

COVID-19 Has Changed Law Firm Operations and Management Dramatically – What Happens Now?



The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed unprecedented change in law firm management and operations. Within weeks, days, or sometimes just hours, law firm employees were forced to shift from their office locations to a fully work from home (WFH) setting. No one could have predicted such a phenomenon, but the transformation to virtual work was both rapid and complete. The question is, what happens next?

A recent [Association of Legal Administrators \(ALA\)](#) poll, co-sponsored by global managed services provider [Integreon](#) and legal productivity and profitability technology company [BigHand](#), sought to determine how law firms had changed as a result of the pandemic, and what the future holds. The poll gathered feedback from ALA members who attended a webinar panel discussion titled “How to plan and manage when change is the only constant”. The panelists then analyzed and provided insights based on the poll data gathered during the session.

The ALA webinar panel included Murray Joslin, Senior Vice President of Global Business Enablement at Integreon; Eric Wangler, President, North America at BigHand; Eric Seeger, Principal at Altman Weil, Inc., and Kacee McCalla, Director of H.R. Operations at Baker Donelson. April Campbell, JD, Interim Executive Director of the ALA, moderated and conducted the polls.

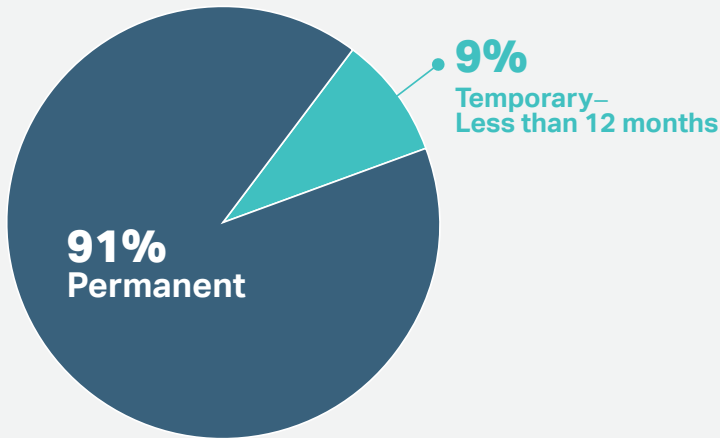
Poll Findings

Finding 1: Working from home will be permanent

Pre-COVID, law firms were typically insistent that lawyers and staff come into the office daily. Many firms were investing substantial amounts to maintain attractive offices that would impress clients and appeal to employees. Now, many of these opulent spaces sit empty or are sparsely populated, attended only by a handful of people. The question on everyone’s mind today is...will the “new normal” of working from home be a temporary or permanent change?

The poll asked, “Do you believe the changes in our working practices, including more remote working are permanent or temporary?” The results showed that 91% of respondents believe that the inclusion of remote working practices are “more permanent”, with only 9% responding they are “temporary”.

Do you believe the changes in our working practices including more remote are more permanent or temporary?



Looking forward and planning for 2021, McCalla provided the law firm’s perspective suggesting that firms must further adjust to remote work and learn to do it in the best, most efficient way possible. When looking at working from home and attorney support, she recommends focusing on appropriate distribution of work and using dedicated workflow management systems, not just an email inbox. Baker Donelson recently implemented BigHand’s workflow solution to help manage their task delegation processes and increase visibility into their legal support services, regardless of where staff members are working.

McCalla suggests that firm managers ask themselves if they have the right person doing the right work, at the right cost. She recommends being proactive and monitoring staff workloads and reshuffling tasks according to demand and capacity, to prevent resources being over- or under-utilized.

Also, McCalla observed that while working from home, attorneys can easily fall into the habit of becoming overly self-sufficient and less reliant on support staff to complete their administrative tasks. With a workflow system in place, Baker Donelson is able to ensure work is always completed at the right level and cost to the business, is delivered promptly, and that lawyers’ time is reserved for high-value client facing work only.

Joslin explained that firms using performance activity analytics to understand how well the organization is managing workloads still need to identify ways to execute on their findings. Making more informed budget choices and ensuring increased efficiency not only means measuring key performance factors, but also making

effective decisions about administrative functions, attorney support, real estate requirements and outsourcing.

In Wangler’s opinion, the long-term operational model of law firms will never look the same. Looking forward, firms will have to operate with greater levels of flexibility than ever before, including the ability to shift support resources and capacity quickly in order to provide high quality support to lawyers and clients, regardless of where those lawyers or staff may be working.

As remote and flexible working becomes commonplace, firms’ focus is shifting to how they deal with transitioning a support organization that was built on direct work assignments, forged over decades of (relatively) predictable demand, to a more flexible approach where demand is less predictable.

Seeger, who counsels law firms on strategy and management at Altman Weil, noted that the legal work itself hasn’t changed as much as where people are sitting when they’re doing it. He proposed examining how the work will get done instead of where it gets done. He advised that firms must instill cost-cutting measures and streamline their operational infrastructure.

Finding 2: Changes to back-office support structures will accelerate

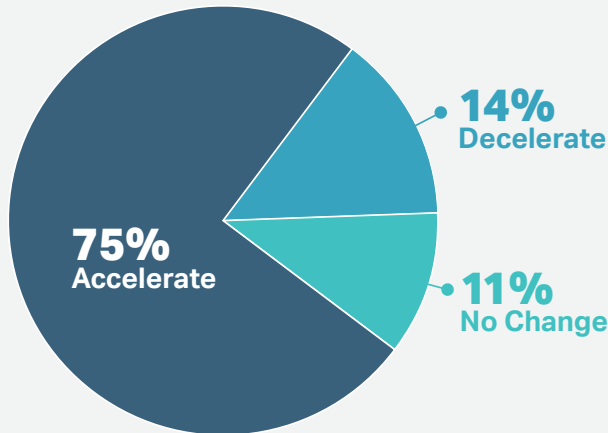
[A 2019 survey hosted by BigHand and ALA](#) (pre-pandemic) found that 68% of firms were planning on changing their back-office services structure within the next five years. Changes included moving to team structures, centralizing in lower cost markets, specializing staff and moving more work to outsourcers.

The webinar poll asked, “Do you believe that the current situation will accelerate or decelerate these structural plans?” The vast majority -75% - said accelerate; 14% said decelerate and 11% said no change.

All panelists said they had expected “accelerate” to dominate, adding that legal services delivery had been broken for a long time and this is the right time to reengineer the process. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided both the necessity and opportunity to innovate the back-office.

Seeger added that the recent crisis has provided opportunities for law firms to differentiate themselves and gain competitive advantages by reducing costs, and making process improvements. He cited an [Altman Weil survey](#) of a large national law firm that found that nearly

In a 2019 Survey, it was uncovered that 68% of firms plan to change their back-office services structure within the next five years. Do you believe that the current situation will accelerate or decelerate these plans?

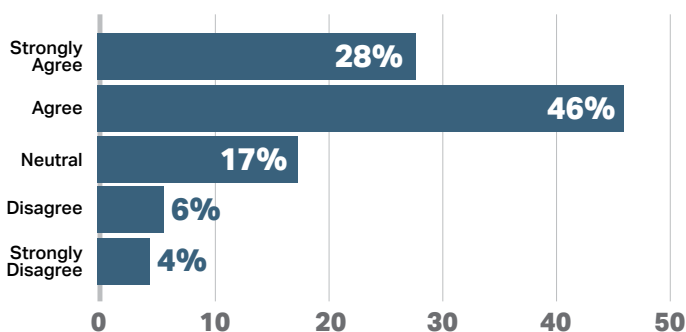


everyone liked working from home. Nearly 75% of that firm’s lawyers, paralegals, administrators, and staff said that even when offices reopen, they will still want to work from home at least half time. Most complaints about remote working were hardware and software related like printing, scanning and needing two monitors, all of which are relatively straightforward to solve with equipment purchases and training.

Finding 3: COVID-19 has made legal staff more willing to change their working practices

Traditionally, law firms and their staff have been known for resisting change. However, it seems that COVID-19 has had an impact on the traditional mindset, with the majority (74%) of poll respondents either “agreeing” or “strongly agreeing” that staff are more willing to change their working practices now than ever before.

Has COVID-19 made our staff more willing to change their working practices?



Joslin noted that firms that were already in the execution phase of innovation and transformation when COVID-19 hit had a distinct advantage over firms that had to assemble a plan under duress. He encouraged firms to be aggressive in making changes to work processes, even though this may be disruptive in the short term. When the main objective is for the firm to increase profitability in today’s market, significant measures are required and shouldn’t be ignored.

McCalla said Baker Donelson decided to make their plans happen in a month’s time, not a year’s time. Although they had been assessing ways to improve attorney support over the past 10 to 15 years, the pandemic was the catalyst needed to make them turn the corner. With the decision to implement the BigHand Now workflow system, the firm is on the way to achieving complete transparency into the administrative tasks that are flowing through the back-office. As a result, they’re able to better support staff, lawyers and clients. McCalla notes that changing working practices is more than just installing a technology though – it’s about changing mindsets and encouraging better ways of working throughout the business, every day.

Echoing McCalla’s call for urgency and action, Seeger emphasized the importance of law firms making improvements and difficult decisions now, rather than waiting. He recalled that many firms should have analyzed their support staffing during the last recession but didn’t. He advises that firms have cover in the current environment to make cuts and changes that may be long overdue.

Finding 4: Visibility of workflow and task delegation is a significant challenge

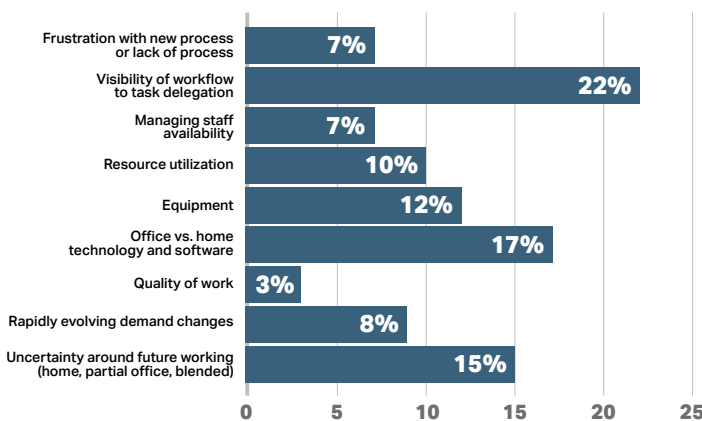
The poll asked, “What are the main challenges that you have faced in the last four months with support staff working from home?” It allowed respondents to choose their top three answers. The most frequently selected answer was “visibility of workflow to task delegation”.

Wangler commented that this challenge goes back to the traditional support staff structure where a legal secretary supported a small number of lawyers directly. Work was physically handed to support staff in the office meaning firms with traditional attorney secretary relationships and delegation methods were at a disadvantage when WFH kicked in, and they struggled to keep work moving effectively. However, firms that had a proper workflow system in place with support staff already in teams and working in centralized and specialized teams, were

far better equipped to deal with these challenges and continue focusing on client needs over support issues. “The traditional ‘secretary outside the door’ model has been broken for a long time, and is not likely to come back,” Seeger commented.

Moving forward, most firms conclude that better systems and structures will enable better support for their lawyers and clients, and returning to direct, relationship-based delegation simply isn’t feasible. Although some attorneys may have had to handle their own support work for a short period as staff transitioned to working remotely during the pandemic, this isn’t sustainable either. Clients are not going to pay attorney rates for them to complete administrative tasks that should be completed by someone with specialized skills, at a substantially lower cost.

What are the main challenges that you have faced in the last four months with the support staff working from home (Choose 3)

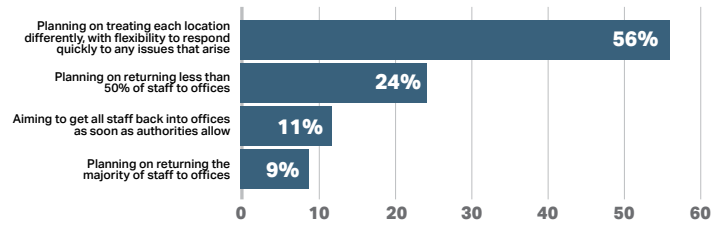


Finding 5: Returning to work requires separate plans for each office

When asked “Which describes your return to work plans between now and October 2020?” more than half of those polled (56%) plan on treating each office location differently, remaining flexible and responsive to regional disparities. Another 24% plan on returning less than half of their staff to offices and only about 20% plan on returning either all or the majority of staff back to offices. What’s clear is that law firms will not be returning to traditional 100% office-based working any time soon.

When considering returning to offices, firms must address infinite variables based on government rules, geography, employee and client comfort level, transportation, and family obligations. Law firms will face questions about when

Which best describes your return to work plans between now and October 2020?



they can reopen offices and whether to require people to be physically present. Law firms will have to balance priorities to ensure people’s safety and comfort, while still maintaining internal morale and equity among employees, and quality service to clients. Critically, reopening plans must be fluid.

Additionally, considering that firms’ real estate costs are among the largest expenses to the business, reconsidering physical office space is an area of potential cost savings with firms of all sizes reanalyzing their space needs.

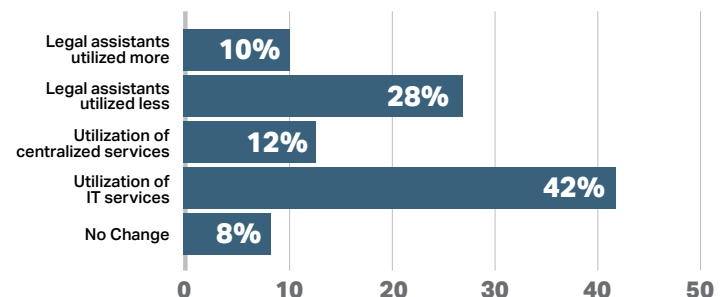
In all situations, a new combination of resources including outsourced support and technology will be considered as ways to work more effectively under changed conditions.

Finding 6: IT services will continue to be heavily utilized

IT professionals were central to the work from home transformation. Technology, both hardware and software, became essential to connecting lawyers and staff and ensuring productivity among home workers. The poll showed that “Utilization of IT services” (42%) was the working practice most likely to remain altered even as return to office is encouraged.

Video conferencing software took priority initially, requiring quick rollouts and training, followed by other collaboration

Which working practices have changed and will likely remain altered even as return to office is encouraged?



and work sharing tools that are expected to be used even after things return to normal. Joslin commented that full utilization of support resources, both internally and outsourced, can help solve the operational puzzle. He cited that technology is key to the management of this workflow.

Generational differences have an impact on resource utilization, Wangler pointed out. Younger attorneys are more accustomed to using technology and don't expect the same level of "white glove" service that many more tenured partners have come to depend on. Taking into account this challenge on the demand side, and coupling it with real challenges on the delivery side, makes this a real conundrum. Leaving aside the current issues that COVID-19 and working from home have presented, law firms have been dealing with a real challenge as there is a generation of generalist legal secretaries in the process of leaving the industry – 58% in the next five years! Flexibility and access to hard-data will be critical to solving this support delivery challenge.

Managing Law Firms and Planning When Change is the Only Constant

Law firms are certainly facing new and uncharted challenges ahead as they manage and plan for the future



when change is their only constant. Taking the poll results and panelists' recommendations into account, working from home is here to stay and law firms must accept this reality. Administrative services will need to continue to morph and change to adapt and support the new normal where work needs to keep moving effectively, without the traditional face-to-face delegation methods. The use of technology, outsourced resources, and other efficiency enablers will help firms to not only survive, but flourish.

In order to achieve success, firms need to better understand their office support teams, and have a clear view into employee performance and workloads to ensure efficiency and client satisfaction. Measurement, analytics, and technology along with effective delivery resources can help them accomplish this. Investment in IT services, hardware, software and training will be essential elements to keep firms running smoothly.

By facing this new reality head on and making the necessary changes now, law firms can turn recent changes into long-term advantages — saving money, improving service and gaining an edge over less proactive competitors. Change may be difficult, but it's the best way to ensure the health of the law firm and its employees into the future.

About Integreon

Integreon is a trusted, global provider of award-winning legal and business solutions to leading law firms, corporations and professional services firms. We apply a highly trained, experienced staff of over 3,000 employees globally to a wide range of problems that require scale and expertise, enabling clients to become more operationally efficient by streamlining operations, maximizing investment and improving the quality of work they provide their end clients. With delivery centers on three continents, Integreon offers multi-lingual, around-the-clock support, as well as onshore, offshore and onsite delivery of our award-winning services.

For more information about Integreon's extensive range of services, email info@integreon.com, visit www.integreon.com and follow Integreon at [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).



About BigHand

BigHand specializes in productivity and profitability solutions that enable clients to achieve operational excellence. Through technology, insight and experience, BigHand has developed a range of task delegation, workflow, document creation, matter pricing, dictation, business intelligence (BI) reporting and analytics tools to help busy people achieve more and law firms become more efficient and effective.

With over 545,000 software licenses in use across 3,000 global organizations, BigHand actively listens and responds to our clients' needs, demonstrated by an outstanding customer satisfaction score of 98% month on month.

For more information about BigHand's range of legal software solution including [BigHand Now workflow](#), email inquiry@bighand.com, visit www.bighand.com or follow BigHand on [LinkedIn](#).

