

Orthodontic Office Size: How Much Space is Enough?

By Scott Somers, NCARB, President ARCH-101
www.arch-101.com ssomers@arch-101.com

Introduction

Your office is most likely the best revenue-generating tools your practice will ever have.

- It announces to your clients the level of service they expect to receive.
- If appropriately sized and efficiently planned, it maximizes the ability to reach revenue goals for a practice.
- It helps attract and retain the best employees.
- It is a marketing tool for your practice.
- It can help increase the value of a practice.

Office size and configuration play crucial roles in orthodontic practice efficiency. An office should also be planned to meet current and future needs of a practice. If not properly sized and configured, it can create procedural and physical “bottlenecks,” which can negatively alter office operations, even leading to inefficient practice policies and procedures which may hinder the growth and potential of a practice for years.

Office location, size, configuration, ownership, etc. should be a part of a comprehensive strategic business plan. Make sure you plan your office around the goals for your practice as opposed to planning your practice around your office.

Leased Space

For recent graduates and/or those opening their first orthodontic office, planning for the amount of space you need is an especially important decision as it will set the stage for future practice goals, growth, and operations. It will be helpful to have a rough idea of your expected suite size when you start your search for office space.

Those who have established offices but are looking for new space, keep in mind that the amount of square footage your current office has does not translate directly into the same amount of space you will need in a new office. If your office is outdated, inefficiently planned, shares restrooms with other building occupants, has storage or mechanical spaces located outside of your suite, has inadequate storage, you want to increase the number or configuration of your chairs, or you want to add more space, you will need to have an experienced orthodontic planner help you with determining your new needs. Also, every building is configured differently. Some configurations are inherently less efficient for orthodontic practices than others.

Orthodontic designers can work with a variety of suite configurations, but if at all possible, look for lease space that is rectangular or square, free of narrow slivers or pockets of space.

Is There a “Rule of Thumb”?

In my experience over the past 25 years, I have observed that many orthodontists who are looking for a new building or new lease space know exactly how much square footage they think they need, sometimes down to the square foot. They will tell me that they need “exactly 2,500 square feet” or “exactly 1,500 square feet” even before they know how many treatment chairs they will have or before they have even found a space to lease within a building. Some are so confident they know how much space they need, they lease space before even completing a preliminary floor plan. *This is not recommended!*

There is no industry-accepted rule-of-thumb calculation as the needs of every office are different, but there is one I use to get into the ballpark that works for most offices. This calculation is to simply take the number of Treatment Bay chairs in (excluding records and exam chairs) and multiply by a factor of 500 to 600 square feet (SF).

For example:

- Four (4) treatment chair practice = 2,000 SF – 2,400 SF.
- Five (5) treatment chair practice = 2,500 SF – 3,000 SF.
- Six (6) treatment chair practice = 3,000 SF – 3,600 SF.
- Seven (7) treatment chair practice = 3,500 SF – 4,200 SF.
- Eight (8) treatment chair practice = 4,000 SF – 4,800 SF.

These numbers should be used in preliminary planning only. Each practice is unique as is every lease, lease space, and new building. To take full advantage of your options in finding a new office, take the time to do it right and comprehensively and strategically plan before making any leasing or building decisions.

Why is it important?

1. You want the right location.
2. You want a highly efficient floor plan.
3. You want your practice to work for you.
4. Your office is one of your best money-generating tools.
5. If your office is too large, it can be inefficient and costly. A leased space that is merely 5% inefficient can relate to the waste of over \$25,000 over a 5-year lease in a 5,000 square foot office with a \$20 per square foot lease rate.
6. If your office size or layout is negatively affecting the number of patients that can be seen in a typical day, it can potentially be far more

costly to a practice than having a space that is too large.

New Buildings

New (owner-occupied) orthodontic buildings have different space requirements than leased offices within existing multi-tenant buildings. New buildings will have spaces that leased office suites will not typically have such as entry vestibules, (more) toilet rooms, mechanical and electrical rooms, server rooms, employee lounges, storage, etc. New buildings are typically also planned with future growth in mind, so they often end up larger than leased space offices.. Therefore, new buildings can use the same calculations mentioned above with the additional square footage allowance multiplier of roughly 20%.

If building new, it is wise to expect a larger building than you originally think you need. In my experience, nearly every new orthodontic building I have completed ends up being roughly 20% larger than the original expectations of the owner. Why?

- Original expectations did not take into account all required (or desired) spaces.
- Translating existing leased office space into the anticipated new building size did not exactly correlate one to one.
- Square footage for such things as the thickness of the exterior walls of a building (which can add up to 4%-5% of their overall building size) was not calculated.
- “Scope Creep”. Scope creep is the addition to the size or complexity of a project, usually during the programming or design phases. This happens most often as clients are simply unaware of all project options, expectations, and/or costs and they get added to the project as the project progresses.

Don't Underestimate Square Footage

It may be tempting to “bare bone” square footage requirements when first planning an office, but this can be a mistake. Many orthodontists practice in suites much too small either because they simply grew out of older space, or they are constrained from tight rental market conditions or odd building configurations. Either way, an under-sized or inefficient floor plan can place an enormous limiting burden on a practice.

Some orthodontists, when looking for new space, simply take the square footage they currently practice in and add a small percentage for unknowns. This is risky and not recommended. For those leasing in an existing building, every building is configured different, each with unique configurations, limitations, and lease requirements.

In Closing

To determine the most appropriate size for your orthodontic office, it is best to have an experienced orthodontic architect or interior designer/space planner review your current and future needs. They can help address key issues for optimized room sizes along with patient and staff flow. The costs for these professionals are insignificant to the overall value they will create for over the lifetime of a practice.

Do not sign a lease agreement for a space until you have done a preliminary floor plan design to determine if the space suits your current and future expectations.

Do not purchase property if building new, until you have reviewed your building requirements and they align with your expectations, those of the building and planning departments, utility requirements, parking, etc.