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Personal Injury Firms in Phila. Aim to Rejuvenate Firm Culture

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Of the Legal Staff

Editor's note: This is the second installment in a two-part series examining vaccine and remote work policies at personal injury firms in Pennsylvania.

Remote work and videoconferencing technology allowed law firms to thrive and survive over the past year, but now that the ranks of the vaccinated are expanding and courts are beginning to open up again, many firm leaders in Philadelphia's personal injury bar are aiming to put that era behind them.

Several personal injury firms across the region have either already started bringing their work force back into the office, or are planning to do so soon, and most are not offering expanded remote work options to their employees. The decision, according to several firm leaders, comes from a desire to foster an efficient and collaborative firm culture, something that can be difficult when



WINKLER



SPECTER

a significant portion of the employees are working from their home offices.

Eisenberg, Rothweiler, Winkler, Eisenberg & Jeck principal Nancy Winkler said the 24-employee firm has been expecting to bring its work force back into the office during the first week of June, and everyone is excited to start once again using the communal kitchen area, holding firm-wide lunches and events, and get back to working closely together.

"We're all in," she said.

She said the firm had success working remotely, but many employees had been

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regularly accessing the firm's Spruce Street townhouse over the past few months. Having everyone in the office makes for more efficient work, and is important, especially as trials are starting to gear up again in Philadelphia.

Winkler noted that their office will make accommodations on a case-by-case basis for those who might need to work remotely, giving an example of someone whose child is sick. But those accommodations will need to be made uniformly, she said.

"We have to be careful to make sure we are fair to everybody," she said.

At van der Veen, O'Neill, Hartshorn and Levin in Center City, firm leader Michael van der Veen said his firm is more open to allowing flexible hours and some remote work, but for the most part everyone is expected to work full time in the office. The firm, he said, wants to be physically present for its clients to help foster a sense of safety and well-being for them.

"We aren't trying to rewrite the culture of our firm. We have a really strong rhythm working together, and we want to get back to that," he said. "It's hard to be client-centric virtually. You can't replace the person-to-person contact."

Other firms are taking a more strict approach.

According to Kline & Specter's Shanin Specter, the firm is not offering remote work to those who weren't already given some remote work accommodation prior to the pandemic. He said the policy is in part to bolster the firm's requirement that all employees not subject to a health or religious exemption be vaccinated.

The combination of those policies allowed the firm to begin operating with everyone in the office starting June 1, he said, noting that ensuring the workforce returns to the office not only has an effect on office culture, but also impacts the city's culture as well.

"It's important for law firms leaders, as good citizens to try to do what they can to help get our economy back on its feet. Law firms have a huge ripple effect on their neighborhoods with the restaurants and the retail stores," he said. "Each of us is dependent on the other in our city and in our nation, and we all need to do what we can, within reason, to get past this pandemic."

At Ross Feller Casey, employees are also expected to work from the office after June 14.

"With extremely limited exceptions that preceded the pandemic, everyone will work from the office and not remotely," firm principal Matthew Casey said.

The remote work policy at McLaughlin & Lauricella is also tied in somewhat with its

vaccine policy. According to firm principal Slade McLaughlin, the office is not allowing any unvaccinated people to come into the office, and unvaccinated employees are being allowed to work remotely.

However, those remote workers will be expected to have their cameras on so that firm leaders can monitor their productivity, which, McLaughlin said, has gone down for some during the pandemic.

"We're trying to accommodate everybody as best we can," he said.

Not all firm leaders, however, are planning to curtail remote work altogether, with some offering limited remote options and flexible work hours.

Emmanuel Iheukwumere said he does not plan to start bringing employees back into the Emmanuel Law Firm office for several months, and even after that, he does not plan to require more than three days a week of in-office work.

"Employees have been doing their job remotely very well. They've been very productive," he said. "All lawyers have access to remote platforms and are able to access all the files."

Ostroff Injury Law's Jon Ostroff noted that remote technology can be used as a management tool.

Earlier in the pandemic, Ostroff's firm, like many others, installed monitoring systems on their employees work computers

to ensure that staff and attorneys were still using their time effectively. While many at the 37-employee firm did just that, some did not, and Ostroff said the firm used that information to recently let go of eight unproductive employees, including an attorney. All of those positions, he said, have since been replaced.

"There is somewhat of a quid pro quo, if you offer stability and allow people to work from home," Ostroff said, noting that early on in the pandemic employees were told their work would be monitored. "It was a challenging transition, but ultimately a very positive one."

Additionally, he said allowing for remote work can enhance employee satisfaction and recruiting, and his firm plans to allow employees to work two days from home each week, before that is reduced to one day a week after Labor Day. The firm, he noted, will also maintain a flexible policy and evaluate requests on a case-by-case basis.

An inflexible remote work policy, he said, can become a driving reason for some—especially administrative staff—to leave a law firm.

"We see it as an opportunity to offer a benefit," Ostroff said. "I think firms that close the door on it are going to lose some good employees."

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