How a remote law firm off-sets traditional office silos

The idea of a remote law firm or hybrid work environment no longer fell on deaf ears when the pandemic hit. As many firms transitioned to remote work, silos and barriers that once flourished in the traditional office setting were no longer prevalent. Silos, often linked to employees feeling unvalued, overworked or a general lack of company morale.

Here are a few reasons why silos fester in traditional law firm settings and how remote work can help improve or diminish them.

Many traditional law firms have a hidden class structure

Equity partners receive a greater share of the rewards and are treated differently (better) than non-equity (service) partners. What exactly is a non-equity service partner? Here's how Toby Brown at Geeks and a Law Blog defines it.

"I define [service partner](#) as a partner with sufficient legal skills, but not one with a sufficient book of business. These are typically very good lawyers, and their role is focused on overseeing major client work, but not as the one who brings the client and work in the door."

Like service partners and associates, support staff are treated as second class citizens, each tier working against the tiers above and below their position in the firm. It's a chronic problem that leads to [silos, politics, and turf wars](#) inside the firm. This turns colleagues into competitors.

The impact on law firms and their employees:

- [Employees don't feel safe when they're replaceable](#)
- [According to Gallup](#), unsafe employees become mercenaries who look out for themselves
- [Mercenaries](#) are employees who are not engaged or disengaged

How remote work improves law firms

With remote work, law firms are forced to acknowledge their co-worker's output (or lack thereof). If firm leadership is reliant on [practice management software](#), they're far more likely to look at performance data to get a true sense of who's doing what and when.

This data provides you with answers to crucial questions, like:

- Are employees [losing time](#) to non-billable work?
- What do attorneys spend most of their time doing?
- What is [the utilization rate](#) for your partners, associates, and support staff?
- How does this affect firm [realization rates](#)?
- Which employees are underperforming? Which employees simply need help?
- Who are your superstar employees?

With remote work and the right practice management tools, your firm is forced to take a look at the data that really matters.

How remote work serves law firms

Altman Weil's survey on underperformers exposes a common law firm response when dealing with underperformers. Many law firms reduce underperformers' compensation, which makes the problem dramatically worse.

[According to Dr. Bradford Smart](#), creator of Topgrading, "the average cost of a mis-hire can be six times base salary for a sales rep, 15 times base salary for a manager, and as much as 27 times base salary for an executive." (Note: Calculate the cost of a mis-hire for your firm with his [mis-hire calculator](#)). With the right practice management tools:

- You won't mistake an overworked top performer with an underperformer
- You'll know why top performers are failing to perform
- Using data, you can identify chronic underperformers, and you can remove or redeploy them

Data and outcomes are all you have in a remote work environment. You'll need to depend on your team to produce the results you need. With the right data, you can identify:

- Whether you're meeting billable targets (or not)
- Your utilization and realization rates at the firm, partner, associate, and support level
- Which employees rely on reconstructive vs. contemporaneous (as-it-happens) billing
- The employees that are most productive (and why)

This also means you'll be able to:

- Minimize (or eliminate) [billable leakage](#) due to poor timekeeping habits
- Avoid paying 6x to 27x an employee's salary due to poor hiring or retention decisions
- Systematically increase your firm's utilization rate and profitability, producing more billable work in less time
- Retain top A player talent in your firm

According to the 2019 Altman Weil's [Law Firm in Transition survey](#), "84 percent of firms still say they have chronically underperforming lawyers and 56 percent report that overcapacity is hindering overall profitability (74 percent of large firms)."

Remote work, combined with a strong practice management solution, may be the firm power-up you need.

Applying remote work in your law firm

It's a good idea to test remote work with a phased approach. Here are some options you can use to deploy remote work in your firm:

1. Allow top performers to work remotely, on a trial basis
2. Permit specific practice groups or employee types (freelance) to work remotely during the vetting process
3. Apply specific iterations of remote work (telecommute, flex work) where employees have specific parameters governing remote work
4. Go 100 percent remote and convert your traditional law firm to a virtual one
5. Go 100 percent remote, switch to a virtual law firm; focus on building a [results-only-work-environment (ROWE)](results-only-work-environment)
6. This is very good news.

When it comes to applying remote work in your organization, you have lots of options. Regardless of the remote work option you choose, it's essential that you select a practice management solution that provides you with the data you need to achieve results.