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Leading Law Firms Back to the Office

A Survey Report
Prepared For:

ALA NYC Chapter

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The Return to the Office May Be a Tricky Transition for Law Firms

Loeb Leadership, in partnership with the New York City chapter of the Association of Legal Administrators (ALA), recently conducted a survey of legal professionals to gather insights into people's readiness to return to the office. "Generally speaking, people are not ready to return to the office and there may be no clear solution for increasing people's confidence in a safe return to the office," says David Robert, Chief Talent Strategist at Loeb Leadership. Only 23% of respondents reported that they are ready to return to the office now, while a significant majority expressed moderate to strong resistance.

"There was no single action a firm could take to alleviate people's concerns, such as increased sanitation efforts or limiting the number of people in the office at any given time," Robert adds. Many respondents shared that their firms have already initiated many of the safety protocols being suggested by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), but the efforts haven't persuaded those with the greatest degree of hesitation.

Of the actions being suggested by the CDC to increase workplace safety until we can achieve herd immunity, the ones most important to respondents were limiting the number of people in the office at one time (80%), implementing a written COVID-19 safety protocol (76%), and increasing the frequency of sanitation efforts (70%), which are actions that firm leaders have likely already taken. And although only 39% of respondents agreed that a vaccination requirement would increase their confidence in a safe return to the office, 71% stated that they would comply with such a policy if it was mandatory, with another 16% stating that they would take a "wait and see" approach. "What's most surprising is the single biggest concern among respondents may be something firm leaders have little to no direct control over," says Robert. The workplace environment itself may not be the source of people's greatest concern and instead it could be getting to and from the office. Respondents who rely on public transportation are worried about safety concerns as more commuters make the transition back to the office with 54% stating that it was their biggest concern. "My concerns about going into the office are around getting to/from the office, not about being present at the office," wrote one respondent.

Another key finding from the survey was the toll COVID is having on people's life/work balance. 75% of respondents reported working longer hours since they moved into their virtual offices, with many people specifically citing blurred lines between work and personal time. "At first glance this finding may not appear to spell trouble for firms, but it points to a potentially serious problem," Robert says. "Burnout is a real issue, and if people are struggling to balance work priorities with the time needed to take care of themselves, their performance could be adversely impacted in the long-term – further adding to the stress people are already experiencing." Another data point seemed to underscore this finding, with 24% of respondents stating that they'd like to see their firm offer mental health counseling as an accommodation.

Some good news came out of the survey as well. Only 1% of respondents reported not being able to meet client needs because of the virtual work environment. In addition, many respondents shared positive verbatim comments about their firm's safety protocols such as, *"My firm is already providing us PPE supplies when in the office, flexible work schedules, and access to counseling services."* Overall, the survey noted the positive actions many firms are taking to protect their people - it is getting noticed and it is appreciated.

One silver lining to the virtual work environment may be its permanent place in a firms' value proposition. 60% of respondents stated that a work-from-home policy would help to retain talent, 43% agreed that it could help to attract new talent and 52% of those surveyed stated that it would improve morale. It is important to mention, however, that 32% of respondents felt a work-from-home policy would further divide departments.

Loeb Leadership's recommendations:

As you plan your back to the office procedures, please keep the following in mind:

- Communicate, communicate, communicate - providing your workforce with continuous and transparent communication will build trust and buy-in.
- Seek specific feedback on your approach from your people and make sure they are part of the solution.
- As a leader you are always being observed - model the behaviors you expect of others.
- Carefully consider any work-from-home benefit to ensure the positive affects outweigh any negative or adverse impact.
- Be mindful that people deal with stress, grief and loss differently which can have an affect on their readiness for change or returning to an ambiguous version of "normal."

For more information, or to customize a survey for your firm, please contact David Sarnoff, Director of Strategic Partnerships at dsarnoff@loebleadership.com or by calling 917.992.0264.