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## Prioritizing Staff and Attorney Engagement in a Remote World

Firms that allow some amount of remote work will face logistical challenges and questions about how to maintain engagement with staff and attorneys not physically in the office. Here's how law firms can maintain—and even grow—employee engagement in a remote environment.

By **Sarah Ruttan Bates, Lexicon** | August 10, 2021



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Many are grappling with what comes next more than a year after law firms pivoted to remote work in the wake of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders. Some will go back to the office (<https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/2021/07/12/davis-polk-plans-trial-period-for-office-returns-requiring-in-office-work-7-out-of-every-10-business-days/>) entirely, while others (<https://www.law.com/2021/08/02/mcdermott-and-schiff-hardin-push-back-office-returns-and-impose-vaccine-mandates/>) are taking a more cautious approach. Still, more are looking at a hybrid arrangement (<https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/2021/07/30/mcguirewoods-wants-a-hybrid-return-after-labor-day-but-the-delta-variant-looms/>) amid indications from staff and attorneys that they prefer to work remotely and have been productive doing so.

Whatever choices they make, firms that allow at least some amount of remote work will face logistical challenges and questions about how to maintain engagement with staff and attorneys who are not physically present in the office.

Below are some recommendations for how law firms can maintain—and even grow—employee engagement in a remote environment.

## Adopt a Technology-Forward Approach

If remote staff and attorneys spend their days struggling with tech issues, their work satisfaction is likely to drop, which is not a good recipe for solid employee engagement. Law firms did not have much time to think about technology when they rushed into remote work back in 2020, but now, more than a year later, they should be much more thoughtful.

The focus should not just be on hardware, either. The latest laptops and dual monitor setups will mean nothing if staff and attorneys do not feel comfortable using a firm's video conferencing platform or have not received proper Zoom practices and etiquette training. Your team should also be able to see and hear each other clearly, so investing in standalone cameras, quality mics, and headphones are equally as important as other hardware.

Another tech “must have” is an integrated phone system up to the challenge of remote work. First and foremost, that means something that allows people to forward calls to a mobile device, home line, or even their computer. Firms should also consider investing in an instant messaging platform such as Slack.

Finally, firms must make thoughtful choices around how to deploy computer peripherals such as printers and scanners. If someone's job involves a lot of printing and scanning, they might not be able to work without those devices, and the firm should support this need. However, they are likely not necessary for everyone. Those with limited needs can likely make use of a copy store.

## Who's Going to Pay for This?

It's likely many firms are looking at all the equipment they are sending to employee homes and wondering why they are paying for people to have the latest tech when the office is also similarly equipped. That is an issue as costs could likely spiral.

One way to approach this is to have attorneys and staff choose whether they want their primary or “best” tech setup at home or in the office. By taking this approach, the firm is only investing in one work environment per employee and not two. For individuals who want the same level of technology in the office

and at home, firms could consider providing stipends that fund some of the costs but leave part of it to an employee.

## Choose a Hybrid Model

No firm will likely be able to go entirely remote or demand that everyone works from the office without exception. The truth is that many people—and their employers—found that they were more productive and happier working from home. Firms that do not pay attention to this trend risk losing valuable staff and attorneys, particularly when there is tough competition (<https://www.law.com/corpcounsel/2021/06/15/a-hiring-war-companies-and-firms-duke-it-out-for-top-talent/>) for talent. Not listening to a firm's people will also take a toll on engagement.

The answer most firms will likely come to is some hybrid model. How that looks depends on the firm, but making it work will require thought and effort, particularly with employee engagement in mind.

The most crucial element is to have clear policies, procedures, and expectations. It's essential to be very concrete regarding how a firm's hybrid model will work to avoid confusion or skirting of the rules. For example, if a firm wants people in the office three days a week, will it expect employees to choose those days and stick to them? What will be the expectations around availability and response times?

All of the above should be outlined in updates to employee handbooks. A hybrid model will also require clear internal communications that address practical issues and provide examples. Not taking these steps will lead to a model that does not serve the business and its clients, and a firm may even have to rescind allowing remote work. Taking away this opportunity would create significant employee morale issues and definitely damages employee engagement.

Other adjustments to accommodate a hybrid model could include regular, mandatory in-person meetings or a schedule that rotates different groups of people in and out of the office each month.

## Ditch Paper

Firms that still rely heavily on paper-based systems for case management will have considerable problems going remote. Organizational issues aside, there is also the real risk of people taking sensitive information outside the firm in the form of a paper file. The threat to client confidentiality if that file was left behind on a bus or coffee shop where prying eyes can see it is significant.

Any firm considering a hybrid model around remote work must embrace cloud-based case management. Frankly, it's something that should have been common practice for years. Still, it is even more crucial—and arguably easier—now and makes working on matters much smoother with far better security safeguards.

## Focus on Performance and Results

Firms will understandably worry that allowing too much remote work could negatively affect operations and the bottom line. What we saw during the early stages of the pandemic really does not bear that out, but the impression may linger. This approach is such a significant shift that law firm leaders may be reluctant to embrace something they have not had much experience with during their careers.

Instead of worrying, firms should focus on performance and results. If they have created a remote work environment where staff and attorneys feel engaged and happy, the output won't suffer and may even increase. The key is tracking that information so random concerns don't creep in and shift the focus.

## Remote Work Can Work

COVID brought attention to the happiness and satisfaction of staff and attorneys and the need to make people feel safe and secure. Adopting a hybrid model for remote work might be the key for many firms to keep engagement up and the business growing. This shift will require thought and investment, but the dividends are likely to be significant.

*Sarah Ruttan Bates is Director of Legal Operations & Training at Lexicon, a legal technology and services company. She has spent close to a decade advising law firms on keeping remote staff and attorneys engaged and productive. Learn more at LexiconServices.com (<https://lexiconservices.com/>).*

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