

# LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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## OM Feature

OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT

# Law Firms Gradually Embrace Telecommuting

It's seen as a valued perk instead of a reluctantly granted exception — at least for lawyers

Robert Krauss practices law from his home in Charleston, South Carolina — for Philadelphia-based Ballard Spahr LLP. You could say he telecommutes but, given Ballard's 14 offices around the country whose attorneys are in regular communication, Krauss says the term "telecommute" is relative, at least for a large firm.



**ED FINKEL**  
Freelance Writer and Editor

*"Forward-thinking law firms are recognizing that lawyers don't have to be sitting at their bricks-and-mortar facility to create exemplary work products."*

### KIMBERLY RICE

Principal and Chief Strategist,  
KLA Marketing Associates



"We all telecommute," he says. "When I do something in Philadelphia with our Los Angeles office, I telecommute."

A Corporate Finance Attorney, Krauss, 71, practiced in Philadelphia for many years before moving to Charleston two and a half years ago. "Philadelphia is only an hour and 10-minute flight away," he says. "The firm said 'Yeah, go give it a shot.' "

Krauss notes that such arrangements are not for everyone — in-person time is probably more important, he says, for younger attorneys, smaller-firm attorneys and some practice groups. Among support staff it depends heavily on the function. "I would never allow a first-year [associate] to do this," he says.

Working remotely full time is a considerably rarer scenario than telecommuting a day or two per week, or more occasionally, which has become accepted and even encouraged as a way to attract and retain top talent and sometimes to save on real estate costs. The ability for attorneys and, in some cases, paralegals and selected support staff to work in the online cloud as it has developed during the past several years has helped to further this trend.

### CONSIDER ITS BENEFITS

*A May 2013 survey from Robert Half Legal* showed that 69 percent of lawyers believed "flexible work hours or telecommuting" provided one of the best ways to recruit and retain legal professionals, ahead of "free or subsidized training or education," 50 percent; "on-site perks," 33 percent; and well beyond "higher compensation," 14 percent.

Research from Robert Half Legal also has shown that 39 percent of lawyers say the number of law firm employees who either worked remotely or telecommuted had increased in the previous year,

and 16 percent of respondents said their firm had plans to accommodate a more mobile workforce by redesigning its office space.

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## DID YOU KNOW?

A 2013 American Bar Association survey showed that nearly three-quarters, or 73 percent, of attorneys sometimes telecommute, which was actually down slightly from 78 percent in 2012. Another 5 percent described their law practice as “virtual,” which 58 percent defined as the “lack of traditional physical office;” 52 percent cited “minimal in-person contact with clients;” and 46 percent attributed to the “use of web-based tools for client interaction.”

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*“What [clients] want from their law firms is efficiency and cost-effectiveness.”*

### LARRY BODINE

Editor, [lawpracticeadvisor.com](http://lawpracticeadvisor.com)



Cloud-based technology like Base Camp for creating projects, WordPress for publishing articles, Google Docs for documents and spreadsheets, and Skype for videoconferencing have combined to make telecommuting easier, says Larry Bodine, Editor of [lawpracticeadvisor.com](http://lawpracticeadvisor.com) and a management consultant. The ability to do so varies among non-attorney staff, he says, although “there’s no reason a paralegal couldn’t work remotely as well, the reason being that legal work is primarily writing.”

Kimberly Rice, Principal and Chief Strategist at KLA Marketing Associates, says the firms with which she consults — and others whose attorneys post on the “three to four dozen different LinkedIn groups” that she belongs to — inundate her with conversations about telecommuting.

“Forward-thinking law firms are recognizing that lawyers don’t have to be sitting at their bricks-and-mortar facility to create exemplary work products,” she says. “They can get more out of their attorney staff by allowing them more flexibility to ... balance the family responsibilities.” But Rice doesn’t see non-attorney staff having the same flexibility. “Definitely not for legal assistants,” she says. “And the support roles, people in IT, facilities management, human resources, not so much.”

### DEMONSTRATE ITS VALUE

Ari Kaplan of New York-based Ari Kaplan Advisers says firm management and clients are more open to telecommuting so long as the work product stays high quality. “If an individual is accomplishing what they need to accomplish and doing it at the level expected of them, there tends to be very little objection,” he says. Advances in technology have allowed firms to monitor employees working remotely as needed, Kaplan says. “People may think, ‘Oh, you have the freedom to take a nap,’ ” he says. “That’s the myth, not the reality.”

Andrew Jurczyk, Chief Information Officer at Chicago-based Seyfarth Shaw LLP, says virtual desktops give firms the ability to monitor activity, but his firm has only caught — and subsequently fired — one person for abusing the telecommuting privilege. “If we suspect something, we can retrieve the logs,” he says. “It’s not something we actively monitor and use as a Big Brother type of thing.”

Bodine figures that as long as attorneys are just as available via phone and email, and especially if firms can demonstrate cost savings, clients will be happy. “What they want from their law firms is efficiency and cost-effectiveness,” he says.

Krauss recalls one client who seemed shocked when he appeared on the videoconference screen instead of in person. “He said, ‘I thought you were going to be here.’ I said, ‘I am,’ ” Krauss says.

"He said, 'I guess this is better than having you come up here for the day for a two-hour meeting.' I said, 'You got it.' "

Source: Working Mother magazine's 2014 Best Law Firms survey

## BY THE NUMBERS

Legal professions working remotely among the Best Law Firms included 35 percent of lawyers (and 39 percent of female lawyers); 32 percent of associates (50 percent of female associates); 37 percent of counsel (47 percent of female counsel); 35 percent of equity partners (24 percent of female equity partners); and 34 percent of non-equity partners (39 percent of female non-equity partners).

*"The staff love it. It's a benefit for work-life balance and attractive for the retention and recruiting of new employees."*

**ANDREW JURCZYK**  
Chief Information Officer,  
Seyfarth Shaw LLP



### DESIGN A FLEXIBLE WORK SPACE

Seyfarth Shaw is among firms planning to redesign office space, to shed about 100,000 square feet, or one-third of its current office space, "and we intend to grow," Jurczyk says. "Obviously, that puts different constraints on the floor plans and what we intend to do with our space."

Concomitant with that move, Seyfarth has been developing a telecommuting schematic that already includes most information technology staff working from home four days per week, managed through a virtual desktop that provides the ability to do anything one can in the office.

Jurczyk believes telecommuting has made his staff more productive, without the distractions of office conversations, and time sucked up by the commute. "The staff love it," he says. "It's a benefit for work-life balance and attractive for the retention and recruiting of new employees."

Jurczyk's biggest concern has been losing the sense of community and collaboration, but he's been mixing up which days people come in and encouraging them not to do "heads-down work" on their one day in the office. "I ask them to meet with people, socialize, collaborate and catch up," he says. Some senior managers don't quite understand it — in fact, one who wrote on a performance evaluation: "On your day in the office, you tend to talk a lot." Adds Jurczyk, "That's exactly what we want."

Some of the real estate savings are coming from collapsing storage space and going to electronic records, Jurczyk says. "That kind of supports the telecommuting world," he says. "You need that information available electronically some place; that way you don't have to walk into that file room."



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**MOVE THE FIRM FORWARD**

Telecommuting is becoming more widespread within the legal industry as the technology continues to advance and allows for better productivity and results — at home or in the office. Individuals can build their own virtual private networks that keep them connected safely with encryption and password-protection. With video conferencing, the cloud, smartphones and mobile devices legal professionals can stay connected fairly seamlessly. The trend toward a more mobile workforce will help with recruiting and retaining top talent and moving the law firm forward.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

**Ed Finkel** is a full-time freelance writer and editor who covers law, technology, medicine, education and youth, and other issues. His legal writing background includes work for the *ABA Journal*, *Student Lawyer* magazine, the *Illinois Bar Journal* and *Chicago Lawyer*.

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