

For those unfamiliar with the term, a virtual law office involves a "computer-simulated environment," accessible by multiple users via the internet. By using technology to accomplish what a traditional "brick and mortar" law office provides, many attorneys are now enjoying the flexibility of working from almost anywhere - all on a shoe-string budget.

Additionally, when combined with a virtual receptionist and the right team of telecommuters, many lawyers have found that a law office can run just as smooth as if your entire staff was located in a traditional office building.

Here are several suggestions for managing telecommuters and operating a virtual law office:

1. Use Client Portals. One benefit of running a virtual law office is that lawyers can easily share information and case updates with clients. Instead of scheduling a meeting with the client for days (or weeks) down the road, with the right law practice management software, clients can log in to their pending case and obtain real time updates concerning the status of their litigation. One of the major complaints from clients is the difficulty in obtaining updates and information from their attorney once litigation commences. A client portal can nip that problem in the bud.

2. Develop a Plan to Go Paperless. Paper and Virtual Law Offices don't mix. Between general correspondence, pleadings, motions, and transcripts, lawyers are inundated with paper. If you want to go virtual, you have to come up with a plan to reduce most, if not all, of the paper that passes your desk on a daily basis. Creating a virtual law office doesn't mean getting rid of all paper. It means being more organized, finding the documents you need quicker, and being able to work from almost any location. There are a number of programs out there to help you reduce the clutter, including NetDocuments, which lets you save, store and easily retrieve documents, from any location.

3. Keep your Telecommuting Staff in Regular Contact. Not only do you need an open line of communication with your staff, but your virtual law office should have at least two regularly scheduled staff meeting per week, where you (and the entire staff) can all provide updates, schedule future assignments, and otherwise make sure you are all on the same page. Regularly scheduled meetings keep telecommuters in the loop.

4. Establish Goals for Telecommuters. Every telecommuter should have clear, defined goals so they know what they have to accomplish each day.

5. Establish Performance Standards. Along with setting specific goals, you should have specific measures of success for your telecommuters. Without regular face to face contact with you, your staff will oftentimes lack the feedback they need in order to know whether they are performing up to your expectations.

6. Address Telecommuting Issues Immediately. Sometimes it's easier to overlook a minor problem with a telecommuting employee. Unfortunately, without face to face contact, it is very easy for these "minor" issues to become a habit, or worse, develop into more serious performance issues. If you don't address these issues during their infancy, you may end up with a major employee conduct issue on your hands.