



David Haber, founder of Haber Law. Courtesy photo

Q&A

Leading the Way: David Haber on Young Lawyer Development, Vaccine Policies, and the Future of Law Firm Offices

Our weekly Q&A series features Haber Law founder David Haber.

noviembre 10, 2021 at 06:39 PM

8 minute read

Q&A



Dan Roe
Reporter

What You Need to Know

- Haber Law was planning for remote work years before the pandemic, but COVID brought unforeseen challenges for founder David Haber.
- After they were vaccinated, Haber called his junior associates back to the office for full in-office work, citing concerns their development had stagnated.

Editor's note: Welcome to "Leading the Way," a weekly Q&A with South Florida law firm leaders about how they're navigating novel challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks for reading! We'd love your feedback, so please send thoughts and tips to Dan Roe at droe@alm.com.

David Haber prides himself on operating a forward-thinking law firm. When Haber Law (then Haber Slade) moved to Wynwood in 2018, the founding and managing shareholder was already planning for remote work and office hoteling.

The 19-lawyer offices in the renovated art gallery were all the same size, designed to house whichever attorneys needed them on a given day. Though hoteling wasn't the practice back then, Haber told the attorneys it would come as the 18-lawyer firm expanded.

Remote working setups and Zoom teleconferencing were already in use, too, when the pandemic shut down the world in March 2020.

Though he felt prepared for the constraints of remote work, Haber began to realize the gravity of the decisions he faced as shareholders offered diverse and at times conflicting opinions on how the firm should emerge from the pandemic.

What's keeping you up at night?

How to train young lawyers, in the COVID and post-COVID era, with the dominance of Zoom and at-home working or flexible hours. I think the people who lose out the most are the young lawyers who need mentors. It's no longer a given that, as a young lawyer, you just go into the next office and ask a couple of questions.

Our firm has chosen to deal with it by requiring all young attorneys to come in every day since they've been vaccinated, and the pandemic has slowed down, because we felt that they were really in need of that mentorship.

When did they start coming in?

May or June of 2021, which meant they went almost a year and a half without being in the office, and it

may be some of them, which means they're not seeing you and their mind isn't being in the office, and it hurt them. It hurt their development, and we noticed it, so we decided we had to do something to change that.



Event

The British Legal Awards 2021

Celebrating achievement, excellence, and innovation in the legal profession in the UK.

[Get More Information](#)

What did you notice about their development?

I think you could see that their work was stagnating. They weren't progressing as much as they should have without that day-to-day oversight and interaction. You can tell people to call other people on the phone but there's nothing like being able to walk into someone's office and talk to them.

At what point in an associate's development do they not need full in-person training?

Years four or five. I think the first three years, you really need to have day-to-day interaction.

What happened after you brought the junior associates back to the office?

They were much more engaged, not on an island and to themselves. You could see it on their faces—and not because everyone was wearing a mask.

Have you mandated COVID vaccines for your firm?

There was a recommendation, not a mandate.

What was the response to the recommendation?

All but one person in the firm is vaccinated. That person had COVID and thus antibodies. [That person was] tested for antibodies and everyone else has been vaccinated, all 31 employees.

Did you suggest antibodies as an alternative to vaccines?

The person didn't want to take the vaccine and we asked that person to stay home from the office and work from home. And then the person got COVID, and got the antibodies, ironically.

Do you think more experienced attorneys need to show up as often?

It varies from attorney to attorney. I have two partners who come in approximately four days a week. I have two partners who come in three to four days a week. I have one partner who doesn't want to come in now because he has his whole setup at home and he's happy as a clam to work from home. He doesn't want to deal with 40 minutes of traffic each way, he finds that to be wholly unproductive, and he comes in every week or two. And I have a number of other attorneys that we've hired specifically to work from home: mothers with two children, people who live farther away, who have no desire to come in more than once or twice a week.

And we've gone to a hotel-type office usage so that you can use any office within the office, because people don't come in every day.

What's your sense of attorneys' desire to give up their personal offices and switch to hoteling?

Attorneys are the last bastion of "I want my own big office." Corporations, banks, insurance companies, accounting firms, have all gone to hoteling of offices long ago, well before COVID. I remember IBM went to hoteling of offices 25 years ago. Banks went to hoteling of offices 15 years ago. Accounting firms did it 10 to 15 years ago. And wherever your computer was, your office was. If you went to see a client, you took your computer with you. You took a vanilla hotel office if a customer met you at the office.

Only lawyers have held onto these offices with, I will call it, a death grip, as if your position in the office and your merit was based upon the size of your office or whether you had a corner office or not. That is a law firm, ego-driven mentality, that other sectors of the economy have given up on long ago, but I think it was the onset of COVID and the realization that you didn't have to be in the office every day. It has accelerated the change for law firms to the hoteling concept and reducing their office footprint. You no longer need 20 offices for 20 attorneys. With hoteling, you can have 30 attorneys with 20 offices, maybe even more attorneys.

Were you planning to switch to hoteling before COVID?

We were planning to do it from the minute we moved into the Wynwood office. It's why we built most of the offices to be generic, the same exact size, so that people could work from any one of the offices. When we moved in we told people that we're going to be moving to the hoteling concept, we did that four years ago, because we had foresight from seeing other businesses do it. We knew we were going

to grow beyond the number of offices we had.

How many more people can you accommodate?

We're going to be building out three or four more internal offices, 19 offices, that I think can fit over 30 lawyers easily. We're also going to have an app on people's phones where you can look at hotel offices and pick which days you want to be in which office. You reserve that like you would a conference room, right on your phone.

There's no longer a reason to have someone on vacation for two weeks and have that office be dark. You don't need that anymore, and that gets to another thing that's really important: Clients don't come to the office anymore.

COVID changed that, as well as traffic in South Florida. Clients like coming to Wynwood more than downtown because they like the restaurants and the vibe, but clients would tell us we're only coming at 11 and leaving at 2:30 because we're not going to deal with traffic on I-95 or the turnpike or U.S. 1 or 826. COVID accelerated that because all of the meetings with clients, all of the depositions were by Zoom, trials were by Zoom.

The need to impress the client with a big corner office is all gone. They can look up your accolades online. You don't need to show them a big corner office with a corner view. You need to show confidence and results for a fair price.

What's the most important lesson you learned as a firm leader during COVID?

I think that leadership involves a lot of planning, for the unexpected as well as the expected. Luckily, we were very well prepared for this kind of situation. We were virtual and remote a long time ago. Our administrator, Niki Gomez, who is the head of the Association of Legal Administrators for South Florida, has been on the forefront of that. And we've never been behind the eight ball. We're always ahead of the curve on software, hardware, new technology, cloud-based storage. We're always in the beginning, which gives us a strategic advantage.

What I've learned as a leader is to also listen to differing opinions before making a decision. There were a lot of opinions, every partner had a different opinion on when to come back, do you need to have a shot, what should the procedures be, many opinions. Ultimately, as a leader, you have to listen to opinions, filter the information, and make a decision. And ultimately, as a managing partner, the decision has to fall on your shoulders.

And with COVID, that meant dealing with medical risks and risks to people's lives, so it was even higher stakes. What I learned from that was that there are actually some things more important than a particular pleading—life-and-death matters, family issues—and I think it gave us a newfound respect for things unrelated to the practice of law, which helps us be more balanced people.
