

Lawyers' Perspectives on Returning to the Office

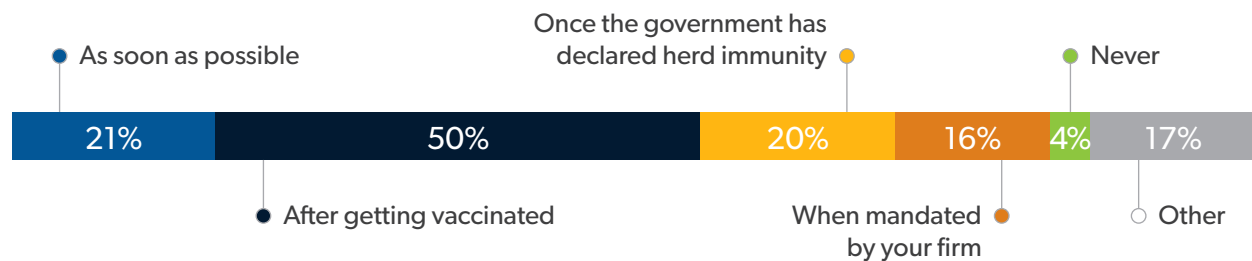


When COVID-19 struck, the ever-traditional legal industry showed impressive agility with most firms and legal departments making a relatively smooth transition to remote work. Offices everywhere shut down and many lawyers traded their rigorous morning commute for earlier start times leading to longer days.

Now vaccines are here, and a post-COVID world is in sight. As the pandemic eases, one question looms: *When will we return to the office?* Major, Lindsey & Africa partnered with Law360 Pulse to get a pulse on the industry's sentiments about returning to work, surveying partners and associates of all ages across multiple cities and practice areas.

Despite glimmers of hope brought on by mass vaccination, most legal professionals do not seem to be in a hurry to get back to business as usual. Just **one-fifth (21%) are itching for a return "as soon as possible."** The vast majority (69%) would only feel comfortable returning to the office after getting vaccinated or once the government has declared herd immunity. Four percent (4%) of participants revealed that they do not intend to go back at all.

UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS WOULD YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE RETURNING TO THE OFFICE AS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC BEGINS TO SUBSIDE?



Other conditions for returning to the office included: "With the firm's implementation of appropriate safety and health protocols"; "Only when physical presence is absolutely necessary per the situation"; "After all members of my immediate family are vaccinated"; "Once we have gotten any necessary vaccine boosters to cover variants in the virus"; "When kids are back in school in-person."

WHO WANTS TO RETURN THE MOST?



According to our findings, 28% of **partners** were “very eager” to return to the office versus associates (9%). Fifty-five percent (55%) of associates said they’d feel most comfortable returning by government act or firm order, compared to 29% of partners. Older individuals and those in greater seats of power appeared to be less reliant upon or beholden to official mandates.



There were generational themes. Twenty-nine percent (29%) more **Baby Boomers** than millennials, 51% and 22% respectively, were eager or very eager to return to the office. Boomers and Gen Xers were 7% more likely to want to return to the office as soon as possible compared to Millennials.



Twenty percent (20%) more **men** than women were “eager” or “very eager” to return to the office. Women who responded to the survey were 10% more likely than their male counterparts to wait for herd immunity before returning.

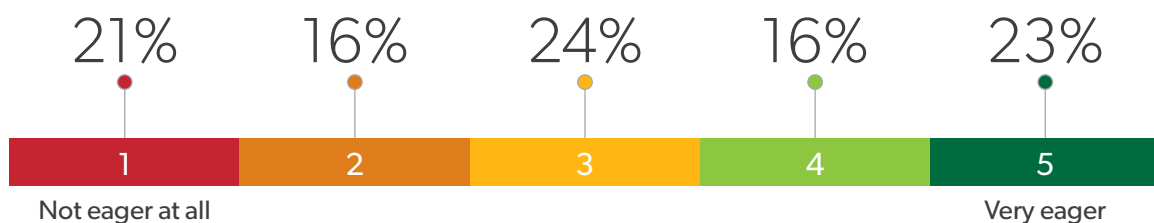


Geography mattered, too. Of the four cities receiving the greatest number of participants, **Los Angeles residents** were 20% more likely to want a swift return to the office and were willing to return after getting vaccinated (57%). Washingtonians were by far the most anticipatory of a government declaration of herd immunity (34%). New Yorkers, meanwhile, had the highest rate of the four cities of never wanting to go back (7%).



Anticipating an eventual return to the office, the frequency of days in the office was a hotly contested point. Only **21% of respondents saw themselves returning every day**, while the largest group (45%) would prefer to settle into a “few times per week” routine. Fifteen percent (15%) were more conservative, seeking to return either a few times a month or less. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of males wanted to return to the office every day—14% more than women answering the same question. This seemed to be a recurring theme; men sought some form of a swifter return than women, which may be related to the familial dynamics at play.

ONCE CONDITIONS MEET YOUR LEVEL OF COMFORT HOW EAGER ARE YOU TO RETURN TO THE OFFICE?



HOW HAS WORK CHANGED SINCE THE SHIFT TO REMOTE?

The virtual workplace model has its advantages, such as greater flexibility for employees, reduced overhead costs and access to talent beyond a specific geographic area. However, the “always-connected” nature of remote work and lack of face-to-face interaction have taken their toll on many attorneys. We asked respondents what aspects of the job have been made better or worse since the outset of the pandemic. More than half said the following areas have suffered:

- *Mentorship (57%)*
- *Training (52%)*
- *Work/life separation (60%)*
- *Mental well-being/burnout (52%)*

Generation X had the highest percentage of worsening mental well-being/burnout at 56%. Interestingly **32% of Baby Boomers reported client retention is “much worse” or “somewhat worse”** since remote work began, more than any other generation with a statistically relevant sample. Those attorneys who practice litigation reported the highest dip in quality of work (15%) when compared with other practice areas.

It is not all bad news, fortunately. Despite the hardships, 88% say the quality of work has remained neutral or has improved to some degree.

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THE ROAD AHEAD

The virtual model has worked considerably well for firms and legal departments amidst the COVID-19 crisis, and telecommuting will endure long after the pandemic is over. One thing is for certain: returning to the workplace will not be as simple as strolling through the door. It is likely to happen with a phased approach that will allow for flexibility with in-office attendance, while still finding creative ways to reinstate a sense of firm culture, mentorship opportunities, etc.

Firms will be challenged to rebuild their workplace cultures and sense of community while prioritizing the safety of their personnel. With a bit of innovation, it can be done. And it just might make the legal industry stronger and more resilient than it has ever been before. ■