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The Biggest Hurdles For Attys Starting Jobs During COVID-19

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Law360 (July 27, 2020, 5:18 PM EDT) — For about two weeks in early March, one new attorney in the Office of County Counsel in Los Angeles had started his new job as usual — touring the facilities, signing paperwork, meeting the majority of his team and getting set up with a computer in an office.

But that activity came to a screeching halt with the escalation of the novel coronavirus outbreak in the U.S., forcing Jonathan Brazile — an associate county counsel within the Department of Public Works — into a remote environment with only a day's notice.

One consequence of that quick transition was not being able to finish the final eight hours of a three-session solicitation training, largely because his email had not yet been fully set up and he didn't have access to the contact information for the leaders in charge.

Brazile, who had to leave that part of his training unfinished in order to focus on adjusting to working from home, isn't alone in his experience with logistical hiccups. With much of the legal sector away from the office for the foreseeable future, attorneys are starting their new jobs remotely, and going through similar technical hurdles — and missing out on casually interacting with colleagues.

Most respondents in a June survey of more than 1,000 lawyers and professional staff

of multi-office law firms said they had “sufficient technology to work effectively at home,” though they asked for improved printing capabilities, dual monitor setups and reimbursement for supplies like toner cartridges, according to legal consulting firm Altman Weil Inc.

For the Office of County Counsel’s virtual summer internship program, leaders had to prepare the technology in advance to ensure the interns had email accounts, and familiarize themselves with programs they used for virtual meetings and training, said Kristine Miles, senior assistant county counsel.

“Many aspects of the in-person program are transferable to a remote program, but the new employee loses the in-person experience and the tour of the other work sites,” she said.

While preparing for a virtual court appearance, summer intern Holly James said her top concerns were related to technology and the at-home environment, including fully charging her laptop and mitigating nearby construction noise.

James, who interned in the office’s Dependency Division, in early July said she was “making sure everything’s in place before I even start to think about what I would be doing from the law end.”

At Baker McKenzie, Jessica Nall last month started working in the white collar defense practice in California. For now, she’s missing out on experiencing the firm’s global reach by not being able to travel to its dozens of offices around the world.

“Everybody keeps saying, ‘The best thing to do when you come to this firm is get on a plane and go out and meet everybody, fly to Asia, fly to Europe … get to see the reach of the massive empire,'” she said.

It’s the inability of new attorneys to experience an employer’s culture that worries Eric Ostroff, managing partner at Meland Russin & Budwick PA. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the 15-lawyer firm has on-boarded two attorneys.

But it’s particularly difficult in a virtual environment, he said, to share the boutique firm’s culture with new employees without being in an office.

To at least introduce the new hires to the culture, the firm holds casual twice-weekly

Zoom meetings and Friday virtual happy hours. And the firm will send cupcakes to an attorney celebrating a birthday, Ostroff said.

> "It's by no means an equivalent substitute for being together all the time, but it is something," he said. "There's been a lot of positive things that law firms have learned about how their business can operate in a virtual environment, but one of the biggest negatives is maintaining and passing along culture, and the loss of interpersonal contact."

While many firms try to bridge the virtual gap with events like happy hours, new legal employees in recent months are still finding it much harder to develop relationships with their colleagues. At refrigeration services company CoolSys, general counsel Burton Hong has a heightened awareness of this, as a lawyer he recently hired has spent the majority of her time working from home.

Hong said he strives to host remote team gatherings twice a month, not only to work through any issues team members are experiencing, but also to give the new employee a chance to socialize and build camaraderie with the rest of the staff.

"It's important to be able to step away from work a little bit and also view each other as human beings, especially in this case," Hong said.

Even with clients, Nall at Baker McKenzie said she hasn't yet mastered how to effectively approach business development virtually.

"It's a lot to ask a client, 'Oh, I know you're busy like we all are with kids and family and the crazy demands of shifting industry overnight, but can you just take some time off to please hop on a video call with me just so that you can see my face and remember who I am so you can send work to me?'" Nall said.

Similarly, Brazile said it has been challenging not to be able to share spontaneous office conversations with his new co-workers. And if he has a question, sometimes he worries about calling them at home during an inconvenient time.

"Everyone is really nice and really friendly," he said. "But at a newer job, you want to put face-time in and you want to meet people and you want to talk to people and

get an understanding of what you're doing and what you can do to be a helpful and productive employee."

That feeling isn't only limited to new employees. In Altman Weil's June survey of lawyers and firm staff, equity partners more than any other group said they "work better in an office setting with co-workers around ."

Also in the survey, partners mentioned the ease of delegating tasks and training associates when everyone is working in an office setting.

At the Office of County Counsel, Dawyn Harrison, senior assistant county counsel and chief of staff, recognized that it might be more of a challenge for government attorneys to telework, especially during a pandemic or declared state of emergency.

In lieu of meeting in person, many of the division chiefs in the 360-lawyer Los Angeles municipal civil law office have hosted virtual meetings with their teams and remote introductions to their respective client departments, Harrison said. Many have also assigned mentors to some of their new employees.

"We're doing it, and it was pretty seamless for us … We are government employees, and therefore essential workers, representing government agencies, many of which are on the front lines of this pandemic," she said. "It's different than a private law firm that can onboard someone saying, 'This is our client, and here's their case' or 'Research this issue.'"

She added, "In general, our work is much more diverse and dynamic, but it's been even more intense as a result of COVID-19."

For Brazile, he said he misses the structure of reporting to an office every day. But overall, he said he's lucky and grateful to have a job during the pandemic.

And progress is being made on certain fronts: Recently, the leaders of the solicitation training that abruptly ended when Brazile went remote in March emailed with plans to finish the final eight hours of the program in early August.

"I am really glad to see that they are picking up the training again," he said.

–Editing by Pamela Wilkinson and Rebecca Flanagan.