

MEDIA COVERAGE

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PROJECT: BEVAN BRITTAN LLP (BRISTOL)

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■ WORKPLACE DESIGN

Eagle's Nest

The tight market for employees mean that law firms are acutely aware of the role of the workplace in recruiting and retaining staff. John Mahoney visits the new and inspiring offices of Bevan Brittan in Bristol.

One group of graduates that has less cause to worry about the repayment of student loans than some is the latest hatch of legal eaglets now emerging from the UK's law schools. Legal practices in the City of London alone are expecting to take on an additional 7000 people over the next two to three years. According to a recent survey by Atisreal, nearly 90 per cent of law firms in the City are expecting to increase their headcount during that period. And it's a pattern that is repeated up and down the country especially in the principle legal enclaves in places like Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds.

This is great news if you're a fledgling lawyer but a bit of a headache if it's you that has to recruit and retain a new brood. So while the main battleground may be drawn around the hearts and

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minds of their prospective employees, the firms also have to worry about where all these new people are going to put their backsides.

"The pressure on firms to attract the best people and keep the ones they already have means they must offer much more than the right salary package," says Sarah-Jane Osborne of Claremont Group. "It means taking on workplace issues, making people feel good about themselves and their firm,

strategic business goals."

Claremont has just completed the design and fit-out of the new Bristol offices of one of the UK's most successful commercial law firms, Bevan Brittan. The firm, which has over 500 employees in London, Birmingham and Bristol, may be familiar to readers of PFM as one of its specialisms is its work on PFI/PPP contracts. It has worked on over 300 projects including the recent £50m Plymouth Schools PFI.

The great thing from a design and FM point of view is that law firms offer a perfect example of how you can use the design and management of the workplace to meet these kinds of

The new home for Bevan Brittan is Kings Orchard in Bristol, a landmark riverside building purchased by the firm in November 2004. As part of the move the building has undergone a complete refurbishment that has also extended the size of the building by 30,000 sq to 108,000 sq ft offering the capacity to house around 600 employees.

Because the size and shape building's floor plate meant it was too small to accommodate the firm's growth plans, the initial consultation demonstrated a variety of ways in which the building could be extended to provide sufficient space. The solution was to fill in the C-shaped building to create more space and a new and striking atrium feature. New glass lifts were designed into the atrium, removing the lift cores from premium office space.

The finished scheme now includes a staff restaurant facility, riverside café,



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break-out space, client suite, a 120 seat conference facility and very high grade main office accommodation.

'The focus is very much on team working and identity,' says Sarah-Jane Osborne. 'It is a very contemporary space in the way it is designed to not only bring everybody together physically but also in common cause through the identity that has been developed for the space. This design also ensures that the atrium and circulation spaces are constantly busy, with individuals visible throughout the building to help them feel connected to colleagues and the business.'

Bevan Brittan Managing Partner Stuart Whitfield agrees. 'Without doubt the new environment has resulted in improved collegiality and team working,' he says. 'It is far easier now for people to see each other and work together informally so they can benefit from quick one to one get-togethers in the break out space and the café. Whilst this was always the rationale and intention, it's great to see that this informal exchange of ideas is happening away from workstations and is yielding good results. Certainly having a café as a central hub ensures increased visibility and opportunities for people to meet.'

One of the most striking features of the new office is found in its approach to branding which makes intelligent use of coloured 'fractals' to subtly and intelligently reflect the firm's brand. Colour-change lighting incorporated into the building 'light house' creates night time visibility for the building on the approach in to Bristol and is synchronised with similarly sequenced colour changes on the reception desk

itself. The fractals themselves are interpreted in kiln fired glass elements throughout the client suite and are used more literally as manifestations on meeting and quiet room elevations. Intuitive navigation throughout the building was re-enforced with a different 'signature colour' for each floor taken from the fractal designs. Naturally, the design is DDA compliant.

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The visual elements of the branding were developed by Claremont in partnership with Artworks Solutions. John Sulzmann of Artworks believes that Bevan Brittan provides a perfect example of how modern law firms focus on creating visual identities in their facilities. 'Image may not always be everything,' he says, 'but law firms have a three way incentive for making sure they convey the right messages about their business. They need to project the strongest possible identity to clients. They need to use the workplace to help them project that same identity to staff and they need to demonstrate they are sticklers for compliance with things like the DDA; they must practice what they preach. What this means is that they need consistent, strong messages of culture and identity to go out to staff, particularly those who deal directly with customers. Everybody must know who they work for and exactly what that means. That has to be about far more than logos in the carpet. It has to be smarter and subtler than that.'

Stuart Whitfield agrees. 'However good our legal service is, clients have an expectation that we will deliver certain things with it,' he says. 'A professional environment is essential. Naturally people

judge us on a range of things but given that so much of their initial impression is based on the visual and cultural we know that judgements are formed before any service is received. In terms of internal perception, it has definitely put a spring into people's step. Despite the tours and the communication of the scheme before the move I don't think people realised how good it was going to be in reality. The

comments we are getting are frequently 'wow, fantastic', it has engendered a sense of confidence and pride amongst the teams here. There is no doubt that the building and the environment here is a great recruitment, retention and motivational tool.'

'It's been said a million times, I know', says Sarah-Jane. 'But the workplace is merely a means to the wider ends of the business. Or should be. If people just see it as a place to keep the rain off them while they're working, then they're missing the bigger picture about the possibilities of design and facilities management. The workplace has to provide that sense of identity and togetherness for the people who work for the firm, inspire them, motivate them and so on. And it has to convey the right identity for clients. If it's not tied in to what the business is trying to achieve, the people who occupy it are missing an opportunity. That's what it's all about, isn't it?'

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