

# Why Every Law Firm Should Develop Handbooks and SOPs in the Age of COVID-19

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Every successful law practice needs Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that establish the firm's regular processes. SOPs provide staff members with a roadmap to complete their tasks and handle firm matters. While some firms faced the COVID-19 virus fully prepared with SOPs and written handbooks in place, others found themselves completely ill-prepared. The pandemic hit without warning and these firm leaders lacked the defined processes to continue their legal practice operations.

For these law firms, the gravity of COVID-19 exemplifies the importance of creating and maintaining defined processes, like SOPs and handbooks. Without these resources, law firms may experience inconsistencies, staff confusion, and costly service disruptions. From security breaches to missed deadlines, a lack of policies can leave law firms of all sizes open to significant financial losses and professional liability.

## Law Firm SOPs

Law firm SOPs essentially create a "how-to" for running the legal practice. They include specific procedures to complete tasks according to the firm's standards and industry regulations. When law firms maintain thoughtful, comprehensive SOPs, they benefit in numerous ways, including:

- Greater efficiency
- Lesser mistakes
- Consistency across the entire firm
- Effective issue resolution
- Demonstrated due diligence

- Streamlined new hire training

Each law firm differs in its daily operations and processes, so SOPs can vary greatly from one legal practice to the next. But some of the most common components include:

- **Human Resources** – Job descriptions, new employee onboarding, employee training, disciplinary procedures, performance reviews, hiring processes
- **Privacy policies** – Security measures, password guidelines, private device usage requirements, client confidentiality expectations
- **Client Communications** – Client communication expectations, accepted methods of communication, client complaint resolution
- **Client Billing** – Firm time tracking tools, task tracking expectations, designated billing staff members, invoice timelines, invoicing processes, payment collection processes

SOPS should be written in concise language. They need to include enough detail to adequately guide the office but written clearly enough for firm members to easily understand. Procedures should be established early in the life of the practice and reviewed annually for necessary updates. Handbooks and written SOPs should be kept on-site for easy access.

## **The Importance of a Firm Handbook in the COVID-19 Era**

One major component of a law firm handbook is the business continuity plan, which lays out the processes that staff members should follow to continue working in the midst of an emergency or disastrous event.

In 2011, in response to Hurricane Katrina, the American Bar Association (ABA) strongly recommended that law firms engage in disaster preparedness. To assist legal professionals, the ABA Committee on Disaster Response and Preparedness released the Lawyer's Guide to Disaster Planning. This guide provides guidelines and recommendations for emergency preparation that firm members can follow for disaster recovery.

While a continuity plan may cover a variety of processes, they should at least include the following:

- Contact information for the disaster recovery team
- Back-up-system information
- Step-by-step disaster recovery procedures
- A list of physical inventories
- A checklist for client contacts
- Plan for obtaining replacement or necessary equipment
- Insurance company information

As outlined by the Lawyer's Guide, these components can be classified into three major categories: a personnel plan, a preparedness kit, and a records preservation plan.

**Personnel Plans** – It's not something leaders like to consider, but disasters can result in injury, illness, or even deaths within a law firm. It's a painful reality that firm leaders must consider when planning for an emergency. COVID-19 has created an environment where one sick employee can turn into an entire office of incapacitated staff members.

As law firms create their continuity plans, they must ensure that essential positions and duties remain covered. They must include plans to address administrative needs, including client billing and payroll. Leaders need to think about each aspect of the daily law practice and address each of them in the personnel plan.

**Preparedness** – The preparedness aspect of a continuity plan centers on promoting the safety and survival of your employees. While this traditionally meant developing an emergency evacuation plan or ensuring the availability of proper emergency equipment, COVID-19 has added an unexpected twist to this component.

Firm leaders must now concern themselves with keeping staff members safe from the spread of illness throughout the firm or from communications with clients as they come into the office. As the last few weeks exemplify, this may require closing the physical office and implementing remote work procedures. Law firms need to include remote work processes within their continuity plans.

**Record Preservation** – Law firms also have to ensure the preservation of important records during and after a disaster. As defined by the ABA, "Vital records, for continuity planning purposes, are records, systems and

equipment that, if lost or damaged, would materially impair an organization's ability to carry out essential functions or require considerable expense to replace or repair."

Cloud-based storage can prove essential for record preservation. When data is stored virtually, it is not only safe from physical damage, it is also continuously available to firm members as they work on disaster recovery – whether they are working within the physical office or from home.

While some disasters come with a warning, many – like the coronavirus pandemic – come out of nowhere. That's why disaster preparation is so important to the continuation of legal practice. For law firms to thrive and recover after a disaster occurs, firm leaders should put appropriate SOPs, handbooks, and continuity plans in place before disaster strikes. But for firms that have found themselves ill-prepared for COVID-19, it is urgently important to create an SOP and continuity plan.

## **Don't Leave Your Law Firm Ill-Prepared for the Next Emergency**

COVID-19 caught a lot of law firms off guard. With some effort and preparation now, these firms can successfully work their way through this pandemic while preparing their practices for whatever emergency the future may bring.

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### **About Erika Winston:**

*Erika Winston is a freelance writer with a passion for law. Through her business, Personal Touch Edits, she helps legal professionals deliver effective written messages. Erika is a regular contributor to [TimeSolv](#) and a variety of other publications.*