

Attorneys Can Have Their (Hybrid) Cake and Eat It, Too

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Let's be clear, lawyers want to work from home (WFH). In fact, young lawyers feel so strongly about remote work that 44% of them would leave their current jobs for a greater ability to work remotely elsewhere, according to a new report by the ABA.

There are benefits to WFH. Remote work has increased lawyers' ability to deal with biases and focus on mental health — and this was particularly true for women lawyers, 56% of whom reported that remote work actually increased their ability to balance work and family obligations. Ibid. Add on top of this that the two years when firms' doors were shuttered were two of the most profitable years on record (according to the American Lawyer Am Law 100/200 rankings 2022 for many firms, and the benefits to WFH look pretty good.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the recent ABA report also showed 87% of lawyers said their workplaces allowed WFH. This makes sense since when firms mandate any kind of return to the office, those firms experienced double the turnover rate of firms that did not. See, 2022 Thomson Reuters State of the Legal Market.

But, there is a downside.

Many of the attorneys surveyed reported a decrease in professional networking and quality relationships with co-workers — and this is exactly what keeps law firm leaders up at night. In fact, the 2022 Citi Hildebrandt Client Advisory found as well that many firms believe the remote environment has damaged personal relationships at work and the sense of belonging among many lawyers — and may be a contributor to the ease with which lawyers, from partners to associates, are moving firms.

So far, the thinking has pitted the two “sides” as if the two are mutually exclusive — WFH versus “work-from-office” (WFO), where law firm leadership is on one side and attorneys and staff on the other. But this is legacy thinking.

While it's true that not much will demotivate WFO faster than just one ineffectual, lonely workday, it doesn't mean firms can't figure out how to cluster attorney time to ensure in-office time has the vibrancy, collaboration and networking only an office can offer — but without mandates. (They don't work anyhow).

So the question becomes, how can attorneys have their cake and eat it, too?

Technology to the Rescue!

If you're a lawyer reading this, don't stop here. This technology is built for you to solve the hybrid challenges of law firms that help you self-determine your WFO/WFH strategies. The good news is, WFH triggered changes to not just where attorneys work, but how. Lawyers upskilled their technical facility and comfort, especially technology that helps attorneys achieve what they want — which is a hybrid schedule that optimizes the best of both worlds: WFH and WFO.

It is important to be clear in this equation that attorneys also want in-office time. They want the time to network and collaborate with their peers. It isn't just law firm leaders pushing from the top down. There simply was not an efficient way to help drive these outcomes — and so, the default action was the rather antiquated idea that WFO time had to be mandated top-down. Rather, with the right technology, WFO could be a bottom-up approach that supports the agency of attorneys themselves to determine their own collaboration and networking goals.

The Details

At the most basic level, lawyers need an app that helps them reserve that desk or conference room. There are a variety of each of these software solutions that exist — so how can firms choose the one that is best? Clearly, key differentiator is that it should be built uniquely for law firms — and that really whittles down the field. One reason this is important, for instance, is understanding the purpose of in-office time.

Not all “room booking” programs are built to help lawyers achieve networking and collaboration goals.

Law firms should start with seating strategies discussions and learn about the various needs of the firm, office by office, practice group by practice group, partner by partner, and help devise a seating strategy that works for that culture. The firm may then decide to designate “neighborhoods” for specific practice groups, thereby ensuring only attorneys in that practice group can be assigned or reserve desks in that neighborhood. These clusters by practice group are one way firms can naturally build collaboration and networking modalities that are so important to the dynamism of WFO time.

Taken to another level, technology can help attorneys “see” where other attorneys are in the office and deliver simple visibility into attorneys’ in-office presence through software automations without any work on the part of attorneys. This can produce highly accurate location data that provides not only general attendance but specific seat locations within a particular office.

This visibility helps attorneys make decisions and take action about who they want to work near — or not. On top of this, attorneys may also be less familiar with their office space especially as the firm’s spaces are constantly evolving — and the attorneys are in the office less often to experience the evolution. At the touch of a button on a mobile phone, attorney A can see where attorney B is working for the week — what city, what floor, what desk — and make decisions.

In this way, attorneys maximize their WFO because it delivers a simple visual experience of their office in the palm of attorneys’ hands, one where they can easily see where their peers are, understand how and when they can network with peers, have immediate access to changing floor plans, and do anything they need to do in a frictionless manner — from reserving a seat, to reserving conference rooms, to posting a bulletin about a holiday office party, to seeing the new location of the MFDs.

Conclusion

No one would have predicted hybrid operations — but hybrid is here to stay. Firms have a lot to gain in terms of creating a new culture that attorneys love and achieving but that new culture will be built on flexibility and dynamism only technology can manage.



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