



## Tough decision

### WORK REMOTELY OR RETURN TO THE OFFICE?

*“Darling, you got to let me know  
Should I stay or should I go?”*

— Lyrics by Joe Strummer and Mick Jones

The Clash song “Should I Stay or Should I Go?” was written forty years ago by the band’s Joe Strummer and Mick Jones. I’m sure that CAALA members faced with office and workplace decisions have asked the same question, although most probably didn’t realize the words were memorialized in a song from an iconic English punk rock band.

For eighteen months, we’ve worked remotely, and most of us have become comfortable with the experience. Now, as firms think about moving back into offices, “Should I stay or should I go?” are more than just words to an old rock song.

Xiumei Dong wrote about the challenge in an April Law360 Pulse article: “As the COVID-19 vaccines roll out across the country, many law firm leaders have begun to plot their office returns. But with lawyer and staff now used to the benefits of working from home, many firms are considering a long-term shift to a hybrid model that allows for both in-office and remote work.”

CAALA has been keenly aware of the issue since March of 2020. On Friday, March 13, 2020, we sent our six employees home due to COVID-19. On Monday, March 16, everyone was working remotely with no interruptions to any of our systems or to our staff. We’ve worked remotely ever since, and it wasn’t until last month’s CAALA convention that the staff reunited in person.

Hopefully, our members agree that CAALA’s transition to a remote workplace has gone smoothly. My guess is that most have no idea where CAALA staff is working from, they just want them to be attentive to their needs; and they have been. Events including the CAALA Convention came off without a hitch. None of us predicted the crisis, but CAALA had already established online

work options that allowed employees to access their office computers from home. We had installed robust online options for all aspects of our business, including membership renewal and event registration. We also provided employees with laptops and printers and gave stipends to cover the costs of cell phones and home Wi-Fi which now were crucial to staff doing their jobs.

Now, like everyone else, CAALA is exploring what comes next for our employees and your CAALA headquarters.

Our answer is a hybrid work experience, and it is something many law firms are now considering. CAALA’s hybrid plan calls for employees to continue to work remotely, but to be in the downtown office for in-person meetings at least one day a week, when it is a safe environment.

For law firms, there are countless hybrid workplace options and many CAALA members are exploring those now. Choices range from full office to full remote with plenty in between.

Robert Sher wrote a recent article for Harvard Business Review’s online platform titled “Lessons from One Law Firm’s Pre-Pandemic Shift to Hybrid Work.” It would be helpful for any CAALA attorneys contemplating a hybrid workplace experience for their offices.

He writes about Hanson Bridgett – a full-service midsize law firm with headquarters in San Francisco. When the firm began offering a hybrid workplace experience, they conducted an employee survey that “showed the discomfort some employees felt at the idea of not having a desk to call their own, as well as their anxiety that by not being physically present in the office, their influence might wane and their careers might suffer.” But the survey also showed that the “consensus was ultimately that this was the right thing to do for most employees and the firm.”

Sher writes about the challenge of how to reintroduce workers to the workplace after over a year of enforced

absence, and how to optimize a new work paradigm. “Going from a totally remote workplace to a hybrid arrangement is a major culture shock. There will be turbulence.” He offers lessons Hanson Bridgett learned as they made the transition:

#### 1. Prioritize your culture

“Leaders must give thought to how they’ll create bonds between people and maintain and shape the company’s culture. This will require leaders to be active, involved and creative. They must reach out and create ways for people to get together.”

#### 2. Take care of your IT

“A significant contributor to the program’s success will be your firm’s efforts to ramp up your IT game to equip everyone to work dynamically.”

#### 3. Be playful

“Today, over a year after people *had* to leave the office, few are sure what they really want. Some fell in love with working at home. Some missed the office. Now is the time to experiment with various arrangements, making sure to consider the financial costs of both giving up space and improving IT systems.”

One more piece of advice to keep in mind; In August, the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) published an online article by Jason Jones and Paul Springer. They wrote “As organizations wrestle with the right blend of working remotely and working in the office, there is a growing sense that any strategy employed will likely change down the road. This is because no one really knows how their organization will respond on a macro level, nor how each employee will assimilate on an individual level. Therefore, organizations must remain nimble.”

Whatever you decide to do about your workplace, understand that the strategy is likely to change; but at least you will be able to give an intelligent answer to that question from the 1981 Clash song. 🎵