



REDEFINING THE OFFICE

How to build a hybrid remote, in-person workplace

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Splitting time between a physical office and a remote location is nothing new for Joseph Boucher, shareholder and founder of Neider & Boucher in Madison.

"I've done a lot of traveling in my practice," said Boucher, a business lawyer.

Before the pandemic, "I was in the office frequently, but I wasn't there every day. I'd be in clients' offices out of town or out of state."

Neider & Boucher recently enacted a policy allowing attorneys and staff employees to pick their preferred work setting — whether that's being in the firm's Madison office every day or at home, or splitting their time between the two. Using an anonymous survey conducted before the start of the new schedule in early June, top officials at the firm learned that most of their employees wanted to keep the choices they've gained during the pandemic.

"We all acknowledge there's a camaraderie effect, a culture effect and an effect on learning

together," Boucher said, "but people have gotten used to working from home and like some of the conveniences that affords."

A survey from the American Bar Association conducted in October 2020 found that 36% of the respondents wanted to be allowed to choose how often they come into the office from week to week. This sort of schedule was the most popular option for the 4,200 attorneys who took part. The remaining respondents were split roughly evenly among those who prefer remote work almost exclusively, those who want to be in the office four or five days a week and those who want to be in the office part-time every week.

With more and more lawyers wanting to not necessarily be office-bound, firm leaders have a lot of decisions to make about what the post-pandemic workplace will look like for their employees.

Is a hybrid workplace the right choice?

Decisions about hybrid workplaces are likely easier for lawyers to make, at least initially, than most other small-business owners. Legal questions about employees' rights are always paramount in such situations, said Michelle Somes-Booher, director of the Wisconsin Small Business Development Center at the UW-Madison School of Business.

Once those are taken into consideration, Somes-Booher said firms should look at whether their operations are set up for permanent remote work. Consider cybersecurity, employees' ability to access resources and how staff wants to work, among other things.

"You're taking a look operationally at how this would function long term versus what we had to do in the pandemic, which we thought was the short term," Somes-Booher said.

The pandemic has given many attorneys a glimpse into what an entirely remote workplace might look like, and leaders most likely learned lessons that should influence their firms' long-term plans. For example, employees may have

been more productive while working from home but also less likely to take vacation time, leading to burnout.

“Regular check-ins with employees to see where they’re at with this new permanent arrangement is going to be important,” Somes-Booher said, “and tracking productivity and employee satisfaction is really important.”

Terri Neider, office administrator at Neider & Boucher, said the firm is monitoring data related to client service, collaboration, training and finances over the next three months to learn whether any changes need to be made to this hybrid system. Boucher said nothing has been changed so far.

“Those metrics are important,” Boucher said. “Making sure we keep track of what we’re doing and how we’re doing it. Some things become less efficient, while some things become more efficient.”

Connectivity key to remote work

Fast, reliable Internet service is indispensable in attempts to make remote work efficient, according to Rob Rosenberg, president of Rosenberg Consulting Services. He helps lawyers and law firms learn how to use technology in courtrooms, war rooms, conference rooms and now even living rooms.

“Internet connectivity is one of the main drivers of success when it comes to remote work,” Rosenberg said.

He generally recommends Internet download speeds of 150 to 200 megabytes a second and 20 megabyte-per-second upload speeds. Upload speeds are particularly important for lawyers who use Zoom and videoconferencing. Slow uploading is often to blame for choppy video or audio on calls.

Cybersecurity is also important. Forrest Fuller, IT specialist at Neider & Boucher, said his firm began reimagining its IT operations in 2018. With many needed systems already in place, there was no need to interrupt client services when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

For firms that weren’t set up for remote work before the pandemic, Fuller recommended proceeding in phases when they make the switch to full-time remote work. He noted that many software companies have updated their applications or even invented new technology to meet the demands of remote work. That’s why, he said, it’s essential to ask vendors about updates or alternatives to current products.

“Some legal-specific software vendors will assist law firms with upgrading, in some cases, free of charge or at a discounted price, if a law firm has a current annual maintenance plan with the vendor,” Fuller said.

Eliminating the physical office

When learning whether a firm needs a physical office space, Somes-Booher advised leaders to consider budgets and client expectations. Think about how much money is spent on office rental, lease terms and the cost of breaking a lease.

As for clients, lawyers should try to learn if video and phone meetings will suffice for people who are used to coming into an office to conduct business. If attorneys still need to hold in-person meetings, find a place where those can take place. Two options are either maintaining a small office or renting a coworking space.

If an attorney or firm commits to remote work, officials there should make an investment in home workspaces. Comfortable, ergonomic furniture should be provided to prevent long-term back pain and other physical ailments. Replace equipment if necessary, including adding extra monitors or a better camera for virtual court appearances and other Zoom calls.

“Make it a place that is comfortable to be in and you don’t dread,” Rosenberg said. “Invest in your space.”

For client meetings or workdays that take place outside home offices, use caution when connecting to public Wi-Fi. Rosenberg advised using a mobile Wi-Fi hotspot instead to establish a secure and private connection.

“You really don’t know who’s on that shared connection with you,” Rosenberg said. “You have to pay attention to what you’re doing, what you’re sharing, what data you’re sending back and forth.”

Communicate and accommodate

No matter what the post-pandemic workplace

looks like, good communication is essential to carrying out decisions that are likely to change how employees go about their days. Ask attorneys and staff what they’d like to see happen and what expectations they have for the company, and then take their opinions into consideration.

Once a decision is made, explain the changes clearly and concisely. Recount how a decision was reached and give people plenty of time to respond.

“You can’t make everyone happy, but if there’s strong rationale for the decision you made and people have time to adjust, you’re more likely to get buy in,” Somes-Booher said.

She said making changes in phases, rather than all at once, will help people adjust to a different way of working. Also leaders should be prepared for the possibility that they will lose employees.

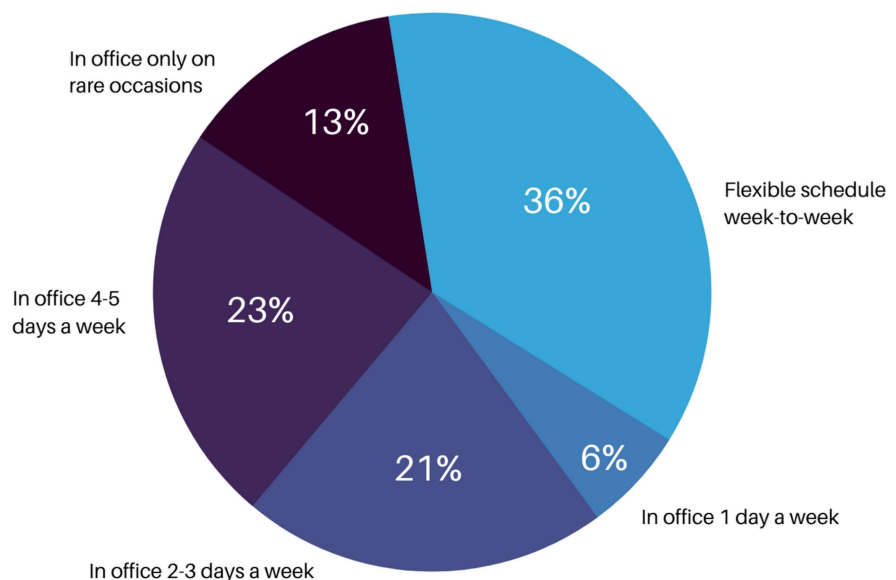
Open communication will once again help employees feel comfortable talking about their needs and their future at the firm. If employees want to work part time, for example, they shouldn’t be afraid to ask for that accommodation.

“The culture should be created in such way where you can go and talk to your manager about what the options and your future look like if you go part-time,” Somes-Booher said.

Being mindful of employees’ expectations and needs will ensure firms can compete in the job market, Neider said, especially when talented and dedicated employees aren’t always easy to come by.

“From a leadership standpoint, we have to be flexible and open minded and listen to the needs of everybody, including all staff members of the lawyers,” Boucher said.

What is the Ideal Mix of In-Person and Remote Work?



Information from “Practicing Law in the Pandemic and Moving Forward” report by the American Bar Association, April 2021