



# As Remote Work Brings Isolation, How Can Firms Keep Lawyers in the Fold?

"The kind of interpersonal communication that people have on a coffee break or in the lunchroom is now gone," said one behavioral scientist who's also a Big Law alum. "Firms are going to have to work to keep their people committed and engaged."

By Patrick Smith@ Law.Com

As law firms settle into working remotely, keeping connected is turning out to be much more than just a technical challenge. And while many firms are finding ways to encourage communication and check in with employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, those contacts haven't extended to everyone.

A [survey](#) released this week by Chicago-based consulting firm [The Red Bee Group](#) found that the vast majority of lawyers and staff respondents—90%—were somewhat or very satisfied with the systems in place for remote working at their firms or legal organizations. But significant percentages had not been included in group meetings designed to maintain contacts or had not had their supervisors personally check in.

More than a quarter—26%—said they had not participated in an employer-led conference call or video meeting designed to stay in touch with colleagues. One-on-one outreach by supervisors to see how personnel were coping was also uneven, with 60% reporting email contacts, 52% saying they had received a check-in phone call, 35% reporting contact through text message and 29% connecting via video chat.



“That was one of the most striking themes that came out of this research,” said Stephanie Scharf, a principal at Red Bee, a behavioral scientist and a former partner at Kirkland & Ellis and Jenner & Block who now has her own firm. “The kind of interpersonal communication that people have on a coffee break or in the lunchroom is now gone. Firms are going to have to work to keep their people committed and engaged.”

Roberta Liebenberg, a principal at Red Bee and a senior partner at Fine, Kaplan and Black in Philadelphia, echoed that reaction. “Law firms are going to need to communicate in a way they are not really used to,” she said. “They need to communicate with empathy and get personal with their lawyers.”

The survey, conducted by email and through social media platforms such as LinkedIn, included responses from over 300 individuals in 34 states and Washington, D.C. About three quarters worked at law firms, but in-house, nonprofit and government employees were also represented.

The responses were gathered March 23 and 24, and 96% of respondents said they were working remotely by that time, with more than 50% saying their employers sent workers home before government mandates left them with no choice.

Since then, firms have experimented with different ways to maintain a sense of community and shared mission among their suddenly dispersed workforces. Joshua Jarvis, a Boston-based partner and the intellectual department co-chair at Foley Hoag, said on top of individual calls to staff, his department has started producing two weekly newsletters.

The first, released Mondays, covers work-related matters such as new business, speaking engagement announcements and firm news.

The second, released Wednesdays, is more of a “lifestyle” publication, he said.



“It’s what the staff is doing at home,” Jarvis said. “Photos of kids, pets and workspaces. It’s been fun for people to share what they are doing. The goal is to keep people connected. Every time we send one, we get a couple of personal notes thanking us for emphasizing that we are not 150 disconnected people. We are a department that is working together.”

And that work has not dried up for many, according to the Red Bee survey, with nearly half of respondents reporting that they were at least as busy as before. Still, nearly as many—42%—said they had experienced a reduction in their volume of work compared to normal times.

Nevertheless, 90% of respondents said their firms or companies have not reduced billable hours requirements or working hours.

Respondents were satisfied overall with their employers’ dissemination of health related information during the COVID-19 crisis, such as clarity on sick leave matters, with 72% saying they had received employer guidance.

There were some gaps, though, as only 41% said they had received information on maintaining mental health from home, and only 21% said they had received any information regarding maintaining child care efforts while working remotely.

The researchers concluded that employers will need to find ways to communicate more, and more consistently, in order to counter the disruptions of the COVID-19 crisis. They analysts also suggested that employers consider adjustments to workloads, although that would be dependent upon the particular firm or practice being impacted.

“There is no such thing as too much communication with your attorneys,” Scharff said.



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