The Online Lawyer: The Rise of the Virtual Law Firm

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The rise of remote/hybrid working in the past couple of years has changed how law firms work. While a few years ago, only a minority of law firms offered lawyers online, Covid-19 opened firms of all shapes and sizes to the possibility of employing remote working lawyers, practising entirely as an online lawyer, or offering a variety of law firm hybrid working models.

What does that mean for the legal profession? Can all firms embrace a model of remote working lawyers or hybrid working? Can lawyers work remotely and continue to offer a first-rate experience for legal clients?

The benefits of remote working for lawyers

What does remote working look like for law firms and lawyers? While the picture will look different for everyone, there are some general commonalities.

Remote working lawyers and those who are hybrid working can work from anywhere, often on a schedule that suits them. Whether you're logging into your email in your local cafe, reviewing case notes at an airport, or sorting out your admin from bed (though we don't recommend this productivity-wise!), hybrid working and remote working can ensure a great work-life balance.

It's a deviation from the typical working model where firms expected their employees to come into the office five days a week, barring court appointments, medical appointments, and the like—and there are more online lawyers than ever before.

The rise of remote working lawyers

Back in 2019, the *ABA TechReport* found that around 70 to 90% of law firms (aside from solo firms) primarily utilised office spaces to conduct their work. In other words, they expected their team to operate in person.

However, our *2022 Legal Trends Report* found that just 29% of lawyers work exclusively from the office these days.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, lawyers became accustomed to the freedom that remote work offered. Many found they were more productive when they weren't surrounded by colleagues, while others appreciated saving a few hours each day due to

no longer having to commute into the office. Whatever the reasons, one thing's for sure: remote working is here for the long haul. The online lawyer is here to stay.

Can lawyers work remotely across all practice areas?

While remote working (at least for a portion of the week) is possible across a range of practice areas, it might be hard for some to make the transition.

For example, criminal lawyers need to represent their clients in person when in court. Despite court proceedings taking place online over the past few years, in-person court proceedings will likely be the norm going forward. (Unfortunately, this means we might see fewer instances of lawyers representing their clients while appearing as an animated cat.)

Whether you can be a fully remote working lawyer (working as an online lawyer) or one who works on a hybrid working basis (splitting time between the office and home) depends on your practice area and how necessary it is to meet colleagues and clients in person.

Hybrid working: the future of work for the legal sector?

Despite the advantages of working remotely, there are certain downsides too. Client meetings over Zoom are sometimes not as effective as they are in person. Firms that lack the right tools (such as cloud-based practice management software) might struggle to collaborate effectively. Meanwhile, solicitors and other law firm staff who live alone may suffer from social isolation if they work from home five days a week.

Fortunately for those who don't believe full-time remote working is the right fit for their law firm, there's a solution: hybrid working.

What is hybrid working?

Hybrid working offers the best of both worlds, allowing law firm staff to divide their week between working in the office and working remotely. Solicitors can reduce the time they spend each week commuting to and from the office, gain an extra hour or so in bed, and make more time for their hobbies.

A massive 61% of legal professionals say their work-life balance is now better than it was pre-pandemic, while 86% of lawyers want to work remotely at least one day per week. According to our *2022 Legal Trends Report*, 49% of lawyers prefer working at home compared to being in the office.

It's clear that hybrid working is incredibly popular.

Consider the following statistics: 77% of solicitors globally would like to continue with a hybrid working model going forward while 54% of lawyers would even leave their current firm if it refused to offer hybrid working arrangements. Providing hybrid working arrangements is increasingly becoming a key competitive advantage when it comes to winning the war for talent.

This is backed up by our *2022 Legal Trends Report*, which found that better work-life balance was the joint top reason (alongside better pay) for lawyers deciding to change jobs.

The takeaway is simple: providing hybrid working arrangements is increasingly becoming a key competitive advantage when it comes to winning the war for talent.

Choosing your hybrid working arrangements

There's no set one-size-fits-all hybrid working model. Firms might ask lawyers only to come in once a week; others may stipulate which days they can work remotely (e.g. staff have to be in on Mondays and Fridays); while some firms might adopt a more discretionary or ad hoc policy, leaving it up to the individual to decide. Generally speaking, however, most firms ask solicitors to come into the office at least three days per week.

Law firms must pick a model that suits both their and their employees' needs. For example, a firm might have downsized its office space as it's never at 100% capacity. That's fine—and it's one of the main benefits of embracing hybrid working arrangements.

However, this requires some planning regarding who's going to be in the office and when. In this instance, it might be worth stipulating which teams should come in on which days to ensure everybody who makes the commute can get a seat.

It's up to your firm to pick a model that works best for its needs. If it doesn't work, you can always fine-tune it. Ask your employees for regular feedback before making the appropriate changes.

How an online lawyer or hybrid working lawyer can work effectively

Remote and hybrid working are revolutionary developments for the legal profession, ushering in a future where lawyers no longer need countless hours working away in the office.

However, there's a caveat.

Lawyers can certainly be productive while working remotely—provided they have the right tools to do so, such as cloud-based practice management tools like Clio.

Clio's cloud-based document management capabilities mean solicitors can access case files from wherever, whenever, and collaborate with colleagues virtually. Electronic signing allows solicitors and clients to sign key documents without having to be face to face, while Clio for Clients provides a secure, remote client-lawyer communication portal that's accessible from anywhere.

Remote working lawyers and hybrid working are here to stay

Even as the pandemic moves into the rearview mirror, its effects will be here to stay over the long haul. Lawyers aren't rushing back into the offices—and many will choose to leave firms that force them to do so. Therefore, firms must trust their team to be productive while working remotely and use their judgement to decide when they need to be in the office.

Firms that get their approach to remote/hybrid work right will benefit from increased employee retention, greater work-life balance among their staff, and lower rent/utilities costs. Additionally, by implementing cloud-based practice management software, firms can ensure remote staff are as efficient and effective as possible.

Frequently asked questions

What is a virtual law firm?

A virtual law firm utilises technology to support remote work, enabling lawyers to deliver legal services from any location globally. This approach promotes flexibility, reduces overhead costs, and focuses on client service, all without the constraints of a traditional office environment.

About Clio

Clio is the global leader in legal AI, powering legal work across the profession, from law firms of every size to corporate legal teams, government agencies, and courts. Its Intelligent Legal Work Platform unites the business and practice of law, connecting the people, information, and processes behind legal work. Clio's AI brings the context together with legal sources drawn from Clio Library, a growing collection of more than one billion legal documents. Over 400,000 legal professionals in more than 130 countries rely on Clio to run their legal world. Learn more at www.clio.com.