

Remote Work Is Trending: How to Make It Work at Your Law Firm

Remote work has grown commonplace across industries. Recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics reveal a whopping one out of five professionals work from a location outside of the office. Law firms, in particular, are expected to widely adopt a remote workforce in 2019, through both “virtual firms” — in which all lawyers work remotely — and evolving policies at conventional law practices of all sizes.

The legal industry has been slow to embrace the trend due to compliance issues, heavy regulation and concerns over client data protection. That is changing, however, with the steady rollout of new technologies, improved security capabilities and wider connectivity.

Turnover is another motivating factor. Talent retention is top of mind for many firms and offering remote work benefits can be a competitive hiring advantage. A recent Gallup poll confirmed that work-from-home policies are sought after by job seekers and beneficial when it comes to employee retention. Plus, some degree of work schedule flexibility has nearly become a norm — the same report showed that 43 percent of employed Americans already work remotely at least partially each week.

The Case for Remote Work

Here are a few tips for accommodating a mobile workforce that could help your firm take the leap, or help you convince the partners.

1. Make It Official

While numerous firms already allow established associates and partners to work remotely, having an unspoken or inconsistent policy won't enable your firm to reap the full benefits in terms of talent retention. People may be unclear about who exactly has access to this privilege or hesitate to take advantage if only a loose rule exists and compliance involves guesswork. With a clear policy that is consistently implemented and communicated, employees at every level should feel empowered to telecommute.

Clear, advertised remote benefits are also considerably more effective in attracting new hires. This particularly applies to younger associates who completed law school and entered the workforce in an ultra-digital age. According to Deloitte research, nearly 75 percent of millennials say a “work-from-home” or “work remotely” policy is important and 69 percent say a physical presence in the office on a regular basis is unnecessary. Firms are rolling out remote work benefits and other office culture

modifications to better support work-life balance and meet millennial associates' expectations.

In terms of hiring, firms in some areas are even accepting full-time, fully remote candidates to widen their pool of available talent and scale the workforce based on client demand.

2. Make It Secure

One of the main factors allowing lawyers to work remotely is the wider use of cloud computing. Technology and security advances mean employees can work from nearly any computer or device and remain safely under the purview of IT and compliance standards. Case files can be viewed securely whenever needed, saving hours by obviating a commute to the office. Cloud software is also crucial in enabling remote teams to leverage legal databases.

Secure remote access and the consolidation of case information into one well-organized electronic space not only aids productivity, but it is also essential in meeting data privacy regulations. The ability to encrypt sensitive client information, control where it is stored and monitor who can access it is key for compliance with privacy regulations — such as HIPAA and GDPR — as well as ethics and professional responsibility requirements.

3. Make It Meaningful ... and Productive

Given most lawyers' demanding schedules, stress-related health problems are becoming all too common. Consider how providing more flexibility via telecommuting can make a lawyer's job (and life) easier. With commutes, traffic and office distractions eliminated or minimized, shifting to remote work can be a game-changer for many who might otherwise be at risk of burnout or other mental health concerns.

Also, it's been proved that working from home can result in impressive employee productivity gains, benefiting lawyers, staff, management and clients alike. Letting team members work at home, the client's office, or anywhere *but* the office can help build a firm culture that benefits clients with increased flexibility and responsive communications. The ability to work between meetings, access case files instantly and meet clients wherever they prefer can mean less time wasted during the workday — and that should mean much stronger results.

These are just a few ways a remote workforce can benefit you and your clients. The trend will only gain prevalence as technology and connectivity continue to evolve.

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