



Page Printed From:

<https://www.law.com/pro-mid-market/2023/08/15/returning-to-the-office-wont-get-zoom-associates-back-up-to-speed/> NOT FOR REPRINT
ANALYSIS

Returning to the Office Won't Get 'Zoom Associates' Back Up to Speed

 Managing partners are worried about training gaps that formed during remote work, but not all mentorship deficiencies can be solved with face time. August 15, 2023 at 12:18 PM Law Firm Associates

Dan Roe
Reporter



What You Need to Know

- Midsize firm leaders are concerned about the competency and social development of associates who worked remotely during the pandemic.
- However, simply returning to the office won't make up for lost time, firm leaders and consultants said.
- Firm leaders said their peers should be intentional about identifying training gaps and addressing them in individualized ways

The pandemic upended the legal profession's apprenticeship model of training. Young lawyers could no longer learn in the way of their predecessors, shadowing experienced partners to absorb the legal, business development and social skills needed to progress to the next level. Unsurprisingly, some midsize firm leaders are concerned about gaps in training that opened up during periods of remote work, not to mention the results of isolation.

"I am hearing concerns with respect to legal skills, that they're falling behind on some core fundamentals on how they deliver legal services from a technical perspective," said Marcie Borgal Shunk, law firm consultant and founder of the Tilt Institute, regarding recent conversations with midsize law firm leaders. "But I'm also hearing of gaps in terms of human skills: how to manage up, interact with one another, engage with clients. I've even heard concerns about social anxieties—people are avoiding social situations out of their own discomfort."

Borgal Shunk's feedback from firm leaders squares with the worsening mental health of the profession. In the American Lawyer's 2023 Mental Health [Survey](#), lawyers reported higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues, with many acknowledging it was harder to know how colleagues were doing amid isolation.

Now, many law firms seek to fill gaps in legal proficiency and social skills by encouraging or demanding more office attendance, but not all midsize firm leaders are convinced that office attendance on its own will be enough.

"It's en vogue for law firm leaders to talk about the pandemic's 'lost generation' of associates. With all due respect, firms with massive training holes likely didn't do enough to change during the pandemic," said James Goodnow, president and CEO of [Fennemore Craig](#). "With many of them doubling down on the old model of haphazard in-office training, I think they'll find that their future associate classes will suffer."

What Influences Training Gaps

Not all midsize firm leaders think they have an issue with training gaps that opened during remote work. In interviews with firm leaders, factors that helped mitigate training gaps for some firms include not having left the office for very long during COVID and being intentional about young lawyer development during remote work.

"The difference is based less on firm size as much as it is on geography," Borgal Shunk said. "In areas where people have regularly been in the office and their way of operating hasn't been as affected as much by the pandemic, they aren't thinking quite as deeply about this."

For instance, South Florida's [Nason, Yeager, Gerson, Harris & Fumero](#) never went fully remote during the pandemic, with up to 40% of lawyers coming in regularly. "We had no requirement for people to come in—people had to feel safe—but we did encourage young lawyers to come in if they could to be mentored," said firm president Gary Gerson.

On the flip side of that experience, global law firm [Clark Hill](#) found that the firm's broad footprint helped it stay connected during remote work. "We already had a work-from-home situation where people were working remotely for a variety of reasons," said Clark Hill labor & employment partner Vanessa Kelly.

In contrast, the firms that may be most worried about training gaps are those that insisted on in-person mentorship for associate development, but had to wait to re-implement it due to extended COVID lockdowns. "There are some firms that are requiring in-office mandates, thinking that just having people in the same place is going to address these development issues because they can interact with others who can mentor them and bring them back up to speed," Borgal Shunk said. "I don't know if that's going to be the right long-term solution, but it's one thing I'm seeing firms do."

Filling Training Gaps, In-Office or Remote

While every firm leader interviewed for this story acknowledged the benefits of in-person mentorship, some firms that adapted their approach during remote work are finding benefits to being more intentional about young lawyer training.

Fennemore Craig focused more on clear communication, consistency and personalized training for associates. What resulted was a year-long associate training platform dubbed 'Elevate.'

Despite being entirely online, the program addressed core legal skills as well as time management, handling stress, and developing business. The firm eventually hired a director of professional development to address associates' training needs and launched a "hackathon" to focus on remote training—with the added incentive of a \$5,000 cash prize.

"The ideas and programs born in a remote-working world have made our training more intentional, consistent, and better across the board," said Goodnow.

Clark Hill also launched a barrage of efforts to keep associates engaged and up to speed. Town halls kept young lawyers apprised of the state of the firm while development programs taught skills like connecting with clients. “Clark Hill Connector” paired up employees who didn’t know each other to help increase the number of personal relationships at the firm, and DEI and allyship programs launched during the pandemic facilitated more interactions and connections.

Still, staying on top of associate issues required a personal touch as well. “I wasn’t the only one calling associates and saying, ‘How are you today? How are you doing? How are your kids?’ There were definitely a ton of us doing that and doing it very intentionally, and not because someone told us to,” said Kelly, who became a remote employee herself during COVID. “I wanted that sense of connection as much as they did—you can only talk to your cats for so long.”

Constangy, Brooks, Smith & Prophete had a similar experience, said administrative partner and general counsel Teresa Bult. The pandemic expedited the firm’s adoption of technology that allowed associates to meet with partners and do meaningful work across offices, presenting opportunities that didn’t exist pre-COVID. “Today’s generation of associates has so many advantages for quickly learning, accessing information, putting together contracts and briefs, and more,” Bult said. “While in-person interactions certainly were interrupted by staying home, our commitment to close collaboration and constant communication helped mitigate that deficit.”

The Gen Z Question

In addition to pandemic-related training gaps, firm leaders are also grappling with how to relate to a younger generation of associates that tends to appreciate clear, hands-on instruction more than learning through osmosis or being left to their own devices. “I was leading a meeting of firm leaders, asking them about their challenges, and multiple people shouted out ‘Gen Z!’” Borgal Shunk said. “Gen X is a highly autonomous group of people, and many are in leadership positions ... for a group of people whose general attitude is ‘figure it out,’ there’s a disconnect there.”

And yet, Gen Z is not easy to generalize. A recent Law.com survey of midlevel associates turned up varying responses to questions about what associates wished their firms would change. “There is little to no advantage to being around other lawyers for the sake of learning,” said a [Robins Kaplan](#) associate. “If you want me to learn, staff me on a case and show me.”

Meanwhile, an associate at the 286-lawyer IP firm [Finnegan, Henderson, Farabow, Garrett & Dunner](#) wished for a return to full in-office work. “I think hybrid and remote work kills company culture, limits associate development, and hurts morale. Associates learn best from more seasoned attorneys through in-person interaction,” the associate said.

For midsize firm leaders trying to understand the needs of young lawyers in the post-pandemic workplace, one positive generalization about Gen Z lawyers is that they’re inquisitive. Many love transparency and loath being left in the dark, firm leaders say, and they’ll run through a brick wall if you can explain precisely why they should.

“Young lawyers are much more inquisitive about whether they have to be in the office five days per week, and that was never an issue before the pandemic,” said Gerson. “But they seem to fully understand it. One of their biggest concerns is not being properly mentored. Our requirement is they learn as much as they can as fast as they can, and their requirement of us is we teach them as much as we can as fast as we can. It’s a lot easier to do that when you’re face to face.”

NOT FOR REPRINT

Copyright © 2023 ALM Global, LLC. All Rights Reserved.