

# The Non-Hierarchical Law Firm

**Summit Law Group's office design supports the firm's egalitarian culture and makes it an extraordinary place to work for attorneys and support staff alike.**

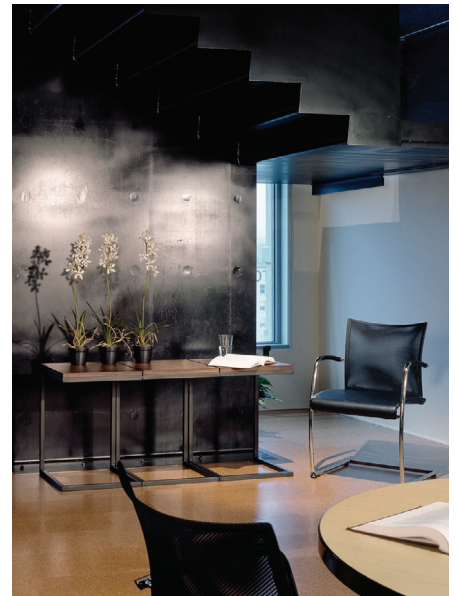
BY MARC G. REYNOLDS, CLM

Expensive furniture. Valuable art. Large offices for partners, small ones for associates, and cubicles for staff. You won't find any of these at Summit Law Group, a 25-lawyer firm in Seattle, Washington.

Instead, you'll find simple, inexpensive furniture; a reception-area wall covered with informal photos of lawyers and staff; and 63 offices, all with window views and all the same size, 10 feet by 13 feet.

There is no room and no need for cubicles at Summit, because everyone has an exterior window office. That's right, *everyone*, from a document clerk to the lawyer with the highest billing rate, has an identical office. The space between the exterior offices, which would traditionally house clusters of cubicles, is used communally for file storage, copy rooms, and a family-style kitchen.

This iconoclastic space plays a pivotal role in supporting the firm's egalitarian culture, maximizing the effectiveness and job satisfaction of lawyers and staff and delivering increased value to clients. As you've probably guessed, Summit Law Group is not your typical law firm. By strategic intent, we have created a non-hierarchical culture and design that is intended to make the firm an extraordinary place to work.



Summit Law Group, a 25-lawyer firm in Seattle, Washington, has inexpensive furniture throughout the office; a reception-area wall covered with informal photos of lawyers and staff; and 63 offices, all with window views and all the same size, 10 feet by 13 feet. Overall the space is modern, functional, and minimalist, characterized by open ceilings, a steel staircase, and moving walls.



PHOTOS BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER FOR OLSON, SUNDBERG, KUNDIG, ALLEN ARCHITECTS

## SHORTCUT

Summit Law Group rejected the traditional law firm model and started from scratch to design a modern law firm founded on a single principle: customer service. To support this approach, the firm designed an office that maximizes individual efficiency and job satisfaction.

### EGALITARIAN AND ENTREPRENEURIAL

Summit was founded in 1997 by 16 lawyers who came from two large law firms in the heart of downtown Seattle. These founders believed that the traditional hierarchal law firm model was outdated and not sufficiently aligned with clients' interests. Such interests would be better served, they decided, by a law firm that was both egalitarian and entrepreneurial.

The most visible example of Summit's non-traditional business model is the lack of associates. All lawyers have an equity interest in the firm. Every lawyer (and every staff member, too) receives daily and monthly financial information about the firm. Staff members enjoy competitive salaries like those of their peers at traditional law firms. But, they also enjoy quarterly and annual bonuses, which can be extremely generous.

### SPACE AND CULTURE

The founders' vision called for inexpensive, highly efficient office space on the fringe of Seattle's downtown business district. But rather than creating their own space right away – which would be an expensive proposition for any law firm – the founders sublet a group of software developers' offices in an industrial section of the city. The corner offices were immediately converted into conference rooms. The remaining offices mostly looked out on one another, were the same size, and had the same furniture.

By 2002, the founding team of 23 lawyers and staff had expanded to 50 and outgrown the firm's initial space. It was time to move. A task force located a building under construction in Seattle's International District and retained award-winning architect Tom Kundig, from Seattle's Olsen Sundberg Kundig Allen, to help create a space that matched the firm's culture.

"Creating the design for Summit Law Group was an extraordinary opportunity to fulfill expectations for a non-hierarchal office environment," Kundig said. "We were honored to help make a very special

place for a special group of people – and to, perhaps, stretch the definition of legal office workspace."

This "special place," located on two floors, has eight conference rooms and 63 identical window offices, each having 130 square feet of space. That's considerably smaller than partner offices in many traditional law firms, where they can occupy 600 square feet or more. The furniture in each office is largely built in, so that the only variation among offices is the number of bookcases versus filing cabinets. Overall the space is modern, functional, and minimalist, characterized by open ceilings, a steel staircase, and moving walls. It speaks of simplicity, low overhead, and genuine equality.

Accounting manager and ALA member Richard Wood remembers interviewing for a job at Summit. "One interviewer took me for a tour around the offices," he said. "I was surprised when we arrived at what would become my office, which I realized was the same size as the lawyer offices I had just walked by. I was even more surprised when I realized that all of the staff, even those working part time, had their own offices as well."

### IMPACT ON LAWYERS

Summit lawyers enjoy the space for many reasons, including the fact that it's far quieter than other law firms.

"When I joined Summit last year, I immediately found the offices to be calm and focused," said lawyer John Chun. "They're highly functional and aesthetically pleasing. But the cultural benefits are deeper. Having an equity interest in the firm where I practice has made me a better lawyer, and it's also more fun."

Contemporary office design and egalitarian culture have been attracting the best and brightest in other industries, notably high tech, for years. Summit's founders believe that a similar effect could be created within the legal industry. But this transition was neither easy nor obvious, requiring new perspectives on resource management and

cultural commitment. Fortunately, the results have far exceeded the investment.

### IMPACT ON STAFF

Longtime IT manager Stu Harris, also an ALA member, is convinced that Summit's classlessness boosts productivity.

"The staff here are not second-class citizens working in cubicles while the highest-billing lawyers have spacious corner offices," he said. "This consistently reinforces that my work is highly valued and makes me want to do the best possible job."

### APPEAL TO CLIENTS

When culture and office design resonate with clients, it gives the relationship new perspective. Not many offices outside the legal industry resemble that of the traditional law firm. By having an atmosphere that is welcoming and friendly, client relationships have also evolved.

Summit's attempts to shift the client relationship parallel the employee relations. Perhaps the best evidence of how clients view the firm's approach is through the firm's "Value Adjustment Line" on each billing statement. This allows clients to assess the

value of the services they received. Clients can then adjust the bill up or down. In some matters, clients have increased their own bills by tens of thousands of dollars, reflecting their assessments of the value received from this nontraditional firm.

### DUPLICATING THE SUMMIT MODEL

When I speak to ALA members about the firm's flat organization and unique office design, people are often impressed with the approach. This office structure and culture both require a definite commitment to change and a particular kind of building footprint that is not typically found in downtown office high-rises.

The jury is out on whether Summit's office model will become more prevalent. Even though the change from a traditional workplace structure may not be the easiest, such a commitment to equality and client service is highly successful and a thoroughly enjoyable approach to the practice of law.

#### *about the author*

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