



# FROM PERK TO PROFIT: How Law Firms Can Implement Flexible and Remote Work

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The days of grinding out 80-hour weeks in the office on top of a long daily commute are over. Whether it's flexible hours, flexible location, work-from-home or going "part time," law firms are changing their ways and opening the door to new policies that benefit both employees and the bottom line. With the right strategy, your firm can use this perk to make a real profit.

**50%** of firms offer flexible, remote or work-from-home options.

## **WORKING REMOTE: MORE THAN A TREND**

As more company's switch to a more flexible work environment across the globe, it is essential to be prepared to ensure the transition is smooth for all employees. This paper covers many of the benefits that come from implementing a remote work policy.

We'll also detail some of the challenges and offer solutions to help you manage them. Finally, we have five simple steps to help you get started.

## **THE BENEFITS OF REMOTE WORK FOR LAW FIRMS**

The perks of remote work are more than just avoiding commutes and working in your pajamas. Beyond mere convenience, firms should also recognise the ways flexible work can be an advantage for them and their clients, while providing significant benefits for employees as well.



### **Hiring and Retention**

Flexible and remote work have become more than just a nice benefit to offer tenured employees. As younger generations advance in the workforce, being able to offer a policy that permits flexibility of hours or location is a must: 75% of millennials say a "work-from-home" or "work remote" policy is important.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to supporting a better work-life balance, having a remote work option may help candidates save money on childcare, commuting, cost-of-living and more. For firms to competitively attract and retain top talent, they can be assured that these criteria will be key for many candidates and be a “critical talent retention tool” moving forward.<sup>3</sup>



## Reduced Expenses

Implementing remote work may give law firms a chance to reduce overhead. Office leases are expensive—in fact, they’re generally the second highest expense in a firm’s budget.<sup>4</sup> The additional costs of parking space and utilities contribute as well. But if fewer employees are in the office on any given day, the firm may be able to take advantage.

California-based Hanson Bridgett took such an advantage. After discovering that long commutes and other responsibilities left 38% of its lawyers’ offices vacant on an average day, one-third of the team gave up their permanent offices and opted to reserve in-office workstations as needed. As a result, Hanson Bridgett negotiated to reduce their office space by a third and saved \$13 million.<sup>4</sup>

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## Higher Productivity and Efficiency

Flexible and remote work policies can increase productivity and efficiency. Legal professionals report that their main reasons for working remotely include schedule flexibility and increased productivity.<sup>5</sup>

Flexible scheduling allows legal professionals to work the hours that work best for them, whether it’s a parent taking time out for soccer games and school plays, or a night owl working into the early hours of the morning.

While it may seem counterintuitive to some, studies on remote work have indicated that productivity *actually* increases.<sup>6</sup> Having control over the work environment allows people to create the conditions that are most conducive to their own productivity, eliminate in-office distractions and work more comfortably.

## Increased Availability

The average worker spends nearly an hour of each day commuting to and from work.<sup>7</sup> In major metropolitan areas, that number can double—and even triple. During their commutes, lawyers may be difficult (if not impossible) for clients and colleagues to reach. While this may seem small, being available more hours of the day, or different hours of the day, make it possible to provide better client service.



## Work-Life Balance and Well-Being

Work-life balance and well-being are not typically associated with the legal profession—quite the opposite. In fact, studies have shown that “too many lawyers and law students experience chronic stress and high rates of depression and substance abuse.”<sup>8</sup> Sadly, the very qualities that make lawyers excellent—such as self-reliance, perfectionism, diligence, competitiveness—also contribute strongly to burnout and other stress-related health problems.

Creating a remote work policy is one-way law firms can support work-life balance and well-being. For those who are at risk of burnout, minimising commutes, traffic and office distractions by working remotely might be a game-changer.<sup>9</sup>

There are organisational benefits as well: Well-being, job satisfaction and engagement have been linked to retention, performance, lower turnover, high client satisfaction, higher productivity and profitability, not to mention general competence.<sup>8</sup> “In short, enhancing lawyer health and well-being is good business and makes sound financial sense.”<sup>8</sup>

## Continuity in Times of Crisis

If nothing else, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has shown the absolute necessity of making remote work *possible* for legal professionals. Fortunately, the legal field is well-poised to maintain continuity in moments of crisis, with numerous technological tools available to support firms working remotely.



Speaking relative to the pandemic, Robert Ambrogi explains:

*The firms that are best equipped for this challenge [of extended remote work] are those prepared in every way to work virtually. Their practice management systems are in the cloud. Their document management systems are in the cloud. They have systems for collaborating and conferencing online.*

*Most importantly, their employees and professional staff are trained in using these systems and have the equipment and hardware they need to work from anywhere. For them, closing an office is an inconvenience, but not an interruption.<sup>10</sup>*

While 84% of law firms have some sort of remote-access software for employees to use, a deeper look into the data suggests that “a sizable portion of the legal profession is poorly equipped to deal with an extended situation of working remotely and virtually.”<sup>10</sup>

There are many benefits firms can gain from enacting remote and flexible work policies but being able to continue operating in times of crisis may be among the most critical.

## THE CHALLENGES OF REMOTE WORK

Remote or flexible work may be easier for the legal field than other industries, but there are still challenges to consider during implementation. Fortunately, with an effective strategy and the right technological tools, they are easily addressed.

### Security

Confidentiality and security are some of the biggest concerns for legal professionals when it comes to remote or flexible work. And with good reason—whether it’s taking physical documents out of the office, connecting to public Wi-Fi networks or making phone calls in coffee shops, maintaining the same level of security and confidentiality of the office while working remotely can be an issue.



The good news is that many of the cloud-based tools that empower remote work can also enhance your security. For example, while your document management system (DMS) makes it possible to access

documents and data from anywhere, it may also provide advanced security services such as document encryption, user access controls, document action prevention and more.

Not yet sold on the benefits of cloud? You may want to rethink that. There are a number of reasons that the cloud is more secure than on-premise systems, including greater technical expertise and fewer vulnerabilities.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Gartner research predicts that public cloud infrastructure as a service (IaaS) workloads will encounter “at least 60% fewer security incidents than those in traditional data centres.”<sup>12</sup> And of those security failures, 95% will be the customer’s fault.<sup>12</sup> This means that training your team on security best practices—especially as they relate to remote work—will be key.<sup>13</sup> Make sure your team knows how to avoid [ransomware](#), [phishing](#) and [malware](#).



## Communication

When you’re used to seeing everyone in the office, transitioning to a dispersed team can be unsettling, even if only a small portion are working remotely. It’s normal to have concerns about accountability, productivity, availability and collaboration. This is why communication must be a priority with remote work.

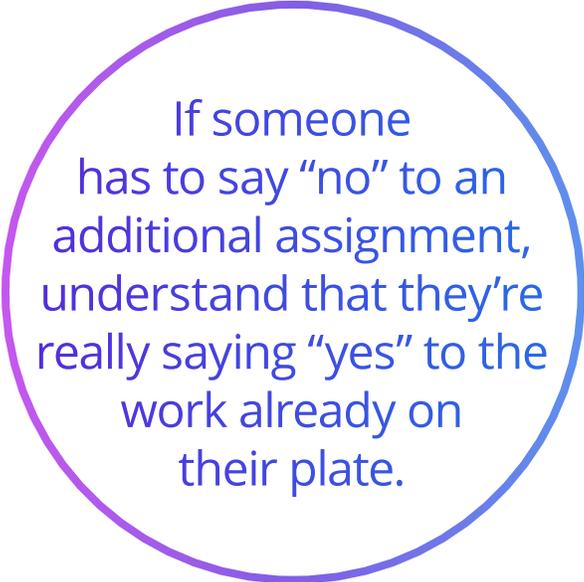
There are a variety of workplace communication tools, including several that are baked into or integrated with other legal tools and platforms. These tools keep communication lines open so that everyone can stay on the same page, discuss matters securely and stay connected. For frequent remote workers, being able to communicate fluidly with the in-office team can prevent feelings of isolation. Video conferencing tools such as Zoom, GoToMeeting, Google Hangouts and others can further support connection among lawyers and legal teams.

## Boundaries

A common struggle remote workers encounter is maintaining a strong boundary between work and personal life. To prevent concerns about productivity, they may feel compelled to be available 24/7. In a field that already struggles with work-life balance, this can have dangerous impacts on well-being and lead to burnout.



When instituting a flexible or remote work policy, it's wise—and in the firm's best interest—to encourage individuals to establish clear boundaries and respect those boundaries. When a team member sets specific office hours, honour them. Save “crisis mode” for true emergencies. If someone has to say “no” to an additional assignment, understand that they're really saying “yes” to the work already on their plate.<sup>14</sup>



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### Policy vs. Practice

To truly reap the benefits of remote work for your firm, it's not enough just to have the policy—it has to be used. Many employees who want to take advantage of the policy may feel uncomfortable using it if they don't see experienced and managing partners using it as well.

Consider, for example, parental leave policies. If a partner has a child but returns to work only a week or even a few days after the birth, will other staff feel free to maximise their use of the policy? Research indicates that this is unlikely.<sup>3</sup> Instead, they'll probably feel pressured to return just as soon, even if taking a longer leave period would be better for their health and well-being, and therefore for the firm.<sup>15</sup>

### Scaling for the Long Term

If your firm is going fully remote, taking steps to proactively manage for the long term is critical to success—whether the transition is planned, or as in the case of a global pandemic, sudden and unexpected.

Extended periods of remote work require special attention in areas such as training, equipment distribution, legal and administrative workflow, marketing etc. One aspect that may also get overlooked is culture. Fully virtual law firms have dealt with this by encouraging people to share family photos, organising virtual contests and drawings, setting aside “water cooler” time and hosting in-person events or retreats when possible.<sup>16</sup> Above all, “It's down to leaders to set the tone.”<sup>17</sup> Attitudes towards socialising, punctuality, responsiveness and the daily rhythm of work—virtual or not—tend to trickle down from the top.

## 5 STEPS TO GET STARTED WITH REMOTE WORK

Once you've weighed the benefits and concerns of remote work, it's time to get started. An effective remote work strategy will include five key factors: the equipment inventory, a tech stack review, the official policy, the execution plan and distribution of best practices.

### 1. Take an equipment inventory.

For those in your firm who will be doing remote work, having the right equipment is essential. To work from a home office, a legal professional will need the following:

- **Laptop or home desktop computer**
- **Headset with mic for audio/video calls**
- **Paper shredder**
- **Webcam**
- **Scanner**



Though it is not a piece of equipment, you should also encourage finding a private, dedicated workspace. Due to the privileged nature of legal work, it's important that remote workers be able to make phone calls and participate in video conferences without security risks.

### 2. Take inventory of your tech stack.

To enable remote work, having the right technology in place is critical. Whether work is happening in the office or out, legal professionals should have a seamless experience (if you really want to reap all the benefits of remote work). Here are a few platforms and services you'll want to have in place:

- **Email:** For remote workers, a cloud-based email platform is preferable to one based on a local server. This is key, since 70% of all lawyers report using their smartphone as their primary means of accessing email outside the office.<sup>5</sup>
- **Document management system (DMS):** Having access to digital copies of all your documentation is key to remote work. Many DMS platforms will have additional features and integrations to make work quicker and easier.
- **Practice management (PM) software:** Practice management software helps keep the firm organised and makes it easy to track clients, case information and more. Some platforms even allow you to track billable hours, send invoices and collect payments.

- **Communication platform:** Because communication is such a high priority for dispersed teams, having a chat or messaging platform that facilitates communication and collaboration among your team.
- **Video conferencing platform:** Video further supports human connection and culture at your firm, but it can also be a useful tool for meeting with clients. Just be sure the platform is secure.
- **VoIP phone provider:** VoIP seamlessly forwards calls from your business number so you don't miss a beat.
- **Virtual private network (VPN):** A VPN creates a secure connection between a remote computer and another network via the Internet. If your firm has not fully committed to the cloud, you'll need a VPN to connect to the office network systems.

### 3. Establish a policy.

One of the biggest missteps a firm can make regarding remote work is not making it official. An unwritten policy or one that is poorly communicated, can diminish or eliminate all the potential benefits of remote work.

Instead, an official policy should be established and communicated to the team. There should be clear expectations about reporting and communication so individuals can be confident and comfortable working remotely.



A remote work policy may cover:

- Who is eligible for remote work (e.g. some firms may prefer 1-3 years in the office before going remote)
- Where remote work may take place (e.g. from home or abroad)
- Limits on frequency or duration of remote work (e.g. 2 days per week)
- Limits on flexible hours (e.g. hours are flexible but must include 10:00 am - 12:00 pm)
- A "buddy" system (e.g. assistants and paralegals may be able to work remote if they ensure their post at the office is covered)
- Expected availability and responsiveness on certain channels
- Expected dress standards for video conferencing (especially with clients)



#### 4. Create a plan.

Beyond having a policy, you'll also want to have an execution plan. How will you keep remote workers in the loop? How should remote team members report on productivity? Do you have clear goals to help remote workers know what's expected of them? Are there additional ways you can support remote team members?

Another key aspect to plan for: trust. When remote work becomes part of your firm, you have to trust your team to be productive and efficient. Without trust, it becomes easy to slip into micromanagement which, again, may negate all the benefits.

#### 5. Share best practices.

Provide training on best practices to empower your team to be more successful when working remotely. A few tips you may want to share are:

- **Prepare your workspace.** Set aside an area where you can work without disruption, such as a private home office.
- **Eliminate distractions.** Gadgets and other entertainment should be treated the same way.
- **Keep a routine.** While your hours may not be the usual 9-5, it may be helpful to maintain a regular schedule. This will also help you keep a clear line between work and personal life.
- **Establish boundaries.** Whether you have a partner, children or roommates at home, you may need to clarify when you can or cannot be disturbed.
- **Connect and collaborate.** If you work from home, it's easy to become isolated or disconnected from the rest of the team. Encourage employees to set aside time to share interests in one-on-ones or messaging groups.





## NOW IS THE TIME

It's clear that remote work has strong benefits, both for the employees and for the firm as well. From increasing productivity to supporting well-being, remote work policies help team members do their best work and prevent burnout. Meanwhile, firms are able to improve hiring and retention efforts and be more prepared for the future.

Certainly, there are some challenges, but you can successfully navigate them by paying attention and developing a strategy. With the right tools, plan and training, remote work is easy to implement for your firm. Overall, the benefits of remote work are simply too great to be left on the table.

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