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Leading the Way ...

Consultants and Recruiters Name the Nation's Best Law Firm Leaders

When historians evaluate the best presidents of the United States, naturally they differ in both their selections and their criteria. Many students of US political history, however, find these ranking lists interesting and educational—and certain presidents make most lists: Lincoln for his integrity, and, to use a modern term, crisis management proficiency; FDR for his compassion and courage; Jefferson for his far-reaching intellect and vision; Obama for his charisma and communication skills; JFK for his inspiration; and LBJ (on domestic issues, that is) for his determination and consensus-forging skills.

In the legal profession, insiders rate law firm leaders—sometimes publicly but more often privately—and they, too, tend to have different favorites. So, as we hit the mid-way point of 2019 who are the profession's best law firm chairs and managing partners?

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The Ginormous Reason BigLaw, and All Law, Should Get on Board with Working Remotely

What with the strong economy, and the relative dearth of lawyers, one might wonder why more of those lawyers, from BigLaw on down, aren't opting to work remotely all of the time, especially given all the lip-service of late being paid to matters like promoting diversity and lawyers' mental health. Cutting out commuting and working from home does tend to leave one on an even keel—and able to juggle things like school pick-up. And right about now, when demand for lawyers is greater than supply, one would think just about every lawyer would use all of their bargaining power to get a more civilized workday.

But for remote work scenarios really to take off, they probably will need to be promoted from the top down. Given commercial real estate prices, it is perhaps surprising that managing partners on a global basis aren't being more proactive about pushing all of those worker bees out the door to the land of work-life balance.

Although some of us have managed to eke out a living while working very comfortably from our well-appointed home offices, just 50 percent of employers in the legal space offer flexible, remote, or work-from-home options, according to Special Counsel's 2019 Salary Guide for Legal Professionals. In-house legal departments came out just a bit above law firm respondents, with 49% of in-house employers offering options to work remotely and 46% of law firms doing the same.

"Law firms and legal departments who are putting a larger focus on creative packages and nontraditional perks are able to attract strong candidates and differentiate themselves from competitors," observes Amanda Ellis, senior vice president at Special Counsel,

a legal talent provider. But are lawyers, especially high-profile ones, actually comfortable opting to work from home? Or does heading to a home office mean that you are very much jumping off any sort of career fast track?

Happiness at a Hybrid

A decade ago, Bryce Linsenmayer, then a partner at Texas-based Haynes and Boone, was approached by another partner who wanted to leave the firm and start a virtual law office. "At the time, I couldn't fathom how to practice without the pomp and circumstance of millions of dollars [worth] of conference rooms," Linsenmayer recalls.

Fast forward a handful or more years. Houston-based Linsenmayer, who by then had worked at a few BigLaw enterprises, was approached by a recruiter who asked, "Do you really need to pay \$30 million for an office lease in London?"

He did not. He is now a partner at Taylor English, a firm founded in 2005 that describes itself as a "new breed of law firm," one that blends the "full-service features of a centralized office with the efficiency and geographic scope of a remote law firm with our remote lawyers situated across the country." Although some lawyers do work in the firm's Atlanta hub, others work from shared office spaces, home offices, or client locations. Linsenmayer works remotely from his home office some of the time or from not overly expensive office space in Houston.

Ultimately, he observes, "my clients want me in their offices; they don't want to come to

mine,” Linsenmayer says. “I am the Amazon of law firms,” Linsenmayer jokes, referring to the Jeff Bezos business that upended retail sales and triggered the not-so-slow death of bookstore chains. “I am coming straight to you. I’ll even wear a suit,” Linsenmayer says.

Admittedly, it’s a setup that at one time he could not envision.

“Ten years ago, I wasn’t mentally prepared to do this,” Linsenmayer acknowledges. “I could not see past the big beautiful glass box I was in and all the beautiful furniture,” he says. Ultimately, those trappings are “not why people hire me,” he said. As for others not yet ready to commit to this support of path, Linsenmayer suggests “I would counsel anyone else to think long and hard what their office space lease is worth to their clients.”

“We didn’t have to have 15,000 square feet” of office space, he says. What he has in terms of office space is more *de minimis* than *de luxe*.

A Virtuoso of Virtual

Melissa Holyoak, president and general counsel at Hamilton Lincoln Law Institute, a virtual pro bono public interest law firm, sounds a similar view. “I thoroughly love having no overhead,” she says. “In today’s world you really don’t need it.”

Holyoak, who is based in Salt Lake City, tends to work more efficiently than when she was in a brick-and-mortar environment where people—mostly fellow lawyers and staff—would pop in and out of her office and discussions that might take 20 minutes on a phone would stretch to 45 minutes in person.

With clients located all over the country, it is unlikely they would drop into her office if she actually had one, she says. Moreover, donors to her organization think “it is fantastic that we are keeping overhead to an absolute minimum,” Holyoak reports. Basically,

“it’s just salary, printing costs, and court fees,” she says.

Holyoak’s practice—she focuses on class action fairness—is well-suited to a virtual law office scenario. It tends not to have a lot of discovery or depositions. When depositions are necessary, her firm rents a conference room as needed.

As much as Holyoak prefers to work virtually, she acknowledges it’s not for everyone. She has found great success with individuals who have worked for BigLaw but who want more flexibility now. People who actually like to work in physical offices and who prefer more rigid schedules probably aren’t cut out for the virtual law firm world.

Holyoak opts to meet with clients for lunch when she happens to be in the same city where they are. In that sense, her work is not so unlike that lawyer clocking in the hours at a brick-and-mortar BigLaw firm. (Holyoak spent some time working at O’Melveny & Myers.) BigLaw firms are not located exactly where all of their clients are, either, she notes.

As for finding clients, they tend to find her through referrals or are motivated by the public interest ideas her firm is known for and for the types of matters it litigates. Even if people are just googling her, it’s unlikely they ever were searching for her physical address, she notes.

Easing into Remote Work

For Matthew Fagan, a principal at Kacvinsky Daisak & Bluni, which was founded in 2003, the transition to remote work was a gradual one. Initially, Fagan worked five days a week at the Marblehead, Mass. office of the boutique IP firm, which has a handful of physical offices and a number of lawyers working from virtual ones. Fagan’s work shifted down to three days a week in the office, then to two, and finally to none when he relocated with his family to Texas.

With children at home, he opted to convert an outbuilding on his property into a home office, but he also makes use of shared office space in downtown San Antonio. He likes the flexibility in his workday and is not unhappy to have escaped the constant pressure to bill, bill, bill that can be found at larger law firms.

Not being tethered to an office also leaves more time for actual client development activities in the form of good old-fashioned networking where you actually talk to people in real life.

Indeed, Fagan very much makes an effort to visit clients. It's something of an old-school approach to legal work that is refreshing. "Without day to day interactions" in an office, "I have to make more effort to meet and talk to people," Fagan reports. He networks with people in his field, keeps in touch with former colleagues, and participates in bar association events.

"Not being tied to face time in an office frees me up for so much in-person new client development," Linsenmayer says. In the end, a law practice remains "a relationship-based business," he notes.

As much as lawyers like to pay lip service to work-life balance, what might ultimately convert BigLaw to RemoteLaw could be client demand—both for house calls, of sorts, by their lawyers who have the time to make them when they work remotely, and for legal fees that aren't supporting high-end commercial real estate leases and the art that goes with. ■

—Lori Tripoli

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