



*The changing  
future of legal work*

How can firms preserve the benefits – and minimise the disadvantages – of remote work?



Law firms have experienced their fair share of workspace reinvention in recent decades – from traditional set-ups with senior partners in corner offices and dusty legal volumes stacked on shelves, to more agile, open, paperless workspaces. Now COVID-19 has thrust the legal community into yet another new structure: remote work.

In July, Dentons, the world's largest law firm by headcount, made headlines for its plans to close two regional UK offices<sup>1</sup> in Aberdeen and Watford, while transitioning all of those offices' partners and employees to permanent remote work. While the firm said it had no plans to close other offices, it acknowledged it would review its London requirements when the lease on its headquarters in the city expires in 2025. Further, Lisa Sewell, Managing Director for Dentons in the UK, Ireland and Middle East, sounded enthusiastic about the future of remote work<sup>2</sup> at the firm: "The success of remote working during lockdown has made us really stop and think about how we can learn from this new way of working to accelerate the physical and behavioural changes that form part of our strategy to build the law firm of the future."

The pandemic has set the stage for similar announcements from other firms – Slater and Gordon publicised closure of its London office and transition to remote working, and additional firms will likely follow while the pandemic persists. This may continue in the longer term as well, creating a potential divide between firms that pay for prime real estate and those that can divert those resources elsewhere – or pass the savings on to clients.

Granted, the transition to remote work was happening well before the pandemic. For years, law firms have been offering agile and flexible work arrangements in an effort to compete for talent. A 2017 YouGov survey found that 89 percent of British workers surveyed said remote working would encourage them to increase their productivity – and employers have been taking steps to accommodate them. But these arrangements had assumed a good amount of in-person facetime among teammates, managers and mentors – and the pandemic has changed that.

If employees of law firms – among many other businesses – continue this phase of significantly reduced time spent together with colleagues and clients alike, what will it mean for team collaboration and client service? How can a firm instil cultural values and maintain its identity in the long term when employees work apart from their office and team? Can trainees effectively hone their skills when they aren't physically in an office setting observing how legal work is conducted and asking questions on the spot? How can managers monitor employee productivity and wellbeing, as well as manage the additional risks of supervising a remote workforce? When the technology that enables remote work allows employees to log in to work at any hour, how can burnout be prevented?

Some of these challenges may take time and effort for businesses to see – but studying them may provide a competitive advantage.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lawyer-monthly.com/2020/07/dentons-closes-two-uk-offices-in-shift-to-remote-working/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.globallegalpost.com/big-stories/dentons-closes-aberdeen-and-watford-offices-as-part-of-remote-working-review-54048492/>

# Striking the right balance

To be sure, permanent remote work has its benefits. As the pandemic has caused mass numbers of employees to work from home, businesses have reported a significant drop in paper use, along with sustained employee productivity. Many employees have appreciated being able to avoid long commutes and work when they like. In the longer term, having large numbers of employees work from home may allow businesses to rethink the need for expensive leases – and perhaps more consistently evaluate employee performance. Making agile work a normal part of business has its own benefits: In a 2018 survey of 1,800 UK professionals by Deloitte with Timewise<sup>3</sup>, James Libson, Executive Partner at Mishcon de Reya, said, “You’ve got to get over the phase where flexible working is exceptional. As soon as it is normalised, it becomes so much easier to make sure it is properly implemented.”

<sup>3</sup> <https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Manifesto-for-change.pdf>



# Navigating the new normal

Now that the pandemic has normalised remote work, how can firms generate the most benefit for employees and clients alike?

**Ensure leadership commitment:** Senior leaders will set the tone for more junior staff, so ensure they are not only on board with employees working from home but are transparent about when they themselves work and manage personal obligations during the day. They can also reinforce the expectation that employees do not need to be accessible 24 hours a day by communicating with staff during regular business hours – not late at night or on weekends.

**Find new ways to keep your team connected:** The Law Gazette<sup>4</sup> mentions how Linklaters teams in Asia have created a buddy system in which team members greet each other in the morning and discuss their plans for the day and what’s been happening in the business. This can help employees feel more connected to the firm and to each other – and provide an outlet to discuss questions or challenges before they become problems. Having regularly scheduled team video calls – not business meetings but casual check-ins where people can discuss what’s on their mind – can foster connection too.

**Add structure around training and mentorship:** While it’s difficult to replicate the learning-through-osmosis that happens for junior lawyers working on location in a firm, scheduling regular video sessions between senior and junior lawyers can help. Associates at Herbert Smith Freehills are operating “pods” with small groups of junior lawyers to encourage accountability, share learnings and build connections. Pinsent Masons has partnered with the digital education InsideSherpa<sup>5</sup> to help junior lawyers build a range of skills and induct new staff members, who may have only experienced their new workplace virtually thus far.

**Consider and implement new tech tools:** Technology is making it possible to not only monitor employee productivity but to mimic the collaborative atmosphere of an office. At a time when face-to-face interactions are limited, many firms are implementing collaborative tech solutions such as HighQ on top of videoconferencing. Technology is also giving firms additional scale to manage projects. Even prior to the pandemic, studies about the future of work in 2025 found that organisations will increasingly share talent on a temporary basis and hire for short-term projects as opposed to relying on full-time employees. Consider your firm’s progress toward these top tech priorities<sup>6</sup> in the legal industry.

**Take care of clients:** As more hearings have gone virtual in recent months, lawyers have had to quickly implement alternative plans for managing client needs when participants were in different locations – and anticipate potential technology challenges<sup>7</sup> along the way. Client due diligence may also be different now if remote work arrangements make it difficult to review original documents or obtain certified copies. Central Law Training suggests several steps<sup>8</sup> you can take to modify your due diligence processes if needed.

**Reinforce everyone’s responsibility to keep data secure:** Beyond fortifying your firm’s cybersecurity systems<sup>9</sup>, update your data protection policy and schedule training to ensure the casual work-from-home environment doesn’t lead to employees being casual about sensitive client information. Their security awareness and resilience must remain high.

**Learn from example:** A number of law firms had already created robust structures for agile work before the pandemic. Paul Allsopp, Managing Director of the Agile Working Organisation, suggested firms look to Baker McKenzie<sup>10</sup>, Linklaters<sup>11</sup>, Osborne Clarke<sup>12</sup> and Pinsent Masons<sup>13</sup> for potential lessons and best practices that can apply to remote work.

All told, 2020 may be a turning point for organisations of all kinds – and a time to reevaluate how to keep business moving in the face of unexpected challenges.

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“The sudden shift to large-scale remote work has been a catalyst for law firms to be more flexible than ever before and assess their liabilities through a new lens,”

said James Kerr, Head of Professional Indemnity at Travelers Europe.

“Firms that understand their new risks and take proactive steps to minimise them will be in a position to thrive.”

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/features/how-to-work-in-new-ways/5103634.article>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.legalcheek.com/2020/04/pinsent-masons-offers-virtual-summer-vacation-scheme/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://blog.oosha.co.uk/news/top-five-tech-priorities-in-2020>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.law.com/international-edition/2020/07/06/why-specialist-law-firms-are-well-suited-for-this-time-of-crisis/?sireturn=20200711102754>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.clt.co.uk/eng/insights/client-due-diligence-dealing-with-clients-and-law-firms-remotely/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/all-notice/content/103439>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bakermckenzie.com/en>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.linklaters.com/en>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.osborneclarke.com>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.pinsentmasons.com>



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