

How Firms Are Keeping Attys Connected To Boost Well-Being

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360 (May 14, 2020, 12:29 PM EDT) -- As many law firms head into their third month working remotely due to the coronavirus pandemic, a number of them are tackling the mental health and wellness challenges of isolation head-on by engaging attorneys and staff with revamped approaches geared toward a new reality of social distancing, including virtual activities with colleagues.

Maintaining a sense of community during a crisis like the one the world is currently grappling with is a big way firms can contribute positively to the mental health of their lawyers and staff, according to Joe Ankus, a lawyer who specializes in providing training to law firms on mental health topics.

"Anything that a law firm can do to increase that sense of community is going to improve the employee's or the attorney's perspective, quality of life and perhaps give them that extra spark to carry on," Ankus said.

A recent survey of law firm associates by legal recruiting firm Major Lindsey & Africa found that around half of respondents said that they felt sufficiently connected with partners for whom they work and other associates in their groups during the coronavirus pandemic, and 52% said they were happy with their law firms' efforts to foster camaraderie during the crisis.

A number of law firms are implementing programs to try to meet those needs of connection and communication better, and creating new social and professional channels for lawyers to visit virtually during the remote working period.

At Fried Frank Harris Shriver & Jacobson LLP, the firm's employee resource groups have been hosting social sessions using video conferencing technology and other communications platforms, according to the firm's director of communications, Alejandra Ramirez.

Members of the firm's working parents resource group, for example, regularly communicate with one another, offering tips and words of support and sharing pictures, Ramirez said.

Additionally, the firm recently created a "Home Alone" resource group for anyone at the firm who lives alone and is looking for others like them who may want to socialize through virtual sessions or share advice, she added.

Meanwhile, Munger Tolles & Olson LLP launched an internal website soon after the pandemic hit. "My Virtual Life @ MTO" is aimed at informing and engaging attorneys and staff members and keeping them

in touch, and includes educational resources on well-being, according to co-managing partner Hailyn Chen.

Additionally, the law firm is keeping longtime traditions alive by hosting their weekly attorney lunches and attorney social hours virtually, with a recent attorney social hour that featured a team-building trivia contest, Chen said.

At Finnegan Henderson Farabow Garrett & Dunner LLP, among other initiatives to engage attorneys and staff remotely, the firm has been conducting a weekly photo contest with different "work from home" themes, such as a picture of the participant with their favorite coffee mugs, their home office setups or their favorite office footwear, according to chief human resources officer Dawn Ibbott and senior professional development manager Johnna Story.

The submissions are judged and prizes are awarded for the top picks, they said.

"Finnegan recognizes that our attorneys and staff are in different home situations. For many of our employees, this is the first time they have worked remotely, so there has been an increased effort to maintain a sense of connection and community," they said.

Mark Grossmann, head of Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP's corporate practice, started conducting daily video teleconferencing calls for his department as soon as they started to work remotely, and he said the calls have brought people together in a way he never could have imagined before the pandemic.

The meetings always begin with deep breathing exercises and regularly attract more than 100 participants. Grossmann said he is hoping that a mix of solid information, upbeat presentations targeting good mental health, and lighthearted fun will keep his team informed, healthy and motivated through challenging times.

"People who live far apart from one another have bonded through these meetings. The real benefit is not just the sharing of information but the community," Grossmann said. "I'm already seeing the benefits, the silver lining, by virtue of how our team is working together and finding this connection."

In addition to community-building, law firms can and should also regularly inform all employees of the resources available to them if they are struggling with mental health issues, according to Ankus. Such resources could include counseling services, employee assistance programs, or well-being and mental health informational resources.

Law firms can also make sure attorneys are aware of their states' lawyer assistance programs, many of which have moved their mental health and other services for attorneys to virtual platforms.

Officials at the programs say they are ready to help attorneys tackle the mental health challenge of isolation, and some have been surprised they have not received more calls for help during this time.

During a crisis, law firms' regular informational communications need to be amplified, according to Ankus.

"What we're finding is there are resources available and that they're grossly underutilized because of fear, shame or simply lack of knowledge, and a law firm has a responsibility to confront all three of these impediments," he said.

Frequent communication on mental health resources is at the top of the list for many law firms looking to make a positive impact on their attorneys' well-being during this time.

Krista Larson, Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP's director of employee well-being, said that her law firm moved from less frequently promoting its internal content and resources — such as telehealth or on-demand educational programming aimed at well-being — to doing so on a daily basis in a newsletter that it sends out to all employees and attorneys.

There is also daily content in the firm's all-personnel newsletter that is specific to well-being while social distancing and working remotely, Larson said.

"It's important to recognize that there's no one-size-fits-all solution for this — what helps me thrive during this time is not necessarily what's going to be best for the next person," she said. "I see my role to be to enable awareness and education around these things and making sure people know what resources are out there to support them."

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg.

Correction: Mark Grossmann's name was misspelled in a previous version of this story.