

Back to the office after lockdown- using the right lenses to make the right decisions



Back to the Office after Lockdown- a How to Guide

Spring – and the beginning of the end of the COVID-19 lockdown- is emerging in the UK. Our clients are looking forward to getting people back to offices which are currently (at best) part utilised.

We are not going to predict “The Future of Work”. Our aim here is to give you a “how to” guide to the issues you as a leader need to look at to tailor your return to work to the needs of your specific law firm or other professional firm.

There are at least five key lenses to look through: -

- Your clients
- Your people
- Your Firm
- Government
- You, as a law firm leader

Your clients and your people rightly come top- talk and listen to them and find out their needs. If you don't, your competitors will. For example, when did you last carry out a *client perception survey*? Clients really appreciate their advisors showing interest and care for them both personally and as a business

Typically, your clients will want: -

- Understanding of their specific needs
- Delivery of solutions to satisfy their needs
- Easy, safe collaboration across your offices and practices to deliver these solutions
- Management of their risk
- Great advice, as always
- Digitally enabled matter information
- Value for money in a tough economy

Your people will have very different needs. Surveys show that the majority of lawyers want to return to the office – but not five days a week and with a very different office set up. Some will have had tough lockdowns, with family trauma. Others will be very conscious that their personal development and learning have suffered through lack of the informal coaching and support provided by partners and teams in the workplace- the “learning by osmosis”. Your people will also judge your leadership by your actions in the crisis and make the appropriate future career decisions as to whether they stay or leave. A *confidential internal questionnaire* on what your people want from their careers and from you as their employer is likely to be revealing- and may well prevent you from losing some of your best people.

Some key issues to bear in mind:

- Surveys show: -
 - Only 10% of Lawyers want to work from home full time
 - Most want to return to the workplace, with critical changes
 - C. 74% want to work mainly in the office: c. 54% flexibly
- There is a major London/ Regions split with many regional firms finding it easier to go back. London firms **in particular** face a key issue with public transport.
- Some firms will see very different attitudes between partners (e.g. in spacious houses in leafy suburbs) and associates (e.g. in flats and shared houses)

The Firm’s need to maintain its competitive advantage is key. Without the Firm thriving and prospering, the clients and people’s needs will not be served. Addressing the question “*what kind of firm do we realistically want to be?*” will require strategic options to be considered and may include: -

- Grow through new and existing clients
- Grow through recruitment, lateral partner hires or merger
- Develop your people (some of whom will never have visited your office)
- Build collaborative, agile teams to take advantage of the new opportunities
- Develop and enhance the culture- a huge challenge with working from home
- Manage supervision risk so reducing PII claims– has working from home with less supervision created a long tail of potential claims?
- Become more cost-effective- can you use the experience to (for example) deliver business services better and with less cost, perhaps in a lower cost or fewer locations?
- Minimise overhead costs- how much office space do you really need?
- Cashflow forecasting- the financial lifeblood of the firm
- Maximise PEP, but also...
- Maximise long term profitability

All businesses operate in an environment influenced by government- both local and central and have political risk to manage.

- What are the tax policies and opportunities- and where are the future pinch points such as VAT payments?
- Public transport- especially in major cities

- Employment law
- Furlough
- How and where could a firm influence local or central policy- individually or collectively?

The final lens is you, as law firm leaders. We all bring our personal perspectives, values and experiences to all decisions. Phrases our clients have used describing being a law firm leader in 2020-2021 have included “tiring”, “lonely”, and “relentless”. We have seen some great leaders buckle under the strain- if only privately. It is a truism, but you can only look after your people if you look after yourself. Every individual is different, and when taking your decisions, we advise you to be aware of your personal lens- and to be sure that it is not leading you to a sub-optimal decision.

So, talk and listen to your clients and colleagues in a structured way to find out their needs. Often external independent help is best here.

Look at your Firm’s needs and strategy - do you have clarity and focus as to the way forward or do you need to review it in light of a changed future?

Look at government policy and decisions particularly around COVID 19 - how will this influence you? Where are the opportunities and threats?

And be aware of your own viewpoint in making the key leadership decisions.

The winning law firms will be those who tailor their next crucial decisions. If you need any help, talk to us. We are here to help you become winners.

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