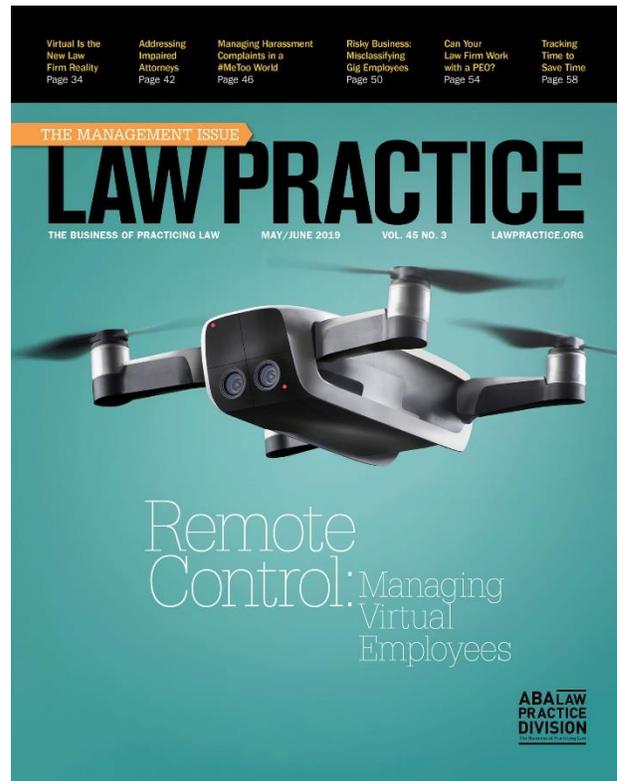


Virtual is the New Law Firm Reality

A roundtable of five leaders managing virtual law firms.

By Marcia Watson Wasserman

Enhanced technology, high office rent, traffic and long commute times, work/life blend and a desire to serve better clients have resulted in the creation of a new way to practice law: the virtual law firm. For some it means a cloud-based distributed law firm with 21 available, on-demand, fixed office locations throughout the U.S. For others it means no brick-and-mortar locations at all. At the request of the Law Practice editorial board, I asked five law firm leaders to share their experiences managing and, in some instances, starting virtual law firms.



Law Practice (LP): Please tell us a little bit about your firm, that is, the number of attorneys, paralegals and staff; the locations; the practice areas.



Grant Walsh, co-founder and co-managing partner:

Culhane Meadows (CM) is the largest national, full-service, women-owned law firm in the country, having grown in six years from four co-founders to almost 70 partner-level attorneys—and no associates—in ten locations. As one of the largest cloud-based firms in the country, we do not employ any salaried paralegals and instead engage legal support resources under a variable cost approach to cut overhead and save money for our clients. We have a full back-office administrative team (also working remotely from their home offices) that handles our day-to-day operational needs, conflict

checks, billing, invoicing, setting up new client files, etc.

LP: How does your firm handle legal and administrative workflow—for example, people, systems, procedures and collaboration software?

Walsh: CM is unique among law firms in that it has created a working environment that encourages deep collaboration among attorneys across all geographies and practice disciplines to best serve clients' needs. We implement technology that fosters and sustains BigLaw-style collaborative relationships among partners at a much lower cost. Data security is also a top priority. Intermedia provides hosting services for email. The firm uses Worldox for central document management, the SecuriSync file-sharing portal for secure collaboration on documents with clients and partners, and

Skype for Business for videocalls between partners and to share screens while collaborating on documents. The firm also has an internal, secure instant-messaging system for immediate communications or to exchange notes with remote partners during a multi-person conference call.

LP: How does your firm address supervising, motivating, developing and retaining attorneys and staff? Is your firm's virtual practice an asset or liability for retention, and why?

Walsh: CM's partners come to us highly motivated. They actively seek out CM's cloud-based approach and transparent, merit-based compensation system where our low overhead structure lets them take home about twice as much compared to a traditional firm. They come to CM from conventional BigLaw firms and even other virtual law firms because they want a better, more transparent and more attorney-client friendly way to practice law. CM partners stay because they genuinely like each other—yes, each office organizes regular social events—and because CM is uniquely partner-focused. We are intentional during recruiting because we're determined to keep this cool culture and foster this tight-knit, collaborative environment among a geographically dispersed and diverse partnership. Every month CM hosts an all-firm conference call as well as in-person local gatherings for our partners in each market. To build esprit de corps, office members frequently get together for a community service activity or recruiting happy hours or other social events. In addition, the firm holds an annual four-day partnership retreat for meetings and social interaction between the attorneys.

LP: How does having a virtual firm help you with marketing to prospective clients and retaining and cross-selling to existing ones?

Walsh: Business in general is increasingly virtual. Our clients, even the Fortune 100, rely on a growing, geographically dispersed, virtual workforce themselves. They like that we are lean, nimble and laser-focused on delivering highly sophisticated legal counsel on their most complicated matters in the U.S. and around the globe. CM serves nearly two dozen Fortune-ranked corporate clients who trust us with their complex legal work because they know our partner-only roster is comprised of experienced BigLaw talent-delivering client-centric results at a fraction of conventional BigLaw fees. Our members guide clients through \$100 million+ deals, work collaboratively and form client service teams. New CM clients are pleasantly surprised that when their attorney joins CM and "moves to the cloud," nothing changes in their attorney-client relationship except the value proposition. The client no longer sees fancy artwork on the walls because the firm has no walls and no unnecessary overhead. When clients call to talk to their lawyer, their attorney answers the phone rather than layers of staff. And the attorneys working on their matter have an average of more than 20 years of experience, not a third-year associate's.

LP: Any parting words of wisdom for lawyers who are contemplating setting up their own virtual law firms?

Walsh: Cloud-based law firms are *real* law firms. Despite the myth of simplicity in launching a virtual or cloud-based law firm, the learning curve is steep. Fortunately, my CM co-founders and I had the benefit of learning the "virtual ropes" while at another virtual firm. When we left to start CM, we did not want to be just a website representing a bunch of free-floating solo practitioners or hide our financials behind layers of secrecy. We built a real, cloud-based law firm of partners committed to the firm's success through full transparency and a culture of collaboration. Key to anyone considering starting a firm is to invest in doing everything

the right way—do not skimp on security protocols that protect client records, and invest necessary resources to fully comply with the professional ethical and multi-jurisdictional tax obligations of a national practice.

LP: Thanks, everyone, for sharing your insights and experiences building and managing virtual law firms.

About Culhane Meadows – *Big Law for the New Economy*®

The largest woman-owned national full-service business law firm in the U.S., [Culhane Meadows](#) fields nearly 70 partners in ten business markets across the country. Uniquely structured, the firm's Disruptive Law® business model gives attorneys greater work-life flexibility while delivering outstanding, partner-level legal services to major corporations and emerging companies across industry sectors more efficiently and cost-effectively than conventional law firms. Clients enjoy exceptional and highly efficient legal services provided exclusively by senior attorneys with significant experience and training from large law firms or in-house legal departments of respected corporations. *U.S. News & World Report* has named Culhane Meadows among the country's "Best Law Firms" in its 2014 through 2019 rankings and many of the firm's partners are regularly recognized in *Chambers*, *Super Lawyers*, *Best Lawyers* and *Martindale-Hubbell* Peer Reviews. *Law.com* included Culhane Meadows among the Top 7 Innovators of 2017. The firm is a member of NAMWOLF and was named among the 2018 Best Law Firms for Women by *Working Mother* magazine.