

Will Law Firm Management Changes Return to Normal in a Post-COVID Environment?

COVID-19 has significantly changed law firm management, forcing lawyers and firm leaders to quickly adapt to the uncertainties of a pandemic. With the blink of an eye, firm leaders were forced to craft practice environments that promoted safety and wellness, while also effectively serving clients.

As news of a vaccine expands, many legal professionals have begun thinking about what their firms will look like post-COVID. While some changes may fall by the wayside when no longer necessary, many may become permanent staples of the legal industry.

This post will examine some of those transformations with an eye towards which changes are here to stay.

The Remote Work Environment

Prior to the pandemic, many lawyers looked down on associates working exclusively from home. Virtual work was seen as nonproductive and even unprofessional within many law firms. COVID-19 put virtual work in a new essential light. In response to stay-at-home orders, entire firms quickly transitioned to remote working environments – and the resulting success may mean that many firms keep remote work around post-pandemic.

The necessity of working from home proved that legal work can be done successfully, effectively, and efficiently away from the physical office. These proven accomplishments make it altogether probable that remote work will stick around as a new normal within many firms.

Safer Workspaces

In response to COVID-19, many law firms have made their physical law offices safer and more sanitary for lawyers, staff, and client visitors. Some of these sanitation measures include:

- Temperature checks
- No-touch hand sanitizing stations
- Frequent cleaning of shared surfaces and equipment
- Physical barriers between attorneys and office visitors

The creation of safer work environments has also included various social distancing methods, including:

- **Staggered work schedules** – Varying work schedules allow firm leaders to limit the number of employees physically located within the office at any given time. For example, some members may work in the office during the morning hours and remotely during afternoon hours. Other firm members may work remotely during morning hours and within the office during the afternoon. Leaders may also schedule employees to come into the office on alternating days.
- **Gathering limits** – The pandemic brought the days of crowded conference rooms to an end. Instead, meetings and conferences are increasingly occurring virtually.
- **Virtual client meetings** – Law firms have also begun limiting client visits to the office in response to social distancing considerations. Client consultations may be done by telephone. Many lawyers have also increased the use of virtual meeting tools when communicating with potential and existing clients. Settlement conferences and mediations have also moved into the virtual realm.

According to many medical professionals, these safety measures are effective against COVID-19, as well as the general spread of germs and illness. In addition, COVID-19 has demonstrated how unnecessary in-person meetings have become. For these reasons, virtual meetings and current social distancing measures will likely continue long after this pandemic is done.

Employee Wellness Initiatives

The obstacles of the pandemic influenced many law firm leaders to create initiatives aimed at employee wellness. They have adopted the view that law firms should play a role in promoting optimal physical and mental health among employees. As such, firm management changes have included sick leave measures that encourage employees to stay home when sick instead of coming to work and spreading their illness to other employees.

Some firms have also implemented various counselling resources to help staff members deal with the mental and emotional challenges of the pandemic. These changes have proved useful in strengthening the firm culture and cultivating employee loyalty, so it's quite possible that these initiatives will remain after the pandemic.

Business Continuity Plans

Unfortunately, many law firms found themselves without plans in place to address the business disruptions of COVID-19. The gravity of the pandemic showcased the importance of creating and maintaining defined processes, like Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and emergency business continuity plans. Without these resources, law firms experienced inconsistencies, staff confusion, and costly service disruptions.

Business continuity plans essentially create a "how-to" for running a legal practice during times of emergency disruptions. They include specific procedures to complete tasks according to the firm's standards and industry regulations. Faced with the challenges of COVID-19, many firms quickly took steps towards creating thoughtful, comprehensive SOPs. The benefits of these changes have included:

- Greater efficiency
- Fewer mistakes
- Consistency across the entire firm
- Effective issue resolution
- Demonstrated due diligence
- Continuation of client services

- Promotion of client confidentiality

Practice Area Changes

For some law firms, COVID-19 changes have included a transformation of their practice areas. These attorneys may have abandoned areas that took a hit during the pandemic or taken on areas that saw significant gains. For example, practice areas such as bankruptcy, employment law, and health law all saw significant gains, while areas like tax law, personal injury, and immigration experienced downturns.

While some of these gains and losses may revert after the pandemic, some firms may find that their practice areas changes have been especially lucrative. As such, they may choose to make these changes permanent within their firms.

Law Firm Management Will Embrace Many COVID Changes Long Term

In the midst of uncertainty, many law firms have adapted to the disruptions of COVID-19 by implementing new policies and management initiatives. As a result, they have seen increased efficiency, profitability, and employee satisfaction. When viewed in this light, it is highly likely that many of these implemented changes will remain in effect once the pandemic ends.