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For Midsize Firms, 'a Hundred Considerations' in Repopulating the Office

As firms shift from questioning if they will reopen to strategizing how they can do it safely, physical and personnel logistics must be considered.

By Samantha Stokes | May 14, 2020



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Some states are slowly beginning to reopen their economies, which means midsize firms, which have mostly shifted to remote work, now have their eyes on an eventual return to the office buildings they largely abandoned two months ago.

But as the question shifts from “when” to “how,” firms are navigating a new world of operating a physical business with reduced capacity, social distancing, face coverings and other precautions that have become de rigueur in society at large but remain foreign in an office setting.

"No one has had training for this sort of circumstance," said Tim Corcoran, principal at Corcoran Consulting Group (<https://www.corcoranccg.com/>). In recent weeks, he said, his consulting work has shifted to address the concerns of law firms that, as the option to repopulate their offices crystallizes, want to make sure they're keeping their lawyers and staff safe while returning to some semblance of normal.

"The first hurdle a firm has to ask is: is our objective to get back to what we were operating like as quickly as possible?" he said. "Or is our objective to do as little as possible to get back to what we once were? That's the first decision."

Many midsize firms say they're taking the latter approach: they're being flexible and encouraging people to continue working from home, while in the meantime taking safety precautions in the office to benefit the slow-growing number of lawyers and staff who choose to return.

At Chamberlain, Hrdlicka, White, Williams & Aughtry (<https://www.chamberlainlaw.com/>), a 138-lawyer firm with offices in Houston, San Antonio, Atlanta and Philadelphia, managing partner Larry Campagna said that even though Texas and Georgia have lifted some restrictions, the firm has not reopened its offices and is still planning the best way forward.

"There are a hundred considerations," he said. "The first consideration is putting our people first, and not just because we care about them. At a law firm, people are assets. We make money by helping clients, and if people aren't around to do that, you've lost your moneymaking engine."

Campagna said the firm has focused only on the first phase of repopulating its offices, which will include continuing remote work on most days while allowing smaller groups to stagger time in the office a few days a week. Additionally, there will be hand sanitizer in the office and new signage to remind people of health and safety measures, and lawyers and staff will be required to wear masks when they are outside of their personal work areas.

Additionally, Campagna said the firm will require lawyers and staff to check their temperatures before going to the office and stay home if they have any signs of sickness. More vulnerable lawyers and staff, including those over age 65 and anyone with underlying health conditions, will stay home instead of staggering time in the office, he said.

"We, like most firms, are lucky because the transition to remote work went pretty smoothly," he said. "People are working and getting their hours in, so the urgency to restaff our offices doesn't feel too great. Working from home isn't perfect, but it still works, so what's the rush?"

California firm Greenberg Glusker Fields Claman & Machtinger (<https://www.greenbergglusker.com/>) is also defaulting to remote work and isn't planning to lead the charge back into the office, even as managing partner Bob Baradaran said the firm is starting to strategize about what an eventual reopening would look like, and how the office would need to change to accommodate social distancing.

"Our office space is such that we do have it set up where there are certain back-of-office areas that don't include private offices for everybody," he said. "I think we'll make some sort of adjustments on how people work and when people work so we can maintain an appropriate level of physical distancing from one another."

Still, Baradaran emphasized the firm was in no rush to get back to its physical office location.

"When we do so, we'll do it gradually and be thoughtful about who and how and when, and educate ourselves about what processes would be best for our business," he said. "[There's also] what's happening generally around us in the city and state, and [we'll reopen] in a way that manages the risk, and in such a way that's appropriate for our particular business."

Beyond the physical logistics of repopulating a law firm office in the age of COVID-19—including how to deal with the coffee machine, a new protocol for visitors and travel, the best way to pass a colleague in a narrow hallway, and whether to allow refrigerator access—midsize firms are also grappling with the personnel logistics of bringing people back to the office. Most schools and day cares are still closed, summer camps are canceled, and people with underlying health conditions are anxious about going to work. That's why it's important to start an office repopulation plan with the employment and people side in mind, said Michelle Friends, executive director of Denver-based litigation firm Fairfield and Woods (<https://www.fwlaw.com/>).

"There have been some interesting changes to the law, so you have to understand how employment laws operate," she said. "There are changes in regards to age, the ADA, high-risk people, as well as laws to help parents [and] workers caring for aging family members, for example."

Friends said these considerations have been top of mind, and Fairfield and Woods' reopening strategy began with a questionnaire of attorneys and staff to create multiple waves of people returning to the office—based on childcare needs, health risks and other factors—in order to be as flexible as possible.

"We're making an effort to make people feel comfortable and listening to them," she said. "And here's a mental health component, too: we don't want to force people back with anxiety or mental health issues; we want to fully operate with health and safety in mind. But it's a very real reality that someone may still get sick. Did we do the best we could?"

All of these considerations are playing out in real time at Florida firm Rumberger, Kirk & Caldwell (<https://www.rumberger.com/>), which began to allow lawyers and staff back in the office, with restrictions, on Monday.

"We're just starting to phase it in, and it's entirely voluntary and just an opportunity to allow people to return, rather than encouragement," said managing partner Frank Sheppard. As of midweek, more than half of his lawyers and staff still prefer to work from home, something the firm is happy to accommodate. And for the employees who do want to return, RumbergerKirk is working in phases, while enacting social distance and face-covering policies in the office, limiting the number of people in common areas, and monitoring who comes through the doors for contact-tracing purposes.

"Florida is on the upswing," he said. "People were wanting to come back, and now they're allowed back in, so that's the first step. So we're doing one group one week, another group another week, and we'll see how that goes for a little bit."

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