

# Time for a change: but how do law firms achieve excellence?

## A balancing act

Slowly but surely, law firms are recognizing that lawyers should not be doing everything. Optimizing operations is key to business success, and the results of the work, Jessica Lancia, patent operations manager at Alston & Bird, is undertaking is a prime example. “In intellectual property, providing consistency is important. At the same time, the world is changing at an accelerated pace and law firms must adapt. As a result, a tension has emerged between trying to make sure we are providing our clients with the consistency they expect and making sure we’re staying ahead of the curve,” she says.

Running a successful firm requires tailoring your operations to the clients you have and the needs of your firm, adds Lancia, but most important is to be seriously committed to improving the practice of your operations.

Positively, Altman Weil’s “2020 Law Firms in Transition” survey suggests that law firms are much more serious about investing in professional staff to manage operations. And there is a real opening of discussions around law firms as businesses. Some firms are bringing in executives to boost their business expertise and drive revenue, while others focus on home-grown business acumen.

“Law school doesn’t prepare you to run a law firm; that’s something I’ve had to supplement by reading books over the past decade,” explains Neil Kardos, a partner at Harrity & Harrity. “How do you manage a business? What do you focus on? There are so many different aspects: marketing, hiring, people development, and more.”

## Creating a culture of retention

Aside from operations, all IP firms know the importance of paralegals and paraprofessionals – when you have brilliant staff members, you must retain them.

Altman Weil’s study suggests that nearly 40% of law firms are shifting work from lawyers to paraprofessionals, and more than three-quarters of these respondents believe there has been a significant improvement in firm performance.

Nearly three-quarters of legal professionals in the Wolters Kluwer study believe that the ability to acquire and retain talented staff will impact their organizations over the next three years, but only 26% of firms are ready to address this issue.

Technology is directly related to retention, and law firms are well aware of the need to invest in legal technology – paralegals often cite technology as an important factor that enables them to do their job more efficiently and effectively. According to the Wolters Kluwer survey, 76% cite technology as the top trend for the next three years, but only 28% of respondents said they were very prepared for it.

## The right people in the right place

Covid-19 has, of course, forced law firms to adapt digitally. Hauptman Ham was an early front runner in hiring remotely, and the foresight derived from this has helped the firm to easily adjust to the new normal.

Randy Noranbrock, a partner at the firm, explains: “Years ago, we had difficulty finding the right people with the right background in the right technology. We started with remote working and teleworking many years ago, so the pandemic hasn’t been that big of a deal for us to switch to a completely virtual format.”



In the IP industry, though, some are concerned that working remotely could impact the quality of, for instance, drafted patents since people are not engaging in ‘water-cooler talk’. However, law firms are working hard to elevate their practice and keep their staff engaged.

“Amid covid-19, our attorneys and agents have been meeting more regularly and having discussions in a way we weren’t doing,” says Lancia. “With offices across the country, the work was siloed. But the firm has spent a lot of energy aligning these processes across offices and digitizing all files.”

## STANDING OUT IN THE CROWD AND MEASURING PROGRESS

Finally, optimizing your operations and managing your business will work internally, but how do you differentiate yourself from the competition?

Unfortunately, only 55% of legal professionals think their firm is differentiated from others. Everybody is aware of the problem, but it is not an easy puzzle to solve. Wolters Kluwer notes that 80% of law firms believe there will be a greater specialization of the legal services offered over the next three years, while three-quarters expect an increased emphasis on innovation. But how to get there?

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Last year, Harrity & Harrity discovered that the firm’s timeliness numbers for sending out draft patent applications to clients on time were not as good as the firm would have liked. It became a major focus area this year. Specifically, the firm developed a dashboard to show

its timeliness numbers in real-time and undertook weekly team meetings with its application drafters. “We started looking at these numbers in February, and we saw a rapid improvement right away. We’ve reached a point where we’re on time over 90% of the time,” adds Kardos.

As the pressure mounts on law firms to consolidate immense amounts of data and to make decisions based on the consolidated data, they are increasingly turning to technology solutions that provide real-time dashboards with statistics like revenue, workload, and internal key performance indicators to make it easier for firms to measure progress and plan business.

## TIME FOR CHANGE

Historically speaking, law firms have not generally demonstrated an impetus to change. Fewer than 2% of firm leaders strongly agree that law firms have changed as much as was needed, according to Altman Weil. But in recent years, we have heard this conversation change across law firms of all sizes. The covid-19 pandemic is only serving to accelerate the need to change. Perhaps, as Altman Weil suggests, now is the time for law firms to hit the reset button and truly rethink their business.

## AUTHOR

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