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Do Lawyers Need Offices Anymore?

More and more firms are giving attorneys more flexibility by letting them work from home, but workplace culture might be taking a hit.

[Leigh McMullan Abramson](#) | 7:48 AM ET

VLP Law Group is a successful young firm by just about all measures: It employs about 50 attorneys. Its business is growing, and it counts startups and Fortune 500 companies among its clients—some of them even Fortune 10 companies.

And its lawyers never go to an office.

VLP is one of several [“virtual” law firms](#) that are seeking provide legal services on the level of a traditional firm’s while dispensing with office space and having their attorneys work remotely, whether from home, a coffee shop, or a

coworking space. On top of saving firms money on rent and reducing the pressure lawyers feel to be constantly present in order to appear busy, this arrangement has another, more basic benefit: It's making many lawyers' lives better.

Michael Moradzadeh left a career in "Big Law" and in 2008 launched Rimon PC, which he calls "a truly virtual law firm, meaning distributed attorneys working from their homes connected through the cloud." This model appeals to lawyers looking for a better work-life balance. "Instead of spending two hours commuting, I spend that two hours with my family," says Moradzadeh. Options for remote work have become more common in the legal industry, but at firms where remote work is the exception, telecommuters can feel stigmatized. But when everyone is working virtually "there's no stigma because it's standard," explains Debbie Epstein Henry, the founder of the firm Bliss Lawyers.

In addition to providing lawyers more control over their schedules, law firms that forgo the overhead that comes with office space can pass those savings onto clients—a major selling point of virtual firms. "We provide sophisticated legal advice in a wide range of practice areas, but our overhead is low, our staffing lean, our fees flexible and value-driven," touts VLP's website.

But virtual work is not without its drawbacks. "The so-called gift of working from home can bring problems," says Scott Goldsmith, a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College. "People inevitably multi-task. It's hard to maintain your focus when you are on your computer, on your phone, and handling your family." And constantly triaging the demands of work life and home life can be taxing. "People constantly feel stressed, guilty, and torn between the two," Goldsmith says.

And further, no one has yet found a technology that can substitute for face-to-face interaction. "You're in your home office by yourself and you don't have a chance to bump into people at the water cooler," says Benjamin Lieber, the founder Potomac Law Group, of the downside he sees in virtual work. Todd Smithline, the founder of Smithline PC, initially offered his employees the chance to work from home twice a month, but found that most of them preferred to work in the same place. "It turns out that an office is a really wonderful piece of technology. You can immediately see who is around. You can check in on how people are doing and share in camaraderie in a very natural way," he says.

"When things go virtual, you lose a lot of the serendipity where you set out to do one thing and something else develops," says Sherry Turkle, an MIT professor and the author of *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. Without sharing a physical space, people don't engage in "conversation without agenda or office humor that leads to good ideas," she

notes. But that doesn't mean virtual offices can't be collaborative places. "If you acknowledge there's a loss, you can begin the work of trying to compensate for it in other ways," says Turkle.

And that's just what some virtual firms are doing. "We found that when people are distributed in homes and different locations, it's still a bit hard to create that productivity, even though we have that technology in place," says Michael Moradzadeh. Though most attorneys at his firm work virtually, it has opened several physical office spaces to house administrative staff, host client meetings and events, and accommodate attorneys who enjoy going into an office, which has created what Moradzadeh calls "that nice balance."

For a firm to be resilient, its lawyers usually need to feel connected over something more than just a collective profit motive. As Steven Davis reportedly told his partners before his firm Dewey & LeBouef's historic collapse, "If it is only money that holds a firm and its partners together, then there is really no glue at all." At the Potomac Law Group, Benjamin Lieber gets his lawyers together as much as he can by convening lunches, drinks, and other events. "It's important for retention," he says. "You want people to feel connected to the firm and loyal." The social bonds, Lieber says, are also important for building business, since his lawyers' peer referrals carry a lot more weight when they actually know each other.

But since virtual firms tend to appeal to lawyers many years out of law school, they often have families and other priorities outside of work. "It's a little harder to get people out to happy hours," Lieber says. "It's a lot of checking in with lawyers and making sure everything is going alright and they are happy."

For many lawyers juggling the demands of their professional and private lives, virtual firms are a wonderful alternative to larger corporate firms. And with their lower overhead, virtual firms are better deals for their clients. But creating a [strong, binding company culture may require doing something very old-fashioned: meeting face to face.](#)