

New Law Firm Polling Suggests Almost Everybody Likes Working at Home

By Eric A. Seeger

Copyright © 2020 Altman Weil, Inc.
All rights for further publication or reproduction reserved.

Can't wait to get back to the office? If so, according to a recent survey conducted by Altman Weil on behalf of a large US law firm, your eagerness to return to the corporate work space is not widely shared.

In June, more than 1,000 lawyers and non-lawyers of a multi-office law firm participated in a survey designed to measure job satisfaction, receive feedback on the firm's management communications, identify hindrances to personal productivity in a remote work environment and invite recommendations on how the firm can best support remote workers. Participants in the voluntary survey were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 10 (Strongly Agree) how strongly they agreed with a variety of statements.

Findings included the following:

- **People like working at home.** Respondents strongly agreed that “overall, working at home is going fine” (average rating of 8.3), that they “like working from home” (8.0), that “working at home has gotten easier/better over time” (8.2) and that they like working at home more than they thought they would (7.9).
- **Nearly three-quarters of all personnel (72%) said they prefer to work at least half time from home, even when their offices fully reopen.** Strong majorities of paralegals (82%) and legal assistants (86%) noted their preference to work half time or more at home. Firmwide, people overwhelmingly indicated that they would like to continue to work at least one day a week from home (89%). Only 4% of all personnel said they will want to work full-time at the office. Nearly everyone agreed that “when our office

reopens, it will be important to me to have the flexibility of working at home when needed” (8.8 average rating).

- **Equity Partners wanted to return to the office more strongly than any other group.** They were most likely to “prefer working in the office” (6.7 average rating vs. 5.7 for all attorneys and 4.7 for all non-attorneys) and least inclined to want to work from home at least half time (55% compared to 65% for all attorneys and 72% for all personnel). Equity Partners were more likely to “prefer to return to the office as soon as possible” (5.8 average vs. 4.6 for all attorneys and 4.1 overall).
- **People felt well-equipped to perform their duties effectively at home.** Most respondents said they had “sufficient technology to work effectively at home” (8.1 average), they felt “competent to use all necessary technology effectively” (8.8) and the firm’s tech support staff had been “responsive and helpful when needed” (8.0). Respondents pointed to specific areas where the firm’s technology could be upgraded to better facilitate working from home. Some participants requested better printing/scanning capabilities, dual monitor setups and reimbursement for toner cartridges and office supplies.
- **Most participants strongly agreed that they “have dedicated space in [their homes] in which to work” (8.5 average).** Most said they were not having trouble separating their home lives from their work lives while working in their homes. Paralegals, legal secretaries and non-lawyer staff were more positive than the attorneys on these questions.
- **Not surprisingly, many people were feeling disconnected from their colleagues or co-workers and missing seeing people around the office.** Equity Partners, more than any other group, said they “work better in an office setting with co-workers around [them]” (6.2 average for Equity Partners vs. 4.8 overall). Some partners noted the relative ease of delegating tasks, discussing legal work and training associates when working in the office.
- **Still, people seem to be able to connect with each other when needed.** Most everyone agreed that they are “having sufficient interaction with [their] supervisor” (8.7 average), “have been able to reach people in the firm when [they] need them” (8.8), are “receiving adequate direction from [their] supervisor or supervising attorneys” (8.9) and are “receiving adequate feedback on their work” (8.5).

-
- **Firm management got high marks for keeping people well-informed regarding remote work expectations (8.4 average) and the status of each office’s return to work plan (8.2).** People strongly agreed that their “safety and welfare will receive the utmost consideration through the firm’s safety precautions under [their] office’s return to work plan” (8.5).

Of course, the favorable results presented above are drawn from just one firm and other firms may be experiencing rougher transitions. Altman Weil’s experience so far, however, is that most law firms have been able to manage a relatively seamless transition to a remote workforce and are now in the process of making their offices safe for those who want to return while making reasonable accommodations for those who do not.

Skeptical readers may point to social desirability bias (some participants' desire to answer questions in a way that would be viewed favorably), fear of retribution or other factors that may have skewed the survey data. Those concerns might be compelling if a firm tried to manage such a survey internally. However, by using an independent third party to collect, tabulate and report the survey data, individual participant anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed, ensuring a more reliable set of conclusions.

Among the many changes that have been driven by the coronavirus crisis, remote work might be the most universally-shared disruption among law firms. Making an effort to clarify and quantify lawyer, paralegal and staff perspectives on this topic will help any firm troubleshoot specific problems, improve communications and morale, and formulate plans that incorporate remote work arrangements into firm policies and budgets.

Eric A. Seeger is a principal with Altman Weil, Inc. He works with law firms on strategy and management projects.

Contact him at 267-908-9781 or eseeger@altmanweil.com.