

# THE LAW OF

The pandemic caused law firms to reassess how they manage their teams and offices, as well as their operating philosophy. Here, trial lawyers and their staff share advice and the lessons they learned.

# OF



# OFFICE TODAY

Interviews by || **KATE HALLORAN**



**ARIANA TADLER,  
FOUNDING PARTNER,  
AND MALIK PRICE,  
EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT/  
LAW CLERK**

## Your firm follows a hybrid setup—why did you choose that structure?

Our firm deliberately chose a hybrid work environment because it enables us to tap into solid talent without location limitations. We are a small firm, and the hybrid environment aligns with our philosophy that a happy team is a productive team.

Our firm maintains a central office for in-person work, with an emphasis on connection, the use of videoconferencing, and the clear communication that our firm can operate predominantly or entirely remotely if need be. This hybrid setup creates space for team members to work in the setting that's most fitting for them. It also allows us to travel without missing a beat in the office. And cutting back on commute time has made us more effective during the hours that matter most.

## What are the critical components for running a successful hybrid firm?

We have a simple acronym that underlies our approach: ACT, which stands for attention to detail, connection, and training.

- **Attention to detail.**

Notwithstanding regular connection via videoconferencing and business communication applications, an online workplace can lead to increased feelings of disengagement. Recognizing and understanding social cues helps us to personally connect with and support our team members when they need it most. We encourage team members to be on camera. Sometimes, that is just not optimal when someone isn't feeling well—in those instances, we encourage people to let us know in advance so that we can be empathetic. And if a member of the team is on camera but not fully present or is distracted in their environment, we check in later to assess how we might help.

The knowledge that your peers are being mindful of your wellness, no matter the circumstances, helps capture a feeling of togetherness that can be elusive in a remote setting.

- **Connection (or Connectivity).**

Connecting with our team both as a group and with each member individually is critical to our success. We have different types of meet-ups throughout the week: a team huddle (to effectively assess assignments and resource needs); coffee breaks (to replicate the in-person experience—these are more social); and study hall (working on our respective projects while in an open videoconference so that we can tap into each other as resources). With “cameras on,” we spend time checking in

with each person during our coffee breaks, especially on Mondays, when we reflect on the prior weekend.

Success in a hybrid work environment relies on the cultivation of a community

and a culture of support and togetherness in the workplace, even if we aren't in the same room. We aim to celebrate and support one another.

- **Training.** We are committed to professional and personal development for the team and each of its members. We regularly incorporate training as part of what we do together: communication training (such as Soundboard Consulting and the use of the DISC assessment); culture training (such as Grace Note Strategies); and software solution training (group and individualized). When we do group training, the interaction and sense of community reaches its peak—team members feel the satisfaction of accomplishment.

## What's the greatest challenge you've overcome in navigating the hybrid office?

We realized that the hybrid workplace is not for everyone. Although we believe that our ACT philosophy is a sound one, sometimes it's just not enough to secure full commitment and engagement with colleagues with whom you may have worked beautifully for years in a traditional on-site workplace. It's important to acknowledge that due to how workplaces have changed during the pandemic, people worldwide are undergoing self-assessments as to how and with whom they best thrive—and realizing that a different setup may be better for them, whether it be hybrid, fully remote, or in person.

## What is the most crucial piece of technology that your firm uses?

Just weeks before the pandemic shutdown began in New York City, when the firm was predominantly



on-site, we had a full team training with a business communications application provider to learn how to capitalize on previously unused functions for real-time messaging, document and project collaboration, and meetings. Who knew that application would transform how we communicate and better manage our time and tasks? The other key piece of technology, quite frankly, is the tried-and-true telephone. Picking up the phone to connect with our team members on an individual basis has been key to the enhancement of our connectivity.

### How can firm leaders support their employees' mental health and well-being?

Good mental health and well-being are individualistic. We encourage all team members to make time for self-care and to share the hacks that work for them. We recently suggested "time batching" to encourage each team member to set alarms on their phones for breaks to eat, stretch, and breathe—and a separate alarm 15 minutes before that break to update time entry so the break time is even more restful. And at any given time, one of us might invite another to join in a course or a goal—for example, participating in an online course on mindfulness offered by Mitra Manesh, a senior mindfulness educator at UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center—and then sharing what we learn with the rest of our team.



**Ariana Tadler** is the founding partner of Tadler Law

and can be reached at [atadler@tadlerlaw.com](mailto:atadler@tadlerlaw.com). **Malik Price** is an executive assistant and law clerk at Tadler Law and can be reached at [mprice@tadlerlaw.com](mailto:mprice@tadlerlaw.com).



## ADAM LEVITT, FOUNDING PARTNER

### Your firm operates in person—what drives that choice?

Our firm is a "work from work" business. We understand that our attorneys and staff sometimes have situations (a plumber who needs to be let into the house or a deadline for a brief for which they want a silent workplace) that require them to periodically work from home, but our expectation and goal is that everyone's default setting is to be in the office.

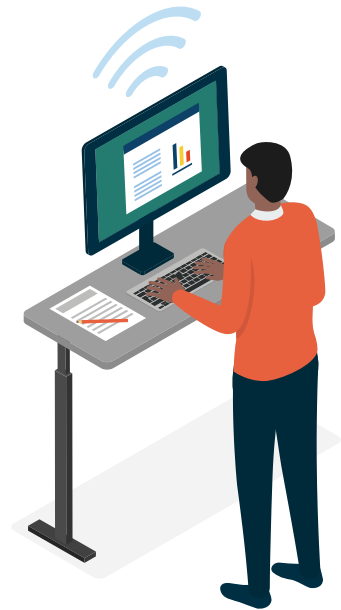
Our reason for this policy is twofold. First, in the legal practice, you learn by watching, by talking, and from hands-on doing. We believe that works best when you're physically in the office. Second, we view our firm as a training ground for future trial lawyers. We have mock courtrooms in two of our offices that facilitate that training—but you need to be in the office to benefit from it.

### With offices in multiple locations, how does your firm maintain a cohesive culture and engage employees?

The key factor in creating and maintaining a cohesive firm structure across our several offices is to approach everything as a fully integrated firm. So we staff cases across offices, have periodic Zoom or live meetings, and make it clear—at every possible opportunity—that we're one firm with one shared goal, and that we're all accountable to one another.

### What are the biggest lessons your firm learned from the pandemic?

While we're capable of performing many legal tasks outside of the office, that's not



a substitute for the advantages of in-office work and face-to-face communication. In addition, it's crucial to communicate with all lawyers and staff to find out what they really want and need. During the pandemic, it was easy to forget the personal nature of what we do for one another as colleagues, as mentors, and as friends.

### What is the most crucial piece of technology that your firm uses?

Our case management/firm management software. With so many lawyers and cases, it's vital that all case-related information is comprehensively entered and readily accessible to our case teams and others. This technology is so important to us, and we're always trying to improve on it and ensure it meets our needs. For that reason, we're currently transitioning to a new platform that will optimize our operations.

### How can firm leaders help support their employees' mental health and well-being?

I think the best way for firm leaders to support their employees' mental health and well-being is to foster a culture of inclusivity; direct, clear, and respectful

communication; and clarity of purpose. Moreover, firm leaders should do everything possible to create an internal environment of support and education, coupled with clearly set goals and a path to get there. We work in a high stress, demanding business, and we fight hard against our opponents every day. Firm employees should be comfortable in the knowledge that they're well-prepared to engage in those fights and that when those fights are done, they're not going to face another round at their home base.



**Adam Levitt** is a founding partner of DiCello Levitt and can be reached at [alevitt@dicellolevitt.com](mailto:alevitt@dicellolevitt.com).



## CANDESS ZONA MENDOLA, SENIOR TRIAL PARALEGAL

### Why did your firm choose a hybrid structure, and why has it worked?

When our firm opened its doors, we knew a hybrid structure worked best for us. Having come from firms with offices in several states and different time zones, we knew the flexibility to work varying hours and in different locations was vital. When the COVID-19 lockdown hit, my firm didn't have any

downtime. We continued as if it was a normal workday, albeit with a kid or two at home.

For us, this approach works. It has allowed our nationwide practice to thrive without burning out our team. It offers our team the freedom to work and live their lives, a crucial thing in a demanding profession. We have found our employees are happier, more productive, and have less overall stress. On the business end, our clients are better cared for, cases are built better, and employees are perfecting their work product. Once we figured everything out, it's been a win-win situation for us.

### How can law firms best support their paralegals and other staff to work efficiently?

## 5 Takeaways for a Long and Satisfying Career

By Ira H. Leesfield

As a trial lawyer for more than 40 years, I have collected many hard-learned lessons that I hope others will find valuable. Here are my top takeaways for a long and satisfying career in the law.

### 1. Is the book worth the candle?

This old saying refers to whether the value of reading a book is worth burning a precious candle—in other words, is the case you are taking worth the investment of your time and resources? Building a lasting practice requires thousands of decisions surrounding case acquisition, joined by tougher challenges on case strategy and law firm management. For example, accepting a client out of empathy for their situation when the facts do not support a strong case can eat up your time and resources and unrealistically raise your client's expectations.

Case selection should include a "review panel" made up of your partners and other colleagues whom you trust to review the facts to see if they pass a minimum test. You're better off staying home than going to the office and accepting certain cases.

Why do trial lawyers often take unproductive cases? The simple answer is that we all have the insecurity that if a case is declined, there will not be another one to take its place. But I have learned that if you manage your business carefully, there will always be another case.

### 2. Life balance is essential.

It's not a failure to be well-rounded—instead, we prosper by being grounded. Dissatisfaction mostly comes from a lack of variety in life, family support, community involvement, spiritual togetherness, good friendships, and support from others in professional organizations. Integrate your family life, physical activities, hobbies, interests, and community involvement with your professional life. One of the main things that will derail you is the lack of appreciation or the feeling that there is "never enough." There is enough when your goals are realized through long-term diligence and you receive appreciation from your loved ones, friends, community, and professional peers.

Remember the fable of a wood cutter

who is prolific for his first week in the forest, and then, his productivity suddenly drops. When he wonders what happened, his mentor helps him realize that because he didn't stop to sharpen his axe, it became dull, and he couldn't keep up the same level of results. Sometimes, we become so consumed with working long hours, trying to accomplish everything, that we fail to take a step back and refresh our energy and goals.

Read books and articles that interest you; learn new hobbies and languages. We all can and should "sharpen our axes" with quality family time and real vacations, learning patience, being gracious to and supportive of those in need, and engaging with our community and whatever our version of spirituality may be.<sup>1</sup>

Stay sharp by having meaningful conversations with friends, old and new. Challenge yourself with new projects and different people. When you are a young lawyer, absorb the knowledge, wisdom, mistakes, and gains of older lawyers. When you are an experienced and accomplished lawyer, share your success, missteps,

The simplest way is to properly train paralegals. The sink-or-swim mentality rarely works. It often creates more pain than productivity. Lawyers are busy, and understandably, they want their paralegals to be amazing and knowledgeable immediately after being hired. But training takes time. If a law firm is going to send a lawyer to specialized training or CLEs, why not give paralegals the same opportunity? Plenty of resources are out there, including mentorship programs—even seasoned paralegals benefit from continued learning. As I continue to grow in my skills, I become a greater asset to my team, especially my lawyer—and this ultimately benefits the firm and our clients.



The second way is to trust your paralegals. If you expect your paralegals to be highly skilled professionals, then treat them as such. Paralegals are not fungible but rather are integral members of the legal team. Building a high-trust organization starts by trusting your team. Listen to what paralegals have to say. They are often deeper in the trenches and can be a great sounding board for their attorneys.

The last way is to give paralegals credit for good work. Acknowledging the work may only take a minute of your time, but it will mean the world to them. Appreciated staff take pride in their work and spend more time being productive than feeling undervalued.

intuition, misunderstandings, and digressions with younger lawyers. In your lifetime, be both a student and a mentor.

### 3. Show appreciation with an act of kindness.

Too often, we overlook opportunities to give back to others in recognition of and appreciation for the careers and lives we have been given. There are so many instances throughout my career when an act of pure kindness, generosity, and empathy turned into a wonderful and uplifting experience, professionally and personally.

This may sound idealistic and lofty but we all know, from whatever our life experience, the right and wrong way to treat our clients, co-counsel, and valuable law firm staff. My firm is fortunate to have lawyers and nonlawyers who have been here for decades. That is not by accident—value and reward your staff. We treat our office team professionally, with respect and compassion. And we've been able to give annual bonuses for 46 consecutive years to recognize everyone's work toward making the firm successful.

### 4. Don't be afraid to ask for what you need.

Ask your co-workers for their help, support,

and dedication. Ask the jury for the right verdict. Ask the judiciary to rule, even outside the existing law, to create new legal theories. Use your peers as sounding boards. Build local and national alliances and friendships with good lawyers you trust and people from all walks of life.


Don't try to "go it alone." If you need help in any of life's challenging moments, go get it. If you feel discouraged, know that you are not alone. A terrific source of guidance can come from active or retired judges with whom you are friendly and respect—they will have a lifetime of experience and observations to share. I also have a group of nonlawyer, life-long friends with whom I have regular contact, and they offer a helpful perspective beyond the legal world.

### 5. Be bold—and seek out new opportunities.

Take cases that have potential, while steering away from those that strike you emotionally but not logically. Don't be afraid to pivot in your practice. Explore new practice areas, reinventing yourself as the legal environment or practice changes. Too often, lawyers adhere to a particular practice area or mindset, instead of shifting into more enriching experiences. For over 20 years, I litigated cases

involving a defective motorcycle product that killed and caused serious injuries to riders. When the industry finally corrected the defect, we moved to new, similar types of dangerous products that posed an unresolved danger to the public.

Be known for something. Create your identity geographically, by practice area, or both. Potential business sources, referrals, and case generation must be anchored to your specific reputation. It is helpful to map out a marketing strategy and work with professionals in graphic design and public relations. If you can, designate a skilled and insightful office leader to help execute your business plan. Building your reputation will not happen haphazardly.

The successful practice of law requires structure, sacrifice, diligence, and difficult decisions. These takeaways only scratch the surface of good lawyering, anchored by strong values and deep appreciation. 



**Ira H. Leesfield** is the founder and managing partner of Leesfield Scolaro in Miami. He can be reached at [leesfield@leesfield.com](mailto:leesfield@leesfield.com).

#### NOTE

1. For more on this idea, see Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1990).

### What is your top tip for time management?

Good and effective communication is key. Hours of productivity are lost due to miscommunication. I use reframing to avoid misunderstanding—I listen to an instruction and repeat my interpretation, right then and there. This ensures I'm on the same page. There have been times when attorneys wanted something completely different from what I heard them say. Reframing should not be used in all forms of communication, but it is a very helpful tool when it comes to complicated projects or ideas.

### What is something that changed in your firm during the pandemic that was particularly beneficial?

We took a good look into the overall well-being of our team members. Heavy workloads and high expectations can wear people down and lead to stress-related illnesses, including

anxiety and depression. So, in the midst of the pandemic, we decided to focus on our team's overall well-being in addition to our work. We encouraged each other to take breaks and eat meals. We checked in with each other about how we were doing outside of work. We had conversations about life. We encouraged self-care, sleep, and starting non-law-related hobbies. We reminded one another that we were human.

I think that if more law firms focus on the overall well-being of their teams, they will find they have happier and more productive professionals. A little care and compassion go a long way.



**Candess Zona Mendola**  
*is the senior trial paralegal for The Lange Law Firm and can be reached at [candess@jorylange.com](mailto:candess@jorylange.com).*



### LAURA YAEGER, FOUNDER

#### How is your firm set up, and what helps it run smoothly?

My firm is woman-owned and operates virtually with team members located across the country. Living up to our vision and core values is critical to our success. Commitment to quality and working to generate results with innovation and compassion are also crucial. If we do that, we deliver on our guarantee to our clients—to provide the best client experience at every stage of the litigation process while we fight to deliver justice and accountability.

Harnessing technology and following best practices also are key. For example, in our case management system (CMS), we use defined, specific terms or

hashtags to show the status of a case—at a glance, anyone knows exactly where we are on it. The calendar-based task setting feature efficiently documents and manages workflow for our remote team. Our robust CMS also helps with collecting important data and analytics related to the business side of running a law firm, such as the viability of a specific marketing campaign or the average case costs per case type.

Our CMS is our most powerful technological tool along with the protocols written to harness its full potential. Without written protocols, data entry tends to be inconsistent and lacks uniformity, which can impact accuracy in reporting, task flows, and document templates. With thoughtful and proactive protocols, we work smarter, not harder. It increases automation, productivity, and efficiency.

#### What is your advice for other attorneys who are considering starting a firm?

Plan! Take the time to plan the details. Being proactive up front will set you up for success when you hang your own shingle. Write the business plan, and revise it from year to year. Be sure it outlines your firm's vision and core values, which will guide the team and provide insight into where the firm is, how it wants to grow, and how the firm will get there. For instance, when holding quarterly meetings, we encourage open and clear communication from all team members to promote collaboration and set realistic goals. I have referenced my business plan repeatedly throughout the last five years. It helps guide the management of our remote team, is a reference when scaling or developing marketing plans, and plays a role in budgeting and financing.

Obstacles are inevitable—so how you




respond is what matters. As a small-firm owner with a tight-knit team, it was difficult for me to recognize that a team member whom I had worked with for a long time was not performing. It

required me to make a tough choice. I had to recognize that I not only owed a duty to my clients and employees but also to the firm. It was best for the business to let the team member go.

### How do you maintain work-life balance and care for your mental and physical well-being?

I have taken the phrase “work-life balance” out of my vocabulary. It is tough to achieve, and it is fleeting. And trying to find it can cause even more stress. Instead, I focus on making time and space for self-care—no matter what that looks like. For me, it can be meditation, working out, taking walks, dancing in the kitchen, pausing to take deep breaths, or watching my favorite TV show on the couch with a delicious bowl of ice cream. It took me a long time to realize that I needed to care for myself—and I still struggle with it from time to time. I had no trouble making time to care for others—my clients, my team, my family, and my friends—but never found the time for me. We all must be intentional about making the space and time for ourselves.

### What is your top tip for time management?

About six years ago while looking for books to buy for my twins, a bright yellow book with the words *Organize Tomorrow Today* on the cover caught my attention. I bought it. Who knew that I would find the time management tool that worked for me? It goes like this—at the end of the day, take a few minutes to plan for tomorrow. Write down your three “must do’s” along with the time of day you plan to accomplish them. The book provided a form to use, but now I use a Post-it Note. Try it! 



**Laura Yaeger** is the founder of Yaeger Law in St. Petersburg, Fla., and can be reached at [laura@yourlegalcounsel.net](mailto:laura@yourlegalcounsel.net). The

views expressed in these interviews do not constitute an endorsement of any product or service by Trial or AAJ.

**THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF DISTINGUISHED NEUTRALS**

**1,000 of America's Top Litigator-Rated Mediators & Arbitrators Available Online**

**Video Mediations**  
Work with the best neutrals in the USA - regardless of location!

**www.NADN.org**

**Over 500,000 Mediations & Arbitrations Scheduled Online With Our Members since 2015**

NADN Members have considerable ADR experience and are approved by at least 8 local plaintiff and defense litigators through our due diligence review process. Search our free database by state, case experience or keywords, or simply fast-track scheduling with your preferred local mediators and arbitrators through their easy-to-use Available Dates Calendars.

*NADN is proud to support the national trial & defense bar associations, along with local affiliate organizations in over 40 states.*

**For more info, please visit [www.NADN.org/about](http://www.NADN.org/about)**