

Ropes Keeps Clients, Tech At Center Of Chicago Expansion

By **Natalie Rodriguez**

Law360, New York (July 13, 2015, 3:08 PM ET) -- Just over two years into its latest space, Ropes & Gray LLP has had to embark on a significant expansion project for its fast-growing Chicago office. And it's taking the opportunity to embrace new technology and design that has the client in mind, Chicago office managing partner Asheesh Goel recently told Law360.

In early June, the Ropes & Gray office began a 12-week construction project that will add a third more space to the 38,000 square feet it occupies in a 37-story high-rise in Chicago's West Loop. The project is key to the firm's plans to continue its breakneck growth in the Midwest market and to further home in on client needs.

"Our space is going to become a critical piece of the puzzle," Goel said.



Ropes & Gray's Chicago expansion project embraces a firmwide open-air aesthetic while bearing in mind the young office's growth plans. (Credit: Gensler)

Launched in 2008 with three lawyers working out of a Regus suite, Ropes & Gray's Chicago office has been expanding at a fast clip, quickly growing out of the short-term space it opened up in the heart of the recession and now busting out of the 191 North Wacker Drive space that it leased about two and a half years ago.

Currently, the office boasts just over 60 lawyers and more than 100 employees in total, including lawyers, paralegals and staff, according to Goel. And in three to five years, he expects more growth that will bring the office into the ballpark of 80 to 100 attorneys, with an additional 50 to 75 employees in support. Since October alone, the office has boosted its partner ranks from 10 to 15.

And while the firm has been mostly taking advantage of where the market has been leading it in Chicago, office leadership is starting to form a more strategic plan for how it wants the office to grow in the coming years — one that reflects where its key clients are and what they need.

To help make that a reality, Ropes & Gray is investing in new videoconferencing technology for both its existing boardroom and the new one that is being built as part of the expansion that is designed by Gensler design director and principal Edward Wood

“With this particular expansion, we are looking to create some new space that is really reflective of this long-term strategy,” said Donna Daly, senior manager of office administration. “One of the things we want to emphasize is function over form.”

In the reception area, which will flow into conference space, there will also be new multimedia capabilities that allow the firm to put up information, photos and videos for events that take place in the space. The idea for this particular design feature was sparked by one of the many firm clients that reach out to use Ropes & Gray's conference rooms for their own board meetings or events.

“The idea is we'll have materials up that relate to them ... that it will be a very tailored welcome,” said Goel, who noted that many multinational clients find Chicago to be a convenient meeting place.

When the expansion is complete, the firm space will be roughly divided into a litigation-focused 32nd floor and a corporate-focused 33rd floor, though there have been some requests made by attorneys wanting to stay near their cross-practice compatriots, with litigators asking to stay near the corporate partners, for example, according to Goel.

“Its really reflective of our culture. We work really effectively across practice areas, so people have really bonded that way,” Goel said.

The office is a also good reflection of the larger firm, with core practices in asset management, business and securities litigation, government enforcement, private equity, health care and intellectual property litigation.

And the new space, like the existing, will mimic the open-air aesthetic that Ropes & Gray has leaned toward firmwide in the hopes of inspiring impromptu meetings and brainstorming between colleagues.

“One of the things that is really core to Ropes & Gray culture is to really eliminate barriers that hinder collaboration,” Goel said. “One of the things that is really special is if you went to Ropes & Gray Hong Kong or Shanghai all the way to our original office in Boston, what you would see is a lot of flow-through space and a lot of glass.”

In London, there is even a bullpen-style environment that the lawyers have agreed to, with only private conference spaces available for confidential meetings. The Chicago office isn't ready to go that far, though, Goel noted.

And while the office leadership gave serious thought to making partner and associate offices the same size, that idea ultimately fizzled in the face of the office's aggressive wooing for top talent in both the lateral partner market and associate market.

"There was a feeling it would be a recruiting disadvantage for us, so we decided not to go that route," Goel said.

The office is heavily Chicagoan in that most of the attorneys have spent a significant portion of their careers in the area, rather than being transplants brought in to bulk up a new office. And the new space is meant to reflect that, down to the decidedly non-ostentatious aesthetic that was requested by the local lawyers.

"Everyone said: 'Listen, we're Midwesterners. We don't want gold. We don't want metallics. We want linens, leathers and fabrics,'" Goel said, noting that he and Daly worked hard to incorporate the partners' views in designing the space.

The space, which had been in the pre-planning stages for nine months, should be ready for occupancy by the second week of September, Daly noted. And with more growth expected for the office — particularly in the office's private equity, IP litigation, hedge fund and government enforcement practices — the extra space may just be the start.

"Everything we expected has occurred and more," Daly said of the firm's growth prospects for the young Chicago office. "Now we are in the process of knowing that we need to continue [growing] that footprint."

--Editing by Jeremy Barker and Rebecca Flanagan.