

New York Law Journal

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Management in the New-Normal Office

In the 20th century, work was king; other parts of our lives revolved around it. Today, younger employees want work to be only one part of a total life.

October 11, 2022 at 10:00 AM

[Columns](#)

By Carol Schiro Greenwald | October 11, 2022 at 10:00 AM

For many of us, September is the “real” beginning of the year. Vacations are over, children go back to school and we buckle down at work. So, I am wondering about the management decisions firm leadership has made to support new office realities in this “new” year.

The major change—a theme in answers from my panel of small/midsize firm lawyers—is a willingness to accept the need to adapt to new employee attitudes regarding the place of work in their lives. In the 20th century, work was king; other parts of our lives revolved around it. Today, younger employees want work to be only one part of a total life.

One way this has played out is the call for flexibility in terms of:

- Days in the office,
- Asynchronous hours
- Employees’ need to meet personal obligations.

According to my respondents, law firms of all sizes seem to be making such accommodations.

Hybrid or Not

Interestingly, B2C firms are as full-time in the office as they were in 2019. General law and business law focused firms are more likely to be truly hybrid. Andrew Peskoe, Chairman of [Golenbock Eiseman Assor Bell & Peskoe](#), says “‘hybrid’ is too understated. How about ‘ultra-hybrid’? We have some attorneys in nearly every day, a very few officially remote, and most somewhere between one to four days a week in the office. Overall, we are accepting the new reality that flexibility is absolutely required, and we are asking of our partners what venture investors ask of their target entrepreneurs: that they be flexible and relentlessly resourceful.”

B2C firms’ work processes require in person cooperation and in person client meetings so they are back to pre-COVID routines.

- Alan Schwartz, managing partner of [Law Offices of Alan J. Schwartz, P.C.](#), says, “Our practice does not lend itself to hybrid. Since we are primarily a criminal defense firm, our clients really need to meet with us in person.”
- Tracey Daniels, principal at real estate firm [Daniels & O’Connell, P.C.](#), says, “We expect everyone to be in the office unless we make arrangements otherwise.”

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- Annamarie Bondi-Stoddard, managing partner of medical malpractice firm, [Pegalis Law Group](#), also needs everyone in the office. “We returned to the office as soon as we were able to back in June 2020. We were not efficient working remotely due to the type of firm that we are and the cases we handle. We work closely as a team. Not having the ability to communicate instantaneously would be a major impediment in regard to work flow.”

Flexible Personal Schedules or Not

Initially, law firms adopted the industrial evolution model of all workers in the office for the same number of hours. While this makes sense for assembly lines it seems less useful in professional service firms. Employee requests for flexibility in terms of location and work hours is a first step toward changing the model.

- For Golenbock, Andrew Peskoe says the focus is the team. “We are focused on team well-being, productivity and client-service; encouraging attendance not mandating it; trying really hard to use fruitfully and intelligently those days of common attendance.”
- Tracey Daniels says: “We expect our attorneys to be working however many hours are required to get their work done. At the same time, and we do encourage people to take time, leave early when workloads allow.”
- Mark Seitelman, managing partner of personal injury firm, [Mark E. Seitelman Law Offices P.C.](#), allows flexibility within “the parameters of an 8:30-5 day.”

Office Technology in Home Offices

People working remotely need to have the same technological office environment as those in the office to facilitate teamwork, collaboration and the professional rules regarding protection of client work and client relationships. Therefore, officially hybrid or not, most respondents say they replicated their office technology for their remote workers. Employees who needed computers, etc. were given them so they could log seamlessly and safely into the office.

[Joel Weiss](#), managing partner of intellectual property boutique Weiss & Arons, says, “In order to comply with the firm’s relatively high security standards, we purchased at-home laptops for our remotes. For security reasons these laptops are essentially extensions of our firm network and are not used by associates for personal matters.”

Alla Roytberg, partner, [Roytberg Traum Law and Mediation, P.C.](#), has fashioned a fully functional remote system that benefits both the lawyers and their clients. “We have shifted 90% of our practice to cloud technology, so that everyone can access what is needed from practically any location in the world. We use Dropbox for work files, Outlook for email and calendaring, and LEAP for client management. We use Zoom for most video meetings but also continue to use SKYPE and Teams when clients or others prefer it.”

Actions To Prevent ‘Quiet Quitting’

“Quiet quitting,” the term for passive anti-work behavior, working the minimum required, can be deadly in terms of office culture and interpersonal relationships. Respondents are all aware of it and work consciously to prevent it. At Weiss & Arons, Joel Weiss hasn’t seen a lot of this behavior. “When we have seen it, we have taken steps to point out to that associate the responsibility that he or she signed up for prior to joining. This points up the importance of

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setting clear performance targets, so that you can remind them of the baseline responsibilities to which all associates must comply.”

Alan Schwartz says, “We have an extremely busy practice, and we work hard to make sure that there is no time for that. We avoid this kind of non-involvement by keeping the staff busy and engaged, and rewarding positive behavior and performance.”

James Landau, litigator at [Prince Lobel Tye](#), says the firm focuses on including new associates immediately in the work of the firm by “allowing younger attorneys to be involved in cases from the beginning, giving them contact with clients and shadowing opportunities with more experienced lawyers.”

Impact of Adaptations on Firm Culture

Most respondents see the impact of change as positive.

- Joel Weiss says: “I think by returning to, and strengthening, our brick and mortar presence we have introduced a new confidence to our firm. This has spilled over into our client base as our business generation has continued to grow through and after COVID.”
- Tracey Daniels sees their positive culture as getting more positive: “We have always had a very open door, respectful culture. If COVID has changed us it’s only for the better as we’re all more mindful of our colleagues’ needs outside of the office.”
- Annamarie Bondi-Stoddard says, “There is a more casual atmosphere in the office as seen in the more casual everyday work attire.”
- Amy Goldsmith, partner, [Tarter Krinsky & Drogin](#), highlights a change in people’s interpersonal activity in the office. “As more people come back to the office, I’ve seen a hunger for connection among attorneys and staff. There are more firm-sponsored breakfasts and lunches, and individual departments are also meeting in person on a weekly and monthly basis. People are also joining each other for lunch more often.”

Concluding Thoughts

Contrary to the fear-mongering and predictions of unproductive employees, the sky has not fallen in. The focus on what employees need to work effectively and an understanding that work-life flexibility has become an important personal value has enabled firms to begin to transition successfully to a more accommodating office environment.

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