

## Millennial Partners Help Speed Change In Virus' Wake

 By [Xiumei Dong](#)

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Law360 (June 9, 2020, 7:43 PM EDT) -- As millennial attorneys become partners at their law firms, many have their own ideas on how to run the firm. But with the whole legal industry now scrambling to deal with the COVID-19 crisis, some are pushing to accelerate these changes.

A technology-savvy generation, millennials – the generation born in the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s – are often in the lead when it comes to tech adoption. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of the legal workforce has moved to remote work environments that rely heavily on new technologies, giving these younger partners the chance to lead the changes.

Beyond implementing technology to allow for remote work, these newly made partners say they'll push to transform the legal industry by focusing on flexible work schedules, fostering collaborations between the partners and associates, and other issues that have long been overlooked by the industry.

"For an industry that is frequently cited as slow to adapt, the transition to an all-remote environment has been encouraging," said Amy Piccola, 37, a litigation partner at [Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr LLP](#). "The technological capability has been there and, in my experience, lawyers are embracing, or at least adjusting, to a new way of practicing."

As the law firms are moving to a remote environment, Piccola, who has been a partner for two years now, also raised questions about support, training and the provision of resources because the lawyers are not physically practicing together.

"How do we support our colleagues' emotional and mental well-being? How do we provide the mentoring that is essential to the advancement of associates' careers? Can we effectively maintain and expand our sense of community?" she asked.

While the methods to address these problems vary from firm to firm, Piccola said she hopes that the industry will learn "the benefits and the necessity" of providing work flexibility, advanced technology, and the need to focus on the well-being of the lawyer as a result of the crisis, and then adopt the modifications even after things return to normal.

"We've proven that we can be a more nimble profession than credited and there's no reason to go back," she stressed.

Geoffrey Gamble, 39, who has been a partner at [Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr LLP](#) since January 2017, said one of the weaknesses of the legal industry that was exposed by COVID-19 is how it had lagged when it comes to the use of technology.

"A frequent topic of discussion over the last several years has been the legal industry's struggle to make technological advancements in line with other professions," Gamble said, pointing out that many law offices in his area still only use paper files, and that three of the largest courts in Maryland do not accept electronic filings.

He further noted that some courts in the state still required litigants to attend in-person proceedings for trivial matters, which he said could easily be addressed telephonically or by video at a much lower cost.

"COVID-19 has shone a light on these technological shortcomings, which have resulted in certain limitations during the pandemic," Gamble highlighted.

Going forward, Gamble encourages law firms to move toward "a paper-light or paper-free" work environment and implement systems that allow legal professionals to electronically and remotely access documents.

"I realize that this may not be an overnight change, and it may not be possible in every case," he added. "However, I am encouraged by the effective usage of remote video depositions and other proceedings during the pandemic and believe that law firms will be able to gradually make the important transition to a more paper-free environment."

Much like the Great Recession from 2007 to 2009, the current economic downturn has also put pressure on the firms to look for ways to reduce costs and increase work efficiencies, Gamble said.

Firms across the country have announced layoffs, furloughs, and salary reductions to mitigate the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Gamble, these changes are having a particular effect on associates and, especially, junior associates who may be saddled with big law school debt.

To help the associates navigate through the time, he said, "an important responsibility of law firm leadership is to make sure that these associates are receiving appropriate messaging and support from their colleagues."

In addition to demanding flexible work schedules and more collaboration between coworkers, Gamble said the younger generation of lawyers might also seek to reform their firm's office space, staffing structure, and succession planning beyond the short term impact of COVID-19.

"Firms that go back to business as usual when the pandemic subsides may not be around much longer," cautioned James Goodnow, 39, who has been serving as [Fennemore Craig](#)'s managing partner since April 2018.

"The efficiencies, cost savings, and improved job satisfaction that come from remote working are tremendous," Goodnow added. "If firms don't put forth effort to make teleworking more common, they will be missing out on a tremendous opportunity."

According to Goodnow, one of the mistakes some of the firms are making is not having enough communications between the lawyers and the clients. He added, "and this silence caused needless anxiety among the firms' people."

To address the problem, Goodnow said his firm has been more "intentional" about communication in the past several months.

"By ensuring we are reaching out to clients and one another, however, we have found that we can maintain and even strengthen relationships we built in the office," he said.

As a mother of a young child, Rose Ehler, 35, who was named a litigation partner at [Munger Tolles & Olson LLP](#) two years ago, said her firm had understood the pandemic's impacts on attorneys' personal lives.

"There are commitments that people have outside of the working environment, and having a workplace that accommodates that, I think is really important," she said. "Especially for gender equity, there are a lot of women moving into partnerships, for whom if they are mothers that may become a more important piece."

Despite the hype to push for more remote work accommodations, Ehler argued that an office is still very much needed for a law firm as it can help facilitate team building, personal connections and mentorships among the lawyers.

"Having people in the office is a good thing," she said. "Even though we need flexibility, I would hope that people go back to the office whenever we can."

While it is essential to invest in technology to increase work efficiency, Ehler urged firms not to neglect the staff and lawyers providing the services.

"You can continue to invest in attorneys, particularly rising associates, but everybody at the firm is important because that's what makes people productive and happy," she said. "You'll want to engage in good client service, which ultimately is what we're selling."

--Editing by Emily Kokoll.

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