



LEGAL TALENT & INCLUSION

Practice Innovations: Lessons from 2020's improvised new associate orientation

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In the latest article in the October issue of "Practice Innovations", we see how law firms are using the lessons of remote working to reconfigure how they approach new associate orientation

Autumn used to be the season for new associates to gather at their firm's main offices, or in fancy offsite locations, to be initiated through an orientation or on-boarding program. These programs ranged from one day up to one week depending on the firm's culture.

With the pandemic's social distancing and travel warnings, however, the in-person orientation went up in smoke in 2020. Poof, it was gone — and law firms had to rethink how to orient the flow of new associates entering the legal profession. Law firms were pressed into adapting and creating training in formats they had never used before.

The professionals responsible for designing, coordinating, and delivering on-boarding found themselves scrambling to create an experience that could accomplish the same tenor as previous orientations, yet without the in-person peril. They struggled to hold on to traditions and instill the firm's culture using

virtual platforms; and unfortunately, firms are still facing many of the same issues around on-boarding and associate orientation as last year.

Here are what some law firms learned that had a lasting impact on this year's orientation programming.

Audience engagement

Senior attorneys and firm leaders are often asked to speak at orientation programs to infuse firm knowledge and culture. Often, there is only one person preferred to present specific content — for example, the firm's General Counsel — so, when that speaker lacks the ability to engage an audience it becomes a problem. And this becomes a bigger problem when the platform is virtual.

One new approach to engaging an audience differently was tried by law firm Lewis Roca. After a short introduction, the partner played a video on the mandatory topic then followed with a discussion. "The discussion format was extremely well received," says Julie Binter, Professional Development Director at the firm. "And they will try it this way again next year."

Keeping the virtual audience interested and involved is one key lesson many firms have learned. Blank Rome's Director of Attorney Professional Development, Joshua Troy, explains that his team prepped their presenters by walking them "through a 'menu of interactivity' ranging from breakout rooms to polling to prework, which allows us to ensure each session is engaging, effective, and rewarding."

When programs are in-person again, it will be interesting to see if presenters will stay focused on audience engagement.

Hybrid approach

Before 2020 associates sat in a ballroom or classroom for hours as presenters rotated in and out, delivering their assigned topic. Yet now, Zoom fatigue from online programming has led to shorter virtual sessions leading some firms to create learning series that covered smaller amounts of content but stretched the number of sessions.

For the first time, firms instituted a blended educational approach which has been dubbed a "hybrid" approach. This means offering content in a variety of formats. Marlene Kane, Director of Professional Development at Canadian law firm McMillan, says the firm provides content, "in pre-work, post-session assignments, and self-directed Learning Plans."

Akin Gump offered short videos prior to substantive sessions to maximize virtual classroom time and make learning more interactive. Jeanette Lee, Director of Attorney Training & Development at the firm says the firm created its own bite-size, remote work best practices and technology training videos.

Blended learning has been a technique used in the academic and corporate world for years, so it is great to see it arrive in the legal field. The question is, will blended learning remain a priority when designing new programs?

Virtual mentoring

One area that has rallied in the virtual environment is mentoring initiatives. Kathy Igoe, Manager of Attorney Professional Development at Honigman, says one aspect that went well last year was that “Zoom helped the incoming class connect with their mentors and peers.” In fact, several firms used their online capabilities to set up coffee chats or lunches with groups across their firms, which would not have happened if the orientation had been an in-person event.

Blank Rome’s Troy explains that the firm “amplified [its] traditional mentoring approach by creating small group mentoring circles by video with multiple mentor-mentee pairs.”

Cooley, another law firm, invested in a software platform that “pairs lawyers based on their self-expressed goals and interests,” notes Gene Gilmore, Director of Professional Development, adding that this is “a great way for people to broaden their network firmwide, which is in some ways easier to do virtually.”

Indeed, it appears that Zoom and other virtual platforms have opened the door for firms to continue to connect people from different locations outside the scope of an orientation program without the travel costs or other expenses.

Team-building

A common social piece to a new associate orientation is a team-building activity. Depending on a firm’s ethos, these activities would range from an evening of beer and bowling to an outdoor ropes courses. “Trying to foster and create meaningful relationships in a virtual environment was so much more difficult,” says Kimberley Ho, National Director for Professional Recruiting at Borden Ladner Gervais, another Canadian firm.

What has tended to happen to foster a team experience is for law firms to have small group meetings via Zoom. For example, lawyers at Jackson Lewis started having short, weekly meetings every Friday, so that the new associates could connect in small groups and discuss the topics covered from the previous week’s training. Tammie Garner, Senior Director of Professional Development at the firm, says they are going to keep this aspect in future orientation programs.

Will these virtual events stay as part of the on-boarding curricula now that firms are embracing a permanent or hybrid work from home policy? Only time will tell.

Live vs. in-person

Interestingly, law firms are all over the map when it comes to whether they will have in-person or online orientations this year. “Our onboarding/orientation will take place virtually with all the presentations taking place via Zoom for all our U.S. offices,” explains Rosa Lopes, Director of Administration in the Miami office of Weil, Gotshal & Manges.

On the opposite side of the coin, Jessica Buchsbaum, Chief Legal Talent Officer at Miami-based Bilzin Sumberg, says the firm is planning an in-person event and “reverting to our programming from 2019.”

Binter of Lewis Roca says that their incoming class had some concern about their safety during an in-person orientation, so the firm strictly observed COVID-19 precautions by requiring masks, setting up the rooms with social distancing, and eating offsite meals outside.

The main lesson learned from 2020 is that law firm orientation programming should continuously evolve. It should not require a global pandemic to encourage firms to review their content and delivery methods. Every year, professionals have the opportunity to refresh their on-boarding programs to ensure the content and delivery are relevant and engaging.

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