

Firms Get Creative In Trying To Support Attorneys From Afar

By **Natalie Rodriguez**

Law360 (April 7, 2020, 12:36 PM EDT) -- On the night of March 30, Levenfeld Pearlstein LLC managing partner and chair Robert Romanoff sent out an email to attorneys at the Chicago-based firm reminding them that the next day was “Friendsday” and calling on staff, for the second week in a row, to reach out to three co-workers who are not on their team.

The goal was that attorneys would reach out to those they used to see on a regular basis in the halls, before the pandemic forced the firm to go remote.

“We are working very hard to make sure that social distancing does not become social isolation,” said Romanoff.

It is one of the several ways the firm is trying to “make opportunities for light in a dark time,” he said, noting firm leaders are working hard to stay in touch with their people.

Romanoff is not alone. In addition to supplying attorneys and staff with the technology they need to work remotely, many firm leaders are also working to make sure they are supported mentally and emotionally with new support networks and opportunities to stay connected. Many leaders see it as a key part of trying to maintain the cohesiveness of their firm cultures when the novel coronavirus is forcing separation.

“That’s important to the life of our firm,” said Romanoff.

Many firm leaders also recognize their attorneys and staff are working remotely under several new pressures, including for some juggling caregiver roles with new work challenges.

To help alleviate some of that pressure, Littler Mendelson PC recently invested resources toward fast-tracking the rollout of a remote parent and caregiver support platform, which had already been planned pre-coronavirus outbreak to go online in the late spring.

The platform, in partnership with coaching consultancy Talking Talent, was accelerated by firm leaders “without a second of hesitation,” said Nina Markey, a Littler shareholder and member of its Diversity and Inclusion Council.

With the virus putting labor and employment issues at the forefront of corporations’ minds, many

attorneys at the employment- and labor-focused Littler who are parents are facing the challenges of going remote while also facing a significant increase in work, said Markey, who noted she had billed more hours in the past month than she had billed in the first few months of 2020.

Fashioned after how the firm does business development coaching, the platform offers both individual coaching, as well as group coaching that pairs new and seasoned parents together. Topics include work-life integration, communicating with managers, flexible schedules, boundary setting, stress management, self-care and career planning, said Markey.

In addition to consultant expertise, the chat function on webinars has proven to be a key resource where attorneys are sharing their own resources, tips and ideas for adjusting to the new remote circumstances.

“Some of the things parents were sharing with how they were keeping their kids busy and how to keep themselves sane was amazing,” said Markey.

At Barnes & Thornburg, the firm has built on an existing regular newsletter known as BT Remote to provide attorneys with tips and resources on how to cope with working remotely. This has included efforts to keep diversity and inclusion in mind.

“It’s more important now that we are mindful of everyone on a holistic level ... and make sure people don’t fall through the cracks,” said Dawn Rosemond, an equity partner and head of the firm’s diversity initiatives.

Wellness and self-care has also been a big thread connecting how firms are trying to support their attorneys and staff.

For example, Michelman & Robinson LLP, which has about 120 employees across five offices in California, Illinois and New York, has launched a new partnership with Wellness Coaches USA to provide each employee with remote fitness coaching, nutritional advice, meditative exercises and more.

Firm leadership acted quickly to research and strike a contract with Wellness in under a week and launched the partnership on March 25. To support the effort, the firm has also offered Fitbits, which track steps, to each employee and is planning to set employees up with virtual buddies to help support the effort and connection among staff.

“Our founding partner had a concern about the health and well-being of our employees knowing that this was going to be not a short-term working scenario and wanting to combat the isolation people were going to face and keep people connected in some way, while also keeping them healthy and physically active,” Dr. Sammy Elzarka, the firm’s chief advancement officer overseeing the program, told Law360.

Michelman & Robinson also went a step further, offering Kindle Fire Tablets or Roku streaming media devices for staff to provide an outlet to help employees pass their nonworking time. The firm considers the devices tools for getting their staff through the pandemic.

“That comes in the form of Kindles and Rokus that’ll allow them to binge watch their favorite shows and movies, read a book or two, and hopefully make the next few weeks just a bit easier to navigate. While just a small gesture, every gesture counts,” Sanford Michelman, co-founder of the firm, said in a statement.

So far, approximately 60% of the staff have taken up the offer, with requests leaning more toward Kindles, according to the firm.

At Crowell, firm leaders are putting a priority on connection. Managers and practice group leaders are reaching out to lawyers on their teams to make sure they have everything they need and even to offer a space for them to vent, said Stephanie Marcantonio, a corporate partner in the firm's New York office.

Many teams are also getting creative in how they connect online. Some have been sharing photos of each other's work setups or their household pets, and there was recently a contest to share funny videos on the work-from-home experience. One attorney is working out of a bathroom since it's the only room with a door.

"It's just a nice way to connect and for people to feel connected," said Marcantonio.

Marcantonio lives in the one-mile radius of New Rochelle, New York, that was an early hotspot and put on lockdown. She has been working from home since March 6.

"Early on, I started missing seeing people face to face and began connecting by Skype video to get that interaction," said Marcantonio.

She appreciates that the firm is putting an emphasis on keeping everyone connected, even while dealing with the upheaval caused by the coronavirus. Recently, she participated in a Zoom meeting of all of the women attorneys in the New York office.

In some ways, getting to see coworkers in their home space and meeting their kids or pets via video conferencing has helped many of them bond closer through this crisis, she noted.

"It does add this level of humanity and connection that maybe we didn't have before because we see people in their personal environment," said Marcantonio.

--Editing by Rebecca Flanagan and Alyssa Miller.