



LEGAL TALENT & INCLUSION

Practice Innovations: What law firms need to learn from Millennials & COVID-19

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Law firms that encourage their younger attorneys to share technology & innovative ideas were better prepared to fully shift to remote work once COVID-19 hit

For years, millennial attorneys have asked, cajoled, and failed to get their law firms to loosen the reins on upgrading new technology and allowing them to work remotely. Firm leaders avoided capital investments in technology for myriad reasons ranging from fear of change to concerns about cybersecurity.

Indeed, about 90% of managing partners responding to 2020 Managing Partner Forum survey (taken in January and designed by John Remsen of TheRemsenGroup), said they believe there is a loss of productivity when people work from home. The lesson learned from the COVID-19 Work from Home (WFH) orders is that both of these fears are unfounded. Over the past few months, law firms have discovered the importance of instituting and improving technology that supports the practice whether in the office or remotely. In fact, firms learned that timekeepers with the correct technology (equipment and software) can be productive and even *excel* in a remote working environment. Millennials had it right all along.

In another recent survey, TabushGroup, an IT provider to law firms, found that more than 50% of respondents said that they had technology problems when converting to work from home, even though they felt their technology was sufficient.

Millennials lead on technology

Firms that embrace and encourage their younger attorneys to share technology ideas realized the benefit once COVID-19 hit. These firms were better prepared to make the “pandemic pivot” to remote work.

“Giving more junior attorneys a leading role in our innovation efforts has been critical to our success,” says Craig Thompson from Bilzin Sumberg, adding that because the firm was already listening to recommendations, “the firm [previously] made a major investment in innovation and remote working capabilities, so when we were forced to move to a remote working environment we were well prepared.” Asking younger attorneys to serve on technology committees or task forces is a strategic method to tap into their skills and ideas of how to keep the firm’s technology nimble.

For example, Millennials encouraged firms to move to a cloud environment because this is how they manage their personal lives. “Law firms have typically been slow in adopting cloud-based platforms for document management and virtualization,” notes Jason Tejani from Warner Norcross + Judd. “Firms that already are storing their client work in the cloud have found their attorneys were better able to hit the ground running once they started to work from home.

Ensuring the use of the proper software can make remote (and in-office) work more profitable as well.. These tools range from document and project management systems to practice-area specific software,, Here too, younger attorneys can lead the way. “Millennials are more likely to request and comprehensively adopt technology tools that allow them to tackle the efficiency challenges of the legal practice,” says Lisa Danay Wallace at WeirFoulds. Senior attorneys, in turn, would do well to follow the lead of younger attorneys especially when clients are demanding more alternative fee arrangements with dollar constraints.

Firms need to follow through

Often, firms have a document management system and other online products but fail to effectively train or enforce the use of them. The pandemic exposed this issue, especially with document management systems. One big law firm, for example, learned that by not enforcing the use of a system, lawyers indiscriminately saved documents to their personal items causing havoc when people started working from home. Firms who have started to impose the use of their document management system and other tools need to maintain this expectation post-virus.

Firms have looked into instituting legal project management, but only a few instituted it as a practice method. Amid the pandemic, firms learned they need to help their partners manage teams virtually, communicate more regularly, and utilize methods they may not have used in the past. “Like other aspects of running a firm, legal project management is now more reliant on technology to support matters, compared to more manual ‘in the room’ ways they might have used. . . explains Susan Raridon Lambreth, Principal at Law Vision. Again, Millennials have been asking for these types of tools because they use them to organize their personal lives.

The 2020 MPF survey also indicated that managing partners believe that the highest negative impact on remote work productivity is distractions (71%) and lack of structure (61%). Again, as the pandemic demonstrated, this was not necessarily true — many individual attorneys say they are working as much or more than they did in the office. And while some law firms have seen a negative impact in their client work, for those firms that have not, attorney billings are on budget.

The future's virtual office

The question then is, how will this impact the future of legal work? Loeb Leadership reports in a May 2020 law firm survey that 85% of their respondents are confident that they can continue to remain productive while working from home, and 67% would like their jobs to stay remote.

To make that happen, law firms need to address their twin fears of distraction and lack of structure.

Indeed, distraction during work hours could be a result of not having the proper equipment or work area at home, despite the endless articles and webinars giving advice on how to set up a home office. Beyond providing a laptop, “smart law firms will commit to the [remote work] program by re-creating the office experience in a work from home environment,” says Christopher Lee from Wilson Elser,

Similarly, the lack of routine can have a negative impact on productivity, so firms need to support remote working by providing organizational skills assistance within the remote work structure. Dr. Marsha D. Brown, a licensed psychologist who works with attorneys explains that the pandemic and quarantine caused stress and uncertainty in everyone's lives. “The instant lack of structure exacerbated the stress of having to work from home so keeping a routine in place is something individuals can control which can lower their anxiety,” she says.

Millennial attorneys can help lead law firms out of the pandemic to a more successful future. Their use of technology on a daily basis to improve their personal lives, their desire for access to information at the click of the mouse, and their push for updated software should become the table-stakes for law firms post-pandemic.

Millennials have shown that lawyers can work from their sofa, the beach, or while tending to children — and now, they want to do this when there no reason other than it is a choice offered by their firm.

For their part, firms now understand that when Millennials began requesting these remote work alternatives, Millennials did so with the knowledge that they would continue to bring high-value work and top productivity to the firm.

So, the next time millennials offer up their thoughts on how remote work can be successfully implemented or how new technology and be adopted — firms should listen. Because they are listening to the future.