OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2026

A PUBLICATION OF LAW BULLETIN MEDIA

CHICAGO LAWYER



Center of Attention

Mayer Brown redesigns reception area into 'Chicago Hub' for added comfort

By Melissa Rubalcaba Riske

Today's office isn't defined by its glass walls or employees being tethered to a desk.

Mayer Brown's recent renovations to its 71 S. Wacker Dr. office demonstrate the firm's understanding that work isn't limited to desks and the nearby courtrooms. In June, Mayer Brown completed remodeling work on its conference center space. The latest upgrades for firm meetings with clients and board members created an inviting space called the Chicago Hub, designed for work and play.

The Chicago Hub is the new centerpiece at Mayer Brown's office. The firm cemented its commitment to its Loop location with the renovation and recently extended its lease in the building where it occupies eight floors. Mayer Brown is an anchor tenant of 71 South Wacker; it moved in when the building opened in 2005. The firm did renovations back in 2016, which included updating attorneys' offices and business professional spaces.

In 2025, Mayer Brown turned its attention to the 32nd floor, where the firm's reception desks and conference center are located. Mayer Brown Chicago office managing partner Joanna Horsnail spearheaded the renovation and was inspired by the firm's concepts in its New York and London offices. Those locations have inviting and less formal space for work and meetings. She and the Chicago office team also wanted a space that could transition to being a space for entertaining — whether its 50 employees gathering to watch England play Argentina during the World Cup this past summer or hosting 150 firm alums for a party.

"It's the hub of our activities in the Chicago office," Horsnail said.

Before creating the Chicago Hub, Mayer Brown had an employee-designed space. Horsnail said it wasn't utilized. She saw the chance to redesign the gathering space and make it as comfortable as the corner coffee shop, but with an elevated look that could host a visiting delegation from another country.

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Horsnail uses the new space for some of her meetings. She loves to pause conversations to greet someone as they come down for a coffee.

"I love entertaining at home. I love entertaining colleagues and clients," she said. "This space is lovely for that purpose."

One of the first events in the new space was a firm alumni event. Horsnail said the group had a nice response to the improvements.

"We wanted the employee experience to be very positive. They work hard here and we want them to feel taken care of," Horsnail said.

Horsnail said that the amenities and the building's location are the biggest factors that it extended its lease. Her vision was to create something new on the firm's reception floor. That included creating a cafe with assorted seating options for meetings, a quiet break from work to enjoy the floor-to-ceiling windows and look out at the city.

"You can bring people [in] to do a one-on-one meeting or have five people meeting together. It's for formal business and informal meetings, like mentoring. Have a delicious coffee [and] run into other [colleagues]," Horsnail said. "I love using it for meet and greets or with colleagues to talk about a project. It's even [used] for potential clients, as long as not talking about confidential matters."

A focal point of the cafe is the full-service bar staffed by a barista who serves cappuccino and espresso, along with plates of fresh pastries in the morning. In the evening, the space transforms into a different kind of bar, one with a self-service option that allows employees to pour a glass of wine for themselves.

Chris Keller, a design principal with IA Interior Architects, helped create a space that is elevating, but not over the top, he said.

"[It's] a space you feel free to use, but also feels important," he said.

Keller said that the brass accents in the bar convey warmth. There is a corridor between the open space and a walk-through area that features seasonal plants that can be changed throughout the year. These add a touch of nature to the space that has sunlight beaming throughout the floor.



"You have to magnetize a space and give people a choice in how they work, that's what we were trying to do," Keller said.

There also is a catering space with induction heating units to keep food warm.

"People are utilizing it in different ways. Each person has their individual preference, and the space evolves throughout the day," Horsnail said.

Mayer Brown places a high value on its culture of congeniality, according to Horsnail. With more than 350 attorneys and more than 600 business professionals in the Chicago office, the ability for cooperation across practices has a high priority.

"Collaborating, that is really the brand of Mayer Brown. That is how I feel," said Horsnail, who recently marked her 28th anniversary at the firm. "We want to collaborate with each other [and] the client."

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