



**David Seager**  
is Managing Director at  
SIFA Professional

## The Work from Home/Office Balance

As we look to emerge from this crisis, the decision for individuals and businesses alike will no longer be one of work/life balance, but more the work from home/office balance. After six months of mostly working from home, work patterns have adapted enormously.

We have all become very accustomed to client and team meetings in the virtual world and realised that a meeting face to face, or more accurately screen to screen, is still highly personal and effective. The question of course is will we all, or many of us, want to continue that way, post-pandemic?

While considering that on a personal level, we cannot ignore the question from a business management perspective. Financial Planning or Law firms, feeling the economic pinch might well rather see meetings continue virtually where possible, to avoid unnecessary travel expense and might even look to reduce office space to reduce costs.

A further factor we cannot ignore is the view of individual employees. From what I have read and witnessed, younger staff value the team camaraderie of the office environment, whilst perhaps more senior team members are content to continue from home.

For firms and individuals therefore, as we move into the next decade, there are many choices to be made and none of them easy. What will assist law firms is the SRA's timely recognition of the need to focus on how to regulate effectively their businesses embracing and using more technology.

With regard to the question about remote working, I am sure that firms will adopt more flexible policies, now they have had to adapt and know in many areas it has not impacted efficiencies. I hope that management and COLPs will embed secure compliant systems for sharing documents and communicating with colleagues and clients, such that whether that be in the office or at home will become individual choice.

That choice will be based on the situation and the individual needs of the client. I have little doubt that all law firms, as indeed financial planning firms, will want to include at least one face to face meeting during the advice process. Whether this is in the office at the beginning of the process, essential perhaps for a new client, or at the end, will vary and the use of technology will allow this. Because of this, working from home, will, in my opinion, become part of the new normal but not entirely the new normal.

*“There are many choices to be made and none of them easy”*



**Alex Holt**  
is Business Development  
Director at Cashroom

## Keeping up with the Joneses – how to modernise your law firm

The pandemic has forced fundamental change within society and business, change that has frequently brought about worthwhile evolution. Law firms should seize the opportunities presented, particularly in the following areas:

Embracing technology and efficiency advances – surely those firms who have stuck with paper-based processes have seen that there is another, better way? Aside from saving space (and the planet!), going paperless is a key element of any sensible approach to remote working, and the use of appropriate technology is the enabler. The crucial thing is a detailed understanding of the processes the firm operates, so that people and tech can work in synergy rather than at odds.

Security and risk management – a collateral benefit of sorting out technology and process should be an improved approach to cyber and internal fraud. It isn't as easy as simply sending people home with a laptop. As part of enforced modernisation, addressing cyber risk through technology will improve a firm's risk profile at a time when insurers are looking very carefully at PII premiums.

Communications technology – whether remote working or back (safely) in the office, all lawyers will have experienced the need for reliable telephony, broadband and video calling. Addressing issues such as weak signal, clarity of audio, and appropriate cameras would have been very low on the priority list at the beginning of 2020. Right now, they are all crucial elements to delivering a professional service.

Communicating with customers and clients – An obvious extension of the price transparency regulation is that firms need to be aware of the potential of online marketing by blowing their own trumpet with glowing reviews from customers and case studies on their user-friendly, informative and up to date websites. Firms also need to consider how they communicate with actual clients – many case management systems now enable SMS updates. There are superb app providers out there who can create branded apps via which updating clients becomes easy and automated.

Wellbeing of staff – in the rush to modernise, don't forget the staff, the driving force of a business. The present circumstances have brought stress, loneliness and fatigue. Firms must embrace new ways of thinking and engage with their staff even more. Communicate plans. Be open about the business performance and goals. Get everyone on the same page, and listen out for those who are struggling.

This is not an exhaustive list of sensible moves. But wouldn't it be a start to consider them? After all, the times they are a-changin'.

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