

ONBOARDING, ORIENTATION, TRAINING, AND INTEGRATION: **HYBRID IS THE NEW NORMAL**

By Sheryl Roberts

Welcome to the New Normal! How many times have we heard that phrase since early 2020? As an industry during Covid-19, we became fully virtual, then a mix of virtual and in-person, next we tried to return to fully in-the-office only to have to dial it back to a hybrid model again. We head into the second half of 2023 with stronger and easier-to-use virtual technology (Zoom, Teams, FloRecruit, Symplicity) and cost-savings, but still share the necessity and inclination to be in-person. Welcome to your hybrid world, where you can thrive with a little planning!

In a recent survey of 40 Am Law 200 firms by Forrest Solutions Legal, two-thirds of the law firms recommended employees (including lawyers) return to the office two to three days per week, and one-fifth mandated such a schedule. Additionally, seven percent mandated four days a week while seven percent had no policy at all. Firms that mandated days in the office reported that 71 percent of employees were failing to comply, and firms “strongly suggesting” days in the office reported that only 55.6 percent of their lawyers were complying. There is little indication that firms are enforcing any policies. The hybrid model appears to be here to stay, so let’s settle in and make it work for us.



The Hybrid Approach

As we move forward, we need to offer both virtual and in-office options for onboarding, including orientation. Due to necessity, most law firms have learned to pivot to a virtual environment. To stay competitive with market demands, we must become skilled at implementing and maintaining a hybrid model that allows employees to thrive.

Planning for and executing both in-person and virtual onboarding takes additional time, resources, patience, and a plan, and if not done from the onset, significantly raises the level of stress for those involved. Training opportunities have been available in a virtual format for some time; however, legal

industry training outside of continuing legal education (CLE) courses have traditionally been in person. Research by Continu Team indicates that corporate online learning is expected to grow by over 250% by 2026 and hit almost \$50 billion. Despite this expected growth and virtual learning improving during the pandemic, it is still not rated as highly as in-person learning with law firms.

Virtual training offers greater flexibility, program variety, and can be less expensive, while in-person training provides hands-on, group experience, face to face interaction, and connection. The feedback on in-person versus virtual is as varied as it is personal, and there are people who thrive in each

RESOURCES

These articles highlight several important ways to keep lawyers and employees engaged, connected, and growing professionally in a virtual environment:

[21 Virtual Onboarding Ideas to Welcome New Hires](#)

[17 Virtual Onboarding Ideas to Engage New Hires](#)

For more information on hybrid work arrangements, see these articles:

[To Mandate or to Suggest? Law Firms Weigh Hybrid Policy Approaches: The American Lawyer](#)

[In-Person vs. Online Training: What Does the Research Say? Continu](#)

group. The hybrid option can offer the best to both groups but requires a well thought out plan to be effective. This assumes that law firms and law schools can offer both, and they have the staffing and resources to maintain each.

While planning training in both formats is not ideal, it can be done and should be considered. With proper technology and foresight, you can add a virtual component to in-person training, offer virtual make-up days for missed in-person training, and of course offer video training. One step is to start tracking what works best virtually, what works best in-person, and when you should offer a hybrid option.

Assimilating in the Firm

One of the heaviest lifts in our hybrid world has been integration. Lawyers enjoy the flexibility of the hybrid work environment, but still strongly desire the benefits gained from in-person opportunities, including mentoring, relationship building, connectivity, fuller integration into firm life and culture, socializing, and a stronger path toward professional development and growth.

I have not found nor heard any argument that virtual integration in a law firm is better

and more effective than in-person integration. The organic connections and mentoring that takes place in the office cannot be duplicated in a virtual world. Those chance opportunities to interact at a meeting, the water cooler, at lunch, and in the hallway simply do not exist. If you have associates who are remote and plan to stay that way, you need to have a formal, deliberate, and workable plan in place for meaningful integration.

We have seen many successful integration plans and models over the past few years, including those that require everyone to be in the office on the same day one or more days per week (anchor days), include in-person lunch or coffee, virtual coffee chats and other social activities via Zoom or other platforms, and assign a key person to manage and execute these interactions. Anchor days have proven to be a popular and workable way to ensure that people are in the office together. Mid-week appears to offer the most in-office attendance, and many employers are adding the further enticement of food on anchor days. We have also seen the introduction of the integration manager or coordinator role, created to manage and implement assimilation and assist with retention.

Prior to 2020, if you could not attend an in-person meeting or event, you missed it.

Now, lawyers often ask for a virtual option, and often ask at the last minute. And while we should appreciate, embrace, and take advantage of the increased opportunities that virtual technology provides, it will never discount the importance of in-person interaction.

Start with viewing everything through a hybrid lens, and plan accordingly. Review and track what works best in each situation for your firm and create a formal plan with all hybrid options in place; provide the ability to immediately pivot to virtual for in-person meetings, interviews, training, etc.; obtain and maintain the necessary technology and resources; familiarize yourself and be well-trained on all technology; consider additional staffing, and the possibility of hiring an integration manager or coordinator. Welcome to your New Normal. Now, let's start reaping the benefits and lean into our hybrid world. +



Sheryl Roberts
(sroberts@smithlaw.com) is the Legal Recruiting Manager at Smith Anderson Blount Dorsett Mitchell & Jernigan LLP in Raleigh, NC.