

Smart Workforce Strategies to Weather the Pandemic Storm

By [Susan Raridon Lambreth](#) on March 23, 2020

It's tempting to apply an umbrella solution to your law firm work-from-home strategy. But resist. A one-size-fits-all approach could not only damage morale, it will likely slow your recovery. The best plan is deliberate, forward-looking and tailored to achieve specific outcomes. Law firms that can accurately forecast their workforce needs will be the most successful in navigating the storm.

As law firms ramp up their work-from-home (WFH) efforts, three segments of the legal professional groups are emerging. For brevity, we've called them: The Taxed, The Redeployables, and The Instructables. Each segment presents a unique challenge, requiring a customized approach that keeps the workforce feeling engaged and supported.

For those of you who want the bottom line at the top, we have summarized our thoughts below. But we hope you'll keep reading after that for important details about specific practices.

The Taxed: These are the fee earners who are busier than ever with pandemic-fueled demand.

What's Needed:

- Clearly communicate when there are resources available to support them (both human and technology)
- Identify where there is an immediate need for contract lawyers, project managers or other resources to help manage the heavy workload under stressed circumstances

The Redeployables: In response to the pandemic, the work has slowed or stopped for these fee earners.

What's Needed:

- Identify where retooling is an option
- Use this present time to develop new skills utilizing online training

The Instructables: These non-executives are worried about what the future will bring.

What's Needed:

- Upskill staff with online training and professional development opportunities
- Cross-train so they can be redeployed to support areas of greatest immediate need

If you're ready for online training options to upskill your professionals, if they have downtime, LawVision offers both LPM certification ([LaunchPad](#)) and LPM overview ([LPMAware](#)) programs in addition to other online courses.

The Taxed

The Taxed are fee earners who are busier now than they were in the recent past. This includes lawyers or paralegals in areas of practice where changes driven by the pandemic have increased the demand for their services. For example:

- Employment lawyers: They are now helping clients deal with novel issues that have never been faced before.
- Restructuring experts: They are or will soon be assisting companies who were struggling before the economic downturn and who are now faced with tough decisions.
- Private equity lawyers: They are identifying, alongside their clients, new opportunities for investment in a rapidly changing market.

That's just the beginning. Fee-earners, especially the practice leaders, need help juggling client demands amidst rapidly changing business models, regulatory environments and more.

How can the firm support these hyper-busy professionals, especially at a time when they are, justifiably concerned, if not for themselves, for vulnerable family members? Further, there are so many unknowns about how the pandemic will ultimately affect their practices, despite the current boom.

1) Reintroduce Available Internal Resources

First and foremost, you should ensure that The Taxed are knowledgeable about the internal resources that are available to support them. This includes technology that could boost efficiency, but is currently underutilized because people have either forgotten how to use it or were never trained in the first place.

It also includes, perhaps more importantly, human resources. Legal project management and practice group management resources, as examples. During our training programs, we are never surprised to discover that many professionals simply have no idea how to effectively utilize their firm's LPM and pricing resources. This can happen despite the proliferation of (or maybe because of) memos. Busy professionals may not have had time to digest the need for or understand the value that your LPM, pricing and practice group professionals can bring.

Now is a perfect time to initiate contact. For example, your LPM team can reach out to The Taxed and let them know that project management techniques can help them:

- Manage the higher workload;
- Meet or beat client deadlines;
- Establish realistic expectations with clients.

Further, when The Taxed encourage other WFH team members to learn and use LPM techniques, it will likely have a positive impact on overall morale.

If you don't have LPM resources, you can deploy outside consultants. They can help your busiest matter teams stay on track and maintain profitability during these chaotic times.

2) Utilize Additional Resources for Immediate Needs

You may need to hire extra lawyers or other fee earners in the overburdened practices. Better yet, where feasible,

re-deploy professionals from your slower practices. This may help you avoid layoffs until the market turns around. Those who are less busy can also be developing model documents, templates for efficient matters, process maps and more to position the firm to demonstrate greater efficiency to clients and to improve the profit margin on the firm's matters.

The Redeployables

The Redeployable professionals include lawyers, paralegals and other fee earners. They are in practices dramatically affected in negative ways by the pandemic. This may include:

- Litigators: Certainly, litigation is expected to explode with new cases arising from claims over cancellations and other alleged contractual failings. But in the short-term, while courts are closed, litigators may not be particularly busy.
- Transactional lawyers: Deals may have been put on hold. In addition, companies either lack financing, have become distracted, or hesitate to move ahead during this period of uncertainty. This includes M&A, capital markets and other areas, as well. Lawyers operating in transactional areas may be affected for an extended period – perhaps the rest of the year.

For these professionals, here are some ways the firm can support them:

1) Retooling

At the practice or department level, management should look at opportunities for The Redeployables to learn new skills. The [Harvard Business Review](#) article, "How Chinese Companies Have Responded to Coronavirus" documents lessons learned during the economic recovery in China regarding re-tooling and collaboration. ...

For law firms, retooling might include cross-training in another practice area. It could also involve the application of existing skills to new practice areas. Or providing a value-added service such as legal operations consulting or dedicated legal project manager to clients.

2) Online Training

Downtime can also be an opportunity to encourage people to develop new skills through online training. One of the four keys to employee engagement is the development of mastery or competence. When the firm invests in The Redeployables, it sends a clear signal of relevance. In addition, these new skills enable them to provide additional value to the firm and its clients as the economy stabilizes.

Of course, online training opportunities vary depending on the person's current role and interests. But here are two that are particularly salient:

Legal Project Management: As the demand for paralegals and legal secretaries declined, some firms were retraining these valuable professionals in LPM even prior to the pandemic. These firms recognized early on how critical the role of project manager would ultimately become.

Other firms cross-trained their marketing team in LPM. The pitch teams, in particular, are the front line when it comes to responding to client RFPs. LPM helps them understand how to create compelling, customized

responses. For associates, adding an [LPM credential](#) allows them to become the managing attorney on a matter team.

Legal Technology: In addition to LPM, legal technology is another area of focus. These are valuable competencies for fee earners and other professionals to acquire at a time when client expectations of legal tech usage are bound to accelerate. Tools may include anything from practice management software to report-building in [XYZ] to advanced spreadsheet Excel training.

Business Development: With an even tighter market for sellers of legal services in a recession, business development skills will be even more critical.

The Instructables

The Instructables comprise the firm's business professionals who are below the C-suite or executive level. As firms start to discuss potential layoffs and delayed hiring, this group is likely concerned about their future prospects. WFH presents a golden opportunity for upskilling Instructables in the aforementioned areas. Training allows the firm to expand its value-added services among practice groups that are growing, while offering protection from the economic impact of those that are contracting. Moreover, training can help boost morale. The Instructables gain marketable skills for the future, whether the firm is able to keep them or not.

Cross-training is another important way to support these professionals. For those who are underutilized in their current role, they could be deployed, for example, to respond to client calls or emails for information. They can also work on social media visibility for the firm, an area that is often neglected during busier times. When a Chinese cosmetic enterprise found itself closing 40% of its stores, the company redeployed its sales force as online influencers. Not only were they able to retain business, they also increased sales by 200% over the prior year.

Stability via Structure

Understanding the needs of each segment and responding accordingly should provide a level of comfort to all those who are experiencing unprecedented levels of uncertainty and anxiety now. Having tailored approaches for each segment can enable the firm to maintain higher morale and productivity than with a blanket approach despite all the challenges and unknowns still to come with the pandemic.