



Making Mentoring Work in Remote Legal Organizations

BY COURTNEY D. SOMMER AND J. RYANN PEYTON

For many of us, working from home has become the new normal. COVID-19 has turned our way of life upside down and is transforming the way we work. As a result, legal organizations are striving to effectively engage and support remote workers in ways rarely considered in the past. Even before the introduction of social distancing, remote working was on the rise. According to the Federal Reserve, the share of the labor force that works from home has tripled over the past 15 years.¹ Based on this trend, it is likely the remote workforce will continue to grow even after the pandemic passes.

Remote work has been an adjustment for everyone, and its effect on our professional relationships has been just as significant as the impact on daily tasks. Maintaining a connection

when we are socially distancing may sound like a paradox, but mentoring matters more than ever before. Remote mentoring can deliver powerful and positive effects for displaced legal professionals. Investing in mentoring can improve morale, performance, and motivation. These benefits are even more tangible during this unprecedented period of anxiety and uncertainty.

To keep current connections on track during uncertain times, this article offers some virtual mentoring best practices to make mentoring work in remote legal organizations.

Recreate the Open-Door Policy

An open-door policy is a communication policy where organizational leaders and senior lawyers leave their office door open to encourage col-

leagues to come and talk to them. It is meant to encourage free-flowing communication within the organization. Organizations that adopt an open-door policy foster a culture of productivity, collaboration, and transparency.

For internal mentoring programs, an open-door policy is critical to generating trust and rapport within mentoring pairs and cultivating organic communication and mentoring opportunities. The proliferation of virtual offices therefore raises the question: How can open-door policies be implemented when there are no physical doors? Fortunately, mentoring pairs can simulate an open-door environment by adopting a few simple practices:

- **Set regular meetings.** Many remote workers report feelings of loneliness and isolation while working from home. Mentors can help mentees feel less isolated and more connected by scheduling regular meetings with them. If possible, try to schedule weekly one-on-ones to give the mentee the opportunity to voice successes, challenges, questions, and concerns. Weekly check-ins also allow the mentoring pair to address any issues that arise in the remote environment.
- **Encourage impromptu communication through text and instant messaging technology.** Weekly standing meetings are important, but to fully replicate the organic nature of traditional open-door workplaces, a mechanism for impromptu communication between meetings is necessary. In a remote workplace, an open-door policy also means a “call or text anytime” policy. While maintaining boundaries and expectations regarding times when you do not want to be interrupted, mentoring pairs should use instant messaging tools to call or chat with one another to catch up personally and professionally. This can help foster a digital open-door atmosphere in which mentees feel comfortable coming to mentors with ideas, feedback, and concerns.
- **Adopt an “open-heart” policy.** An open-door policy that lacks an open heart becomes a box-checking activity rather than a relationship-building tool.

When presented with opportunities for connection, especially virtual connection, mentors should demonstrate a nonjudgmental approach and actively listen to understand who a mentee is and where they are in that given moment. Mentors can reinforce that their “open door” is a metaphor for their willingness and openness to hear concerns, feedback, and desires to learn and grow. Mentors should encourage mentees to show up in the ways that are most comfortable for them, on their own terms. Creating a culture of openness and a welcoming space is imperative to opening doors by opening hearts first.

- **Build a mentorship support network.** In remote workplaces, the demand on mentors can be even greater than in traditional office environments. No mentor can be successful on their own. An open-door policy creates an open-door support network that will help the mentee connect with other organizational leaders to grow the mentee’s network, provide additional perspectives, and generate innovative solutions to individual and organizational challenges.

Think Outside the Zoom Box

The pandemic has forced most of us to use Zoom or a similar platform for some aspect of our lives, from court hearings to social gatherings. Many of us have felt “Zoom fatigue” at one point or another, or still feel it now. The thought of taking on yet another social interaction over Zoom may feel exhausting and make you want to rethink taking on remote mentoring altogether. But Zoom isn’t the only option for connection.

For a mentoring pair working through specific goals together, a shared digital space for tracking progress is key to making the best of the time between regular meetings. Products like Google Docs or project management tools like Trello or Todoist can help the pair share their work and move through tasks together.

To avoid getting stuck in endless back-and-forth emails to find a meeting time that works for both parties, try using a platform like Doodle, where one person creates the calendar with all

available times and the other person notes the options that work for them as well.

If both parties of the mentoring pair are in the same organization, discuss whether using the company’s Teams or instant chat option could work for those between-meeting questions.

It’s important to discuss what options make sense for the mentoring pair. Some mentees may not open up much over the phone but are comfortable writing out their thoughts and talking face-to-face. Some mentors may not feel comfortable sharing their personal phone number, while others may enjoy texting with their mentee. Having the discussion upfront allows the pair to select the best and most appropriate digital tools for them and sets the relationship up for success.

As the world opens back up and we learn how to exist in a pandemic, so too is the legal community. In a remote mentoring relationship, or for mentoring pairs at remote legal organizations, in-person experiences are not as difficult as they were a year ago. Mentoring pairs should discuss whether both parties feel comfortable with in-person meetups and, if so, what type of social events they would be comfortable attending. Options include swapping a Zoom session for a lunch or coffee meeting, or attending a social event together so the mentor can introduce the mentee to others in their network.

If one or both parties in the pair is interested in meeting in person but is not yet comfortable attending social gatherings, the pair could go for a walk or share an outdoor coffee. Don’t be afraid to get creative to make your mentoring relationship work in real life.

Facilitate Communication and Feedback

During this time of massive upheaval, people want to know that mentoring partners have their back. Communication within mentoring pairs goes a long way to providing this reassurance in these tough situations, even if it is just providing them with a semblance of life as they knew it before the pandemic. Failure to keep up communication might seem harmless in the short-term but can quickly erode the trust of your mentoring partner, who may feel abandoned or left out of the loop at a time where they need

information more than ever. Indeed, research found that more people were opening email in the wake of the pandemic than before it started, illustrating the importance of maintaining engagement.²

Reestablish Expectations

One of the most challenging aspects of living and working in our digitally driven world is the feeling that we should always be available by phone and that checking emails on our phones after work hours is a normal part of daily life.

Setting boundaries and expectations, not just with clients and colleagues but in all areas of work and life, can set us up to successfully navigate new or changing relationships and situations. The same is true in mentoring relationships. Regardless of whether the mentoring relationship was once in-person but has now become virtual, or whether it will be virtual from the start, setting clear expectations allows the transition to go smoothly and sets the stage for successful mentorship.

Priority discussion topics include how often the mentoring pair will meet and in what format that will happen, which platforms they will use to communicate with each other, and if they will attend virtual or in-person events together outside one-on-one meetings. A meeting to set or reestablish expectations also allows the mentoring pair to set or reestablish the goals and boundaries of the mentoring relationship.

Regardless of what the mentoring pair decides is best for their relationship, making a plan that allows for consistency will ensure that the months don’t pass by without mentorship taking place. When there is no opportunity to walk down the hall and stop into an office to check on a colleague, the need for intentional consistency through virtual platforms becomes even more crucial.

Intentionally Create a Pull for Feedback

Feedback tools are a critical part of a successful mentoring relationship. Checking in on what aspects of the relationship are not working and making changes to improve communication foster a more successful mentoring relationship.

If an organization runs the mentorship program, the organization should provide

surveys or other tools to collect feedback from participants to track how the mentoring relationships are progressing. This allows participants to share their honest opinions on whether they are getting what they need out of the program and their mentoring matches. These surveys should be offered both during and at the end of mentorship programs so organizations can implement changes before the mentoring relationships have come to an end.

Individuals in a mentoring relationship should check in with each other independent of organizational surveys. Both parties should feel empowered to invite feedback from each other regarding the timing, consistency, and content of the mentoring relationship. Having open and honest dialogue is an important part of ensuring the mentoring relationship is beneficial to both parties and continues to be productive for the duration of the program.

When in Doubt, Overcommunicate

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of social interaction, engagement, and communication. When in-office meetings, social gatherings, and the ability to see coworkers and friends on a regular basis went away, and when Zoom meetings and not leaving your house for days at a time became the norm, the need for talking to humans instead of animals became a trending topic on the internet.

The need for communication hasn't gone away simply because we can leave our houses. It may still take some of us time to get back to interacting with others like we did before the pandemic, but remembering to communicate with our mentors and mentees is a key component of navigating a successful mentoring relationship. Set expectations early and often. Ask questions and follow through on tasks discussed together. And continue communicating.

If needed, set a flexible agenda before monthly meetings with a list of topics to discuss. Set goals for each month or quarter of what you would like to accomplish together or individually and keep each other accountable with check-ins and friendly reminders. Start each meeting with an icebreaker to get to know each other on a personal level. And continue to communicate about what you need and how you can stay engaged in your mentoring relationship.

A Healthy Hybrid Workplace

Many legal organizations do not already have remote work and remote mentoring built into their organizational cultures. It is natural that challenges will arise as the transition to hybrid and remote workplaces continues. However, changing the mentoring environment can offer new and improved opportunities for mentorship. Encourage your mentoring pairs to take risks and experiment in this new frontier of remote workplaces. While it may seem impossible to work apart, mentoring teams can still bond over this challenge virtually and be energized by the opportunity to redefine mentorship in a remote legal profession. ^{CL}

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Courtney D. Sommer is the education and outreach staff attorney for the Colorado Attorney Mentoring Program (CAMP). Before joining CAMP, she focused her practice on immigration law, representing immigrants in removal proceedings and before US Citizenship and Immigration Services. **J. Ryann Peyton** is the CAMP director and a seasoned consultant and advocate on diversity and inclusivity in the legal field. Before joining CAMP, Peyton focused her law practice on civil litigation with an emphasis on LGBT civil rights.

Coordinating Editor: J. Ryann Peyton, r.peyton@csc.state.co.us

- NOTES**
1. Arbogast et al., “Working from Home: More Americans Are Telecommuting,” Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (Oct. 9, 2019), <https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/regional-economist/third-quarter-2019/working-home-more-americans-telecommuting>.
 2. “Email Marketing Benchmarks: COVID-19 Edition,” Campaign Monitor (May 9, 2020), <https://www.campaignmonitor.com/resources/guides/covid-19-email-benchmarks>.