

Staffing During a pandemic

After an extremely active legal job market in 2019 and an equally busy start to 2020, we hit a mammoth roadblock with the COVID-19 pandemic. Scheduled interviews in early March quickly went from in-person to video or phone, to being cancelled all together. Attorneys and staff began working remotely and within a week, office buildings were empty and Zoom and other video platforms were commonplace.

As recruiters we continued interviewing prospective candidates for what we hoped was a short-lived hiccup to business as we knew it. We began relying more on phone screens and video interviewing. While tools like Hangouts, Zoom or GoToMeeting are convenient and get the job done, they're better suited for video conferencing. And it's difficult to replicate an in-person meeting, which is considered by many as a crucial step in hiring. As recruiters, we have Firm Administrators and HR Managers ask us on a regular basis, "have you met this candidate in person"? The answer is usually "yes". Hiring Managers are often interested in hearing about a candidate's personality, demeanor, energy, eye contact and general interaction. Again, can be hard to convey those traits via video.

Speaking to Firm Administrators and HR Managers in late April, the need to fill jobs they had open pre-pandemic still existed. By early May, most firms had implemented a hiring freeze. Firms wondered if they'd have the work to keep a new hire busy. Those that have hired during this time have experienced the challenge of onboarding a new hire while employees are working remotely. Certainly uncharted waters. Many employers consider onboarding a vital part of the new employee's experience. Lunch with colleagues during the first week, learn about the company's culture, the softball team, get to know people you'll be working with daily. Not to mention training – now done by Zoom, phone, email and some socially distant in-person meetings. A challenge.

Here we are in July.... remote work in some form is probably part of our professional landscape for the foreseeable future. Although for many years it has been commonplace for companies, especially tech, to allow professionals to work remotely some or all the time, law firms typically have not been part of this group. Attorneys certainly work from home on occasion. Same with paralegals. Rarely did you hear about a legal admin, billing clerk or receptionist working from home. Now they are. This has been a challenge for Administrators, IT departments and logistics, in general. Early in the pandemic it was an "all hands on deck" to keep law firms running smoothly and with as little disruption to workflow as possible.

We've heard from several of the smaller firms have returned to their offices. These include a mix of 50-50 home and office, a rotating schedule of staff, and some that have returned full time to their office. Larger firms are still primarily remote. Guessing the logistics of managing a larger group, partially in the office and partially virtual makes it impractical until an "all clear" is sounded.

Some firms furloughed a portion of their staff and we've thankfully heard about very few layoffs. More in Houston and Austin than we're heard about in Austin. New hires? Not happening. We have a handful of law firms actively looking to hire immediately. Most of these are to replace an existing job – new jobs are not being created. As a recruiter with 25+ years' experience in the Austin legal market, this is certainly something I've never experienced before. Speaking with my colleagues at Momentum, we believe law firms will turn to contract labor as a bridge, in lieu of hiring a full time employee in uncertain times. We expect to see an increase in contract labor through the end of 2020 and quite possibly into

next year. Austin economist Angelos Angelou wrote recently in the Austin Business Journal about Austin's economy being one of the strongest in the nation as we entered into the pandemic, giving us the ability to recover faster than some other areas in the US. We certainly hope he is right.