# Tips for Working Effectively in a Virtual Office Environment in the Midst of the Coronavirus Pandemic

In response to the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, millions of people are staying away from their traditional office settings and are working from home, most for the first time in their careers. There are major challenges facing these newcomers to the virtual office world. Switching over to a virtual office model can be difficult and stressful in ordinary times, but exceedingly so when the exercise is initiated immediately and without notice in response to a global pandemic like this.

VLP Law Group, as one of the leading virtual law firms in the country and a first mover in the space, has been embracing the virtual office model for almost 12 years and has developed policies and practices that have allowed the firm and its employees and clients to flourish. This brief memo provides tips and suggestions for working effectively and thriving in a virtual office environment.

• Maintain your typical routine. When people work from home there are typically more potential distractions, less direct oversight from managers and co-workers, and a temptation to work less or work less vigorously. At VLP we have found that people are more productive and less likely to fall into a pattern of procrastination and distraction when they maintain a similar routine as they had when they were working in a traditional office setting. That means waking up at about the same time, taking a shower in the morning, getting dressed just as you did when you had to commute into your traditional office setting, and eating an actual lunch rather than skipping it altogether or eating snack food all day.

• Create boundaries between work and home. The first step in creating these boundaries is to establish a dedicated workspace, which we find very important for people working remotely. Working effectively requires focus and concentration, which can easily be interrupted or lost if you are working from a space that you associate with leisure activities (such as working near a television that is on). Another important step in creating boundaries is to discuss your work/home boundaries with the other people living in your home. For example, establish “rules” about when it is acceptable to interrupt your work and when it is not . The third important step in creating boundaries is to establish the timing of your own “workday” (perhaps 8am to 6pm, with 45 minutes for lunch, and a couple of 5-10 minute breaks) and try to stick within those parameters as much as possible. When you work from home you are technically at your “office” 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, but it is unhealthy to you and is unlikely to result in an overall successful experience working from a home office if you are on call for work 24 hours a day. For most people there will be times when you need to work longer hours to get a project done, and other times when you can work less hours because you have completed what you needed to do and are between projects. But establishing a standard “workday” as a baseline is important.

• Communication is key. When you work from a home office, you lose the face-to-face interactions that occur naturally in an office environment. Communicating regularly with your managers, co-workers and others is critical when working in a virtual office setting for several reasons.

  o First, it is imperative that you discuss and establish expectations with your managers in terms of your schedule and availability. Your managers need to know what time you are starting work each day, when you are typically ending work each day, whether there are time periods when you will not be available, and the best way to reach you if they need you.
  o Second, you will be far less efficient as a team if your team is not aware of what needs to be done, who is doing it and what your role is. Your managers also won't know if you have too much work, the right level of work or not enough work if you don't communicate with them. In a virtual office setting, this type of communication does not occur as naturally and often as it does in a traditional office environment, so you need to go out of your way to proactively facilitate it.
  o Third, working remotely can be lonely for some. In a traditional office setting you talk to colleagues in the hallways, at the water fountain, at lunch, etc. None of that happens in a virtual office setting, and that can be a real problem for some people. Picking up the phone and talking to colleagues and/or taking a break and talking to other people from time to time can help you not to feel disconnected or isolated.
  o Fourth, there is saying "out of sight, out of mind" which can become true in a virtual office environment if you are not frequently communicating with your managers, team members and clients. If you have not had any communication with your managers or clients in a while, they may naturally send work and opportunities to people that are top of mind because of recent communications. As noted above, in a virtual office setting you don't see people in the hallway and you can't walk a short distance to someone's office, so extra effort is required to maintain contact with your managers.

• Take breaks. It is easy to forget to take breaks when you are working in a home office and "get lost" in the work. However, it is important for your physical and mental well-being to take a break once in a while to stand up, stretch and give your brain a rest.

• Managers need to hold people accountable in a virtual office environment. In a virtual office setting, it is more difficult for managers to know whether a member of their team is working hard or hardly working. The manager cannot see when the team member arrives and leaves work, whether the team member is taking long breaks or is on the phone with friends all day. As a result, managers need to establish a means of tracking the productivity of the members of their team. Each industry and job is different in terms of measuring productivity. Common ways to assess productivity include tracking overall hours worked by each person, having daily and/or weekly team conference calls, knowing the types of projects each person is currently working on and what the deadlines are for each project, and tracking the response time in regard to calls or emails to each person.

• Secure and reliable technology is crucial. Technology is a critical component of maintaining productivity in a virtual office environment. Having the appropriate technology can help to maintain strong and regular communication among team members despite not being in the same

office, facilitate collaboration and minimize the chances of work stoppages. VLP requires all of its attorneys, paralegals and staff to have a state-of-the-art computer, a back-up computer, a printer/scanner and a separate VOIP phone for company use only. If you do not have the appropriate technology at your home office to be able to work at home effectively, you need to talk to your managers and solve the problem. We have found at VLP that one of the most important requirements for success in running our virtual office is a dedicated tech support team available by phone or remote computer access to assist with technology-related problems and questions. People working from home will sometimes have computer or other technology problems, and in many cases they will be unable to work at all until those problems are resolved. If your company has such a tech support hotline, use it and be sure that all team members know how to access it.

• Culture. One of the challenges with a virtual office model is the fact that when people are not working in the same office space they can feel isolated, lonely and out of touch. Such feelings can reduce morale and become a major impediment to maintaining a thriving business. At VLP we have made culture a top priority from the beginning. The firm has bi-weekly, firm-wide video conference calls, practice groups meet regularly through video conference calls, team managers have frequent check-in calls with each of their team members and there are numerous firm-wide events (held both in person and virtually) throughout the year. In fact, VLP has a “Virtual Culture Committee” that coordinates a lot of these events and is constantly thinking of new ways to enhance our firm culture. VLP also has a dedicated email group called the “Watercooler” where attorneys, paralegals and staff interact virtually about non-work-related topics such as cooking, sports and movies. We also have virtual happy hours, an internal newsletter and periodic contests, such as a contest to pick the Academy Award winners. In a virtual office workplace, it is important that the organization and team managers create an environment in which people feel a meaningful connection to the business and part of a team. One of the important technologies in regard to building a sense of community is video conferencing. VLP strongly encourages its people to use such technology for internal meetings to maximize face-to-face interaction rather than making traditional, more impersonal telephone calls.

So, to summarize, working remotely has its challenges, but with a bit of effort and the right technology, it can lead to high productivity, great efficiency, a fabulous company culture and exceptional job satisfaction. At VLP, we are proud to be an example of an online model that truly works for its attorneys, team members and clients. Please reach out to us if you have any questions or if we can assist your transition to a virtual office setting in any way!