

Goldilocks Solution: Why The 4-Day Office Week Is Just Right

By **Paul Manuele** (March 10, 2025)

As law firms continue to wrestle with return-to-office policies, many are being pulled toward one or the other of two extremes: the rigidity of a five-day in-office schedule and the laissez-faire approach of a flexible three-day hybrid model. Neither is quite right.

Fortunately, a growing number of firms are finding a balanced middle ground with a four-day in-office workweek — a Goldilocks solution that offers the best of both worlds.



Paul Manuele

The Current Landscape: How Firms Are Handling Return-to-Office Policies

Sullivan & Cromwell LLP announced in January that it was returning to a mandatory five-day, in-office schedule, a move that has reportedly made many associates furious and tanked morale.[1] So far, there hasn't been a push by other firms to follow Sullivan & Cromwell's lead. But that could change, as a significant number of companies — i.e., law firm clients — are making that push.

JPMorgan Chase, for example, announced earlier this year that beginning in March, employees would be expected to return to the office five days a week or leave the company.[2]

At the other end of the spectrum, most law firms are clinging to a hybrid model averaging three days in the office, often either with flexibility for employees to decide which three days work best for them or a less flexible requirement that each department maintain "coverage," or a certain level of presence every day of the week. These firms tout relatively high job satisfaction, but it's unclear what the costs are in terms of decreased productivity and client service.[3]

Between these two extremes is a middle ground: four days in the office. A handful of firms are staking out this ground, such as Latham & Watkins LLP; Weil Gotshal & Manges LLP; Ropes & Gray LLP; Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP; Vinson & Elkins LLP; and Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom LLP. On Feb. 28, Paul Weiss Rifkind Wharton & Garrison LLP joined this group, announcing that beginning April 30, it will require all employees to be in the office four days a week, Monday through Thursday.[4]

This is the perfect solution, and I'll tell you why.

Too Hot: The Problem With Five Days in the Office

The return-to-office movement is not irrational, but it is excessive. It is understandable if law firm leaders are concerned about the possible negative effect of remote work on productivity, mentorship, collaboration and interpersonal relationships. But a strict policy of five days in the office is an overcorrection. It fails to recognize that some of the costs of remote work are mitigated by its benefits in terms of higher job satisfaction and a better quality of life for employees and their families — benefits that accrue not only to businesses but also to our society.

A strict five-day in-office schedule is also reactionary. Five days is considered normal today, but it was not always so. In 1920, the average workweek was 60 hours. In 1929, it was 48.

Although Henry Ford instituted a 40-hour, five-day workweek for his workers in 1926,[5] Saturday was still a workday for many in the early 20th century.[6] The 40-hour, five-day workweek became U.S. law under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which was championed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his secretary of labor, Frances Perkins, the first female cabinet member in U.S. history.[7]

Increases in productivity in the early 20th century due to assembly lines and mass-production techniques made a reduced workweek possible. In 1929, 69 workers produced as much as 100 produced in 1920, a 45% increase in productivity.[8]

Since 1947, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. nonfarm labor productivity rose from an index value of 22.07 in the third quarter of 1947 to 114.85 in the fourth quarter of 2024, an increase of 420.5%.[9] Yet, despite these extraordinary gains in productivity, the standard workweek has remained frozen in time.

A rigid five-day in-office schedule ignores not only the productivity gains of the past 80 years but also the changing needs of today's workers. In 1920, women were about 20% of the U.S. labor force. Today, women make up 47% of the U.S. labor force.[10] Arguably, this shift has transformed family dynamics, making flexibility a necessity, not a luxury, in the 21st century.

Too Cold: Why Three Days Isn't Enough

Three days isn't the right answer either, especially considering that those three days often can be shifted around on a whim and enforcement tends to be lax. It means that even when employees are in the office, they spend most of their time alone in their offices on videoconference calls — because some of the members of their team are working remotely.

Many associates find that when they are in the office, many partners are not. The result is that mentorship and collaboration haven't improved much since moving from a fully remote workweek during the pandemic to a hybrid model.[11] Productivity may be taking a hit as well. Hours per lawyer have declined an average of 1.6% annually since 2020.[12]

Associates who are in the office three days a week report higher levels of job satisfaction, but many of them never knew a different way of working. Do they know what they're missing — things like spontaneous mentorship, real-time feedback, and organic learning through observation and informal interactions?

Let us also remember that legal service is a client-driven industry. Satisfaction among attorneys is important, but so is the quality of client service, which intuitively correlates with the levels of internal collaboration and professional development and the quality of relationships among their firms' lawyers.

Just Right: The Case for Four Days in the Office

The right balance is a four-day in-office workweek, Monday through Thursday, with one optional remote day Friday. Four days are better than three due to higher productivity and increased opportunities for collaboration, mentorship and relationship-building. It's better than five days because it increases employee freedom and job satisfaction at minimal sacrifice in terms of productivity.

But it must be a strict four days, and it must be the same four days, just as it was five days and the same five days before the pandemic. Otherwise, we will still find ourselves alone in our offices on videoconference calls much of the time.

The DEI Imperative

The four-day workweek also must apply to all personnel. Inconsistent policies can deepen hierarchies, creating resentment and undermining diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. According to a Thomson Reuters report from 2024, paralegals reported far less flexibility in return-to-office policies compared to lawyers and nonbillable professionals, with 64% saying their office attendance policies were more rigid.

While stricter policies led to higher productivity — 42% of paralegals reported increased productivity — they also resulted in lower job satisfaction, with 23% expressing dissatisfaction, double the rate of their lawyer counterparts.[13] Their dissatisfaction may be less about the nature of their work and more about the reality that they have fewer privileges than their lawyer and nonbilling professional counterparts.

As Mark Twain once said, "Comparison is the death of joy." Law firm leaders committed to DEI principles should be mindful of how office attendance policies are enforced, ensuring they do not unintentionally reinforce class divisions or create unnecessary inequities within their organizations.

Make It Universal

One of the challenges in establishing a four-day in-office workweek is overcoming resistance from senior partners, many of whom are approaching retirement and may not prioritize the firm's long-term future. These partners often enjoy the flexibility of hybrid schedules with lax enforcement and may not see the need for structural changes that would primarily benefit the next generation of lawyers and the firm's long-term health.

Fortunately, law firms have a history of banding together to support important initiatives, which could be a model for adopting a standardized four-day workweek. For example, law firms banded together in support of the Mansfield Rule, pioneered by Diversity Lab in 2016, which calls on firms to commit to considering at least 30% "qualified underrepresented talent" for leadership roles.[14] This initiative gained widespread adoption across the Am Law 200, showing that collective action can create industrywide change.

A coalition of forward-thinking law firms could establish a "Four-Day Workweek Pledge" where firms collectively agree to implement a structured, Monday through Thursday in-office schedule. By approaching this as a collaborative effort, firm leaders could reduce the perception that this policy is a capricious or isolated management decision. Instead, it would be framed as a strategic and industrywide response to modern workplace realities.

If law firms set this example, it could create a powerful precedent that extends beyond the legal industry, influencing other professional services businesses as well. Establishing a universal four-day in-office standard would not only enhance productivity and job satisfaction, but also contribute to a healthier, more sustainable work culture for all.

Conclusion: Time to Move Forward

JPMorgan CEO Jamie Dimon and other corporate leaders are right about one thing: A three-

day in-office hybrid workweek, or even a four-day in-office schedule if employees can choose which days to be in the office, isn't a sustainable model for most industries. These models create confusion and division and disrupt organizational rhythm and efficiency, which negatively affects professional development, client service and likely personal well-being.

But a five-day office mandate is a relic of the past, not a vision for the future.

A four-day in-office workweek Monday through Thursday with a remote day on Friday is the rational compromise between law firm control and attorney autonomy. It balances collaboration, deep work and personal well-being in a way that aligns with modern society.

The future of work, including legal work, isn't about extremes — it's about finding the balance that is just right for our times.

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[1] "Biglaw Firm Breaks With Trend, Requires Associates To Be In Office 5 Days A Week," Above the Law, Jan. 6, 2025. (<https://abovethelaw.com/2025/01/biglaw-firm-breaks-with-trend-requires-associates-to-be-in-office-5-days-a-week/>). Employee morale took another hit later in the month when S&C announced it is representing President Trump in his challenge to his conviction in the New York hush money case: "Sullivan & Cromwell Attorneys Are NOT Happy The Firm Decided To Suck Up To Trump," Above the Law, Jan. 30, 2025. (<https://abovethelaw.com/2025/01/sullivan-cromwell-attorneys-are-not-happy-the-firm-decided-to-suck-up-to-trump/>).

[2] "JPMorgan asks staff to return to office five days a week, prompting complaints," Reuters, Jan. 12, 2025. (<https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/jpmorgan-asks-staff-return-office-five-days-week-march-memo-shows-2025-01-10/>) Other companies mandating five days in the office include Amazon, AT&T, Goldman Sachs and Tesla. "Which companies are enforcing office returns?" Raconteur, Jan. 21, 2025. (<https://www.raconteur.net/talent-culture/which-companies-are-enforcing-office-returns>).

[3] "2024 Law Firm Office Attendance Policies," Thomson Reuters Institute. (<https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en-us/posts/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/04/2024-Law-Firm-Office-Attendance-Policies-Report.pdf>).

[4] "Paul Weiss to Require 4 Days of Weekly Office Attendance," ALM, Feb. 28, 2025. (<https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/2025/02/28/paul-weiss-to-require-4-days-of-weekly-office-attendance/>).

[5] "40 Hours, 5 Days," Library of Congress Blogs, Jan. 17, 2024. (https://blogs.loc.gov/inside_adams/2024/01/40-hours-5-days/#:~:text=The%20company%20announced%20a%20five,In%20making%20the%20announcement%20Mr.).

[6] "The Powerbroker," Robert A. Caro, 1974, p. 143.

[7] "The Origins of the Five-Day Work Week in America," History.com, Aug. 26, 2024. (<https://www.history.com/news/five-day-work-week-labor-movement>).

[8] Caro, p. 143.

[9] "United States Nonfarm Labor Productivity," Trading Economics, citing U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data. (<https://tradingeconomics.com/united-states/productivity>).

[10] "History," Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor website (<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/about/history>).

[11] See Thomson Reuters 2024 attendance policy report above.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Diversity Lab website (<https://www.diversitylab.com/what-we-do/mansfield-certification/>).