



LEGAL TECHNOLOGY

## Positive outlook on remote on-boarding for incoming associates (and lateral hires)

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After pivoting to remote working amid the pandemic, law firms are now more easily transitioning to remote hiring and on-boarding as part of the new normal

In March as the pandemic began to change the way law firms approached many of their most basic functions, many firms were compelled to make an immediate pivot to remotely on-boarding of attorneys who were in the hiring pipeline. During July and August, the summer associates arrived in large numbers so firms had to adapt once again.

Now, law firms are hiring and on-boarding in the remote world as if it's old hat, or at least as if it's the new normal. With the new class of fall and winter associates coming online, law firms can look forward to January when there will finally be time to review what has worked and what hasn't with on-boarding before continuing to go forward.

This somewhat dramatic pivot, of course, was easier for those law firms that had an on-boarding system already in place and were able to re-tool in an effort to make virtual orientation suitable for new hires. Davis, Graham & Stubbs (DGS), for example, chose to conduct their regular orientation completely

through Microsoft Teams. The firm had to work hard to manage video fatigue by spreading orientation sessions over more days and using a critical eye to decide what sessions really needed to be included in orientation and those that could be covered at a later date, says Emily Sheldon, Professional Development & Recruiting Manager at DGS.

Kendra Brodin, Chief Attorney Development Officer at Taft, Stettinius & Hollister, described how her firm had continued to have in-person on-boarding and orientation, though some of the orientation sessions were held via Zoom — even if the new hires came into the office to pick up a computer and set up the technology. “As much as we can, we work to make sure all new hires get to meet the same firm leaders and new colleagues and integrate into the firm much like they would have if their on-boarding had been 100% in person,” Brodin says, adding that because Taft Law is located in Minneapolis, its experience in the pandemic was less impactful compared to that of firms in larger cities and in more affected states.

## Moving in-person to on-line

The transformation from in-person on-boarding to online orientation seems to have run smoothly for many law firms after some initial bumps in the road. The question is, have new and lateral hires been able to learn and share in the firm’s culture as deeply as before?

Susan Manch, Chief Talent Officer at Winston & Strawn, says that one of her firm’s new lateral partners confided in her that initially he was worried about his virtual on-boarding. Later, he was happy to report that what he experienced instead was welcoming invitation into partners’ homes, via online, that allowed him to feel he knows more about them and the firm than he would have from a typical orientation.

We all understand the pandemic caused firms to change the way they handle standard processes. The by-product has been profound because it has opened the path for creating new processes that are more engaging. Jennifer Smith, Senior Manager of Legal Recruitment from Goulston Storrs, worried how the firm was going to replace the usual office tour. “At first, we didn’t think we could re-create the floor tours virtually, but we tried it, and it was a huge hit with the entire firm,” Smith says.

## Warming to virtual on-boarding

Of course, newly minted associates will not be able to wander down the hall and get invited to lunch by a partner. They will not be able to drop into a fellow associate’s office to ask how to approach an assignment. These limitations can be overcome, however, if the firm creates a process to bring partners and mentors together with laterals and new associates. The management at Taft Law “makes sure firm leadership, practice group leaders, partners in charge of local offices, and associate advisory group representatives are scheduled to reach out to attorneys soon after they have joined the firm,” Brodin explains, adding that someone is assigned as the point person to ensure these virtual meetings happen soon after someone joins the firm.

DGS’s Sheldon says that before the pandemic the firm used “associate pods” as a peer-to-peer mentoring tool for new associates. These groups came in very handy once the summer program moved online because the summer associates were invited to a virtual event with each pod as a way to interact with every associate at the firm. Sheldon is already thinking about in which pods to assign DGS’s incoming class when they start in January.

Concerned that first years will not feel the warmth through a virtual orientation, Manch of Winston & Strawn, says the firm moved everyone to a February 2021 start date. The hope is that by then, local guidelines will allow the firm to bring everyone together in Chicago for their normal new associate orientation week. If that is not possible, they learned from their summer experience that they can do an effective program remotely.

A key lesson everyone has learned is the need for open communication with any new attorney, says Goulston Storrs' Smith, adding that she encourages firms to "to keep in regular contact with the class and communicate with them as much as possible. It's important, especially in this environment, that they feel like a part of our community and feel connected to others."

Being proactive with the first-years is reminiscent of the 2009/2010 deferrals that happened during to the Great Recession. Letting potential associates know what is happening with the firm, even though they are not yet employees, is critical for them to stay positive about their employment. Some ways to keep your first-years engaged include:

- invite them to attend training sessions;
- schedule regular phone calls with selected attorneys;
- host group chats; and
- email them firm newsletters and alerts.

Remember — these are not mandatory, but these touch points can calm anxious new associates. Taking it one step further, DGS is also helping their associates find work, internships, and other legal experiences while they wait for January to arrive, Sheldon adds.

No one knows if the incoming class of new attorneys will be solely remote, live, or a combination of both. However, the key to success will be to maintain the lessons learned from COVID-19 pandemic and continue forward in this way.

"If we have to on-board remotely, we will be ready," Smith says. "And will pull from the experiences and feedback we've received over the last five months."

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