



Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network Podcast: Real Talk

Episode 35: Practicing Law Post-COVID: How the Workplace Has Evolved for New Lawyers

[Rachel Moseson Dikovics](#),
[Amanda K. Cipriano](#), [Brianna M. Ferrante](#), [Jessica Kriegsfeld](#)

SEPTEMBER 2024

-
- Rachel Dikovics:** Welcome to the Lowenstein Sandler Podcast Series: The Women's Initiative Network, Real Talk. I'm Rachel Dikovics, an associate attorney and member of the Women's Initiative Network at Lowenstein Sandler. Before we begin, please take a moment to subscribe to our podcast series at lowenstein.com/podcasts, or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, and SoundCloud. Now let's take a listen.
- Amanda Cipriano:** Welcome to another episode of the Women's Initiative Network "Real Talk". I'm Amanda Cipriano, an associate in Lowenstein's White Collar Defense and Investigations Practice Group.
- Rachel Dikovics:** I'm Rachel Dikovics, also an associate in Lowenstein's White Collar Defense Practice Group.
- Brianna Ferrante:** I'm Brianna Ferrante, an associate in the firm's M&A and private equity group.
- Jessica Kriegsfeld:** I'm Jessica Kriegsfeld, an associate in the firm's executive compensation employment and benefits group.
- Amanda Cipriano:** On today's episode, we're going to discuss what law firm life looks like to associates who join the practice of law during or after COVID. Even though discussions of the pandemic have taken over a lot of programming in the last few years, we thought it'd be interesting to hear from a generation whose primary and perhaps only working experience at a law firm has been in a post-COVID world.
- Rachel Dikovics:** So for those who graduated in 2020 or later, many of their experiences in a law firm involved a remote or hybrid in-office schedule, which presented unique challenges to acclimating new law firm life. Many recent graduates have never had to work a five-day in person work week, which for more seasoned attorneys may be difficult to imagine. While firms have grown a lot in the last four years to accommodate remote and hybrid work, leaders should tune into their junior associates' perspectives and experiences because as we all know, the last four years have really changed what working in a law firm looks like. Today we're joined by law school graduates from years 2020, 2021, and 2022. Can you each talk a little bit about what the start of your career here at Lowenstein looked like?

- Amanda Cipriano:** Sure, so I'll go first. I summered in 2019, so that was the last I feel like normal summer, but I started in October of 2020 and we were fully remote at that point.
- Brianna Ferrante:** I summered during the pandemic, so we started end of May 2020 and then when I started again later in 2021, we were still primarily remote at that point.
- Jessica Kriegsfeld:** COVID hit when I was a second semester one-L in law school, so both my one-L internship and when I was a two-L summer at Lowenstein we're both remote. And when I started in September 2022, that was my first job ever, my first law firm experience in person.
- Rachel Dikovics:** Great. So each of you obviously has a bit of a different perspective. Amanda, you mentioned that you summered in 2019, which was in person and then you started in 2020 remotely. So can you talk a little bit about what that transition was like and whether it made it harder to kind of integrate yourself into the firm?
- Amanda Cipriano:** I think having an in-person summer was really, really helpful to starting completely remote. I was able to put names to faces and reach out to people that I'd met in person, which I think made it easier for me to start working at a law firm. This was my first, I guess, fully salaried position, this was my first real job and so to do it from a quiet room in my house all alone was a little scary. I do feel like we kind of got in a normal and it was nice for me because everybody else at the firm was adjusting in the same way that I was. So people had to learn how to work fully remote and at that time I think we were even using three different types of software to do group meetings.
- Rachel Dikovics:** Back in the days of WebEx and-
- Amanda Cipriano:** Right. WebEx, Zoom, Teams, we were using it all. So I think everybody was kind of in the same boat and I really had to rely on any connections I made in person to really get myself afloat. I think the hardest transition actually was when we went back to being kind of in person because I got so used to doing everything in the quiet of my own home. I got so used to not having a commute or not needing to really get ready in the morning. So I think managing my schedule became actually a little bit of a challenge once we kind of started to move more towards a hybrid work environment.
- Rachel Dikovics:** And Brianna and Jessica, can you talk a little bit about starting remotely and then figuring out how to come into the office?
- Brianna Ferrante:** Sure. So starting remotely, I mean my summer was fully remote and at that point the pandemic was still so new where it was almost like what's the post pandemic world? We couldn't even imagine it at that point. But I think it was definitely really challenging to form connections because you're new and you don't know anybody and you have these preset mentors and groups that you were introduced to remotely, but you still didn't really feel like you were integrated in the firm through the summer. And the firm did everything they could at that point because there was still so much going on and it was just a massive learning curve for everybody. But then when we started, we were

still I think primarily remote if I remember right, and then you could come in if you wanted to, but you had to register.

Rachel Dikovics: Forgot about that.

Brianna Ferrante: And so they knew you were going to be there and you had to wear masks still. So I think there was definitely not a whole lot of turnout at that point because it was very difficult to even go in. But I think it really wasn't until about a year, a year and a half after I had started that we were really committed to being back in person at least a few days a week. And I think it really wasn't until then that I felt like I was kind of creating relationships with my team and partners and the other associates.

Jessica Kriegsfeld: I started in 2022 when we were back in the office our select days of the week. But since I had never had a job in person ever, there was a huge learning curve for my class. Like what do we wear to the office? I remember going to the mall with my mom before we started and I'm picking out suits and blazers and heels and then I got to the office and that's not really what people were wearing. Or we had a desk phone, I have never used a desk phone. I didn't know we had to dial nine to go out of the office. Little things like that, I just had never been in the office and my first time in person is at a law firm.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah. It's not the easiest first job, although there are a lot of perks. So how long did it take you guys to feel like you really had integrated into the office and your practice group? Some of our practice groups sit in multiple offices, so that can kind of complicate it a little bit more. So how long did it take you to feel like you'd really found your spot and integrated?

Amanda Cipriano: I think for me, I've been here for four years now, I would say maybe not until last year I felt like I was finally getting the swing of things. I was seeing how a law firm operates, how the different practice groups interact, and so that took three years, but there was a lot of trial and error to get to that point. It was a lot of talking to different people and reaching out and going to events just to meet people. And I think that the more I did that and the more events that became available for me is when I kind of started to feel like, oh, I'm part of this firm. I belong here, this is my home. So I think it took a few years and I think throughout those three years the firm was also changing and trying to adjust to, I hate to say it, but the new normal.

Brianna Ferrante: I think for me it took every bit of two full years. And I think the most critical portions of those two years was I was on deals I had started and finished while we were in the office, and I think I was able to connect with members of my group and see things come full circle and that's how I really got to meet more people and just get a better understanding of how everything works together. But yeah, definitely two full years. I think only really the past year, year and a half do I feel like I've really been integrated and on the day-to-day basis involved.

Jessica Kriegsfeld: I think it took me about a year, which would be the same year as what Amanda and Bree said. I think that's just by virtue of things being more in person and all meetings were in person so by the first full year I felt like I

knew people in other practice groups and felt like when I came to the office I could go chat with people more informally.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah. That's interesting that Amanda said three, Brianna said two and Jessica said one, and that all lines up to be actually the same year when everybody started coming back into the office more often. So how in these various scenarios did you manage to find mentors in your practice group, more broadly in the firm? What were some strategies that you used either remotely or in person or to kind of bridge the gap between the two?

Jessica Kriegsfeld: I like to reach out to people who I think are well-respected, well-received in the firm, people who I want to mirror their behaviors, so then I'll reach out and then it's just easier to meet up in person to talk. I tend to reach out maybe on the Zoom chat or an email, but it's so much easier to have that natural discussion when you can just stop by someone's office or run downstairs and get coffee.

Brianna Ferrante: I think it happened for me on a transaction-by-transaction basis, who I was working with, who was walking me through how to do things, correcting my work or just teaching me what was going on. I was kind of able to leverage those conversations into more personal stuff and talking about their life, my life, what's going on. So I think that was really the basis for all of those relationships and then just got easier to maintain that as we became more in person, more integrated.

Amanda Cipriano: I think for me, I kind of had a built-in mentor coming into the firm, which was Rachel, because she was my one LTA, which was really nice because she was in the same practice group that I eventually wanted to be in. So I really tried to reach out to her, and this is kind of what I was talking about earlier with the connections you make in the summer program. I think those are really important because I was able to reach out to her before I came back and said, "Hey, this is the type of work I want to work on. If you have any cases, let me know, but can you also put my name out there?" And so I think I continued that with other people in the firm too once I started getting staffed on matters.

If there was someone I felt like I worked really well with, I would try to do what Brianna was talking about. I would try to find out more about them on a personal level and see what their day-to-day looks like and what kind of work they do and just really try to be present and also to show up to events that the firm was hosting or my law school was hosting, just trying to put myself out there as much as I could to form those one-on-one connections that kind of went beyond the workday. And I think making that effort and taking that time was what really helped develop those kinds of relationships.

Rachel Dikovics: Do you feel like WIN events helped you do that as well?

Amanda Cipriano: Well of course, Rachel. I think WIN is single-handedly one of the best things that this firm has to offer for its women attorneys. I think the programming, the lunches, the mentorship, just the friendships we meet, I mean I feel like there are tens of offices that I could walk into on a daily day basis if I just want to chat with someone, and that's all due to WIN.

- Rachel Dikovics:** Yeah. That made a really big difference for me when I was starting out at the firm. So I started in 2018, a couple years pre-COVID, so by the time the pandemic hit and when we went remote, I felt like I had a lot of good relationships already developed, which was extremely helpful to being able to keep up with what I was doing. And WIN was definitely a big part of that. I remember early in the pandemic, Amanda will remember, we did the WIN happy hours virtually and things like that, which were really nice. But I feel the same. I mean I feel like my practice group has a lot of young women but not a lot of women partners and it's been hugely helpful to tap into the broader network of more senior women who come to our WIN events. And as a result, I feel like I know almost every woman in the firm probably that I otherwise really would not because they're not people I normally would work with. That was definitely a huge help for me in terms of finding mentors and just building supportive relationships and friendships too.
- Amanda Cipriano:** Now it's even across offices.
- Rachel Dikovics:** Yeah, for sure.
- Amanda Cipriano:** I mean we don't do a lot of work with the attorneys in Palo Alto, but there are a few women members out there that I've actually referred to some of my friends who had trademark questions. And I was like, I don't do this, but I know someone who might. And so it's just really cool that we can cross offices in that way even if we never work a billable hour with them.
- Rachel Dikovics:** Yeah, for sure. We've all experienced a lot of work from home. We work from the office somewhat frequently, probably some of us more frequently than others, not naming names, but there's been a push in big law recently to have people come back to the office more often. And I'm curious based on your experiences, and I can talk about mine a little bit as well, but when you're working in the office versus working at home where do you get more done?
- Amanda Cipriano:** I think for me, I get more done at home. But you have to think a lot of people that are starting out in a law firm, many of them are coming straight from college, straight from high school, so they may not have families, they may have kids, they may not be taking care of a household. A lot of people are just living in a one bedroom apartment with themselves. We got so used to doing everything productively in the quiet of our own home. So when we had to transition to being in person where there were other people to account for, there was ringing phones, there were lunches, there were meetings in person disrupting our day was really challenging. I got so used to having my own little sanctuary in my house. So when I have my days where I really need to focus, like if I'm writing a brief or if I'm doing some research that's time sensitive, I'm doing that from home because I know that when I come in person, I'm saying hi to people. I'm doing my kind of social rounds, scheduling meetings in person to get that face time, but I'm not going to be able to sit down and focus on something for eight hours like I would be able to at home.
- Jessica Kriegsfeld:** Totally agree. I think there is no substitute for making those personal connections in person and stopping by people's offices, but when I'm in the

office I have to put in earplugs because people are chatting and phones are ringing and people are on Zoom calls where if I need to focus, I like to do it in my two bedroom apartment at home where I have no kids and no pets. But I understand that's different for more senior people who might have those distractions at home.

Brianna Ferrante: I'm kind of the opposite. I think for me when I'm home I get a little distracted knowing I have other stuff going on. I think I do my best work when I'm in the office and I make an effort to come into the office when I know I have a lot of stuff to do just because I also just feel like towards the end of the day, I'm going to out myself here, but towards the end of the day. If it's later and there's things I could get started on but they're not time sensitive and I could do it tomorrow, if I'm already at the office, I'm more productive and I'm going to do all the extra stuff. Whereas if I'm home and I know it could wait for tomorrow, I'm going to do it tomorrow. That's just kind of the way I am. So I think I tend to get more done in the office, so I try to arrange my life accordingly.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah. I feel like I'm somewhere in the middle. I like coming to the office sometimes, but I definitely lose billable time in a big way when I come to the office. For me, I'm older compared to you guys and have a kid and so working from home can have some distractions, but what I find is the days that I come into the office, I lose a good two hours on just getting back and forth because there's also time it takes to get ready and when you have a toddler, you really can't get ready probably until childcare arrives. And so it's just sort of a later timeline than if I could just walk down to my office, which is in my quiet basement, and just get started right away. And on the other end of the day, I have to think about what time to leave to not hit traffic so that I can be home by 5:00 when childcare leaves and then I've lost a good two hours of the working day that if I was working at home I would have. And that's not time that I can make up right then it would have to be later or the next day or whatever.

So I definitely see the positives of being in person, I think it is really important for relationship building. But from my perspective, there's a lot of billable time lost on the days that were coming into the office. And I think that's worth it sometimes, but I think that overall, we're probably more productive with the mix than we would be solely doing either.

Amanda Cipriano: I think that's one of the things that was most challenging actually for me transitioning from being fully remote was looking at the difference in my hours. Because like you said, I mean right now I have a 20-minute commute, which is amazing. It's the shortest commute I've ever had in my life. But even the getting up and going were hours lost where when we were remote, not only were we remote but we were in a pandemic, no one was hanging out, nobody had extracurricular activities. All I was doing was staying at home so I could log in at 8:00 AM, log out at 8:00 PM and that could be 12 straight hours of billable work. When I transitioned to the office, I had to rework that because I didn't have as much hours to get done. And so looking at that transition was definitely really different for me.

Jessica Kriegsfeld: I will say the mix, I think, has been great for my mental health because it gets really isolating sitting alone in one room by myself all day. So being able to work from home on Monday but then come in on Tuesday and see people is a nice mix.

Rachel Dikovics: As law firms consider how to move forward with the structure of working remotely and working from home, and in my view hopefully a continued mix of the two. What do you feel like senior leadership should know about more junior attorney's perspective on office versus home?

Jessica Kriegsfeld: I think junior attorneys can be analogized to toddlers where we are going to mirror the senior associates and the partners just like a toddler is going to mirror their parents.

Rachel Dikovics: To some extent.

Jessica Kriegsfeld: But if I see partners coming in on the RN office days religiously, that's going to make me want to come in. Where if I come in on a Friday and no one I work for is here, why am I in the office?

Amanda Cipriano: I think that's a good point. Thinking about it from a morale perspective. I mean there have been some days, usually in the summer where a lot of people take vacations, but I'll come into the office and no one else is here and I'll come into the office, and I haven't spoken to another person.

And so in my head I'm like, oh, that kind of felt like a waste. I could have just stayed home. I could have just taken the time there. So I do agree. I think it's nice to be able to mirror and feel like you're part of a team when you're working together and being able to see your team.

Rachel Dikovics: So what about now that we bring our laptops back and forth? Back home, back to the office, you always have your laptop outside of... Times you've gone out without it, but how does that change the dynamic? Do you feel like you always have to be available and you kind of have no excuse to be offline?

Amanda Cipriano: So that was one thing I actually was thinking about earlier because when I summered, we didn't have the laptops to bring home. We had a different system that kind of was wonky to get on, and so I kind of really felt that when I left for the day my day was done, which was, again I was a summer associate, so usually your day was done. But I felt that disconnect and I feel like coming back into the office, having the laptop with you, bringing your laptop on vacations, bringing your laptop with you to Christmas and family holidays, a lot of times I don't end up opening it, but there is a lot of pressure of just never being able to be offline and I feel like that's something all juniors probably are working on and probably will work on for the rest of their careers. Just how to set those boundaries and I think the more senior you get, the easier it becomes. But as a first year, I kind of felt terrified to not be without my laptop, which honestly is kind of sad.

Brianna Ferrante: I feel like I agree, but to some extent that's kind of part of what the job is and that's what the job requires. So I think the phone honestly is way worse than

the laptop. I think that's like everyone knows everyone's on their phone all the time. So at least if I'm on my computer, I'm in the office, I get an email, I can give myself 10 minutes, so I think about it. Whereas I feel like sometimes on my phone, if I'm out, it's almost more pressure. I think to the extent the laptops allow us to work from home and we have our setups, and we have to come in on the weekends if we're going to do a little bit of work, I don't mind the laptops as much. I think the phone is what gives me that sort of overbearing sense of just a never-ending list of things to do.

Jessica Kriegsfeld: I think I never experienced not having a laptop, so I don't know what it would be like to be able to leave it at the office and go home. Like an emotional support laptop.

Brianna Ferrante: Even if I know I'm not going to need it. I just like having it just in case.

Rachel Dikovics: I do the same thing. When I'm going on vacation or something, even if I intend to be really offline, I always bring it because I always feel like, well, if I don't bring it, there's going to be some emergency and it's going to be a big problem that I don't have it.

Brianna Ferrante: Even if it's just somebody asking where something is saved and you're like, oh my God, it's local or something, I would want to make people's lives easier and if it's not going to be a tremendous effort for me to fix it or handle it, I'd rather be able to do that.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah.

Amanda Cipriano: I will say I do think it makes the transition home easier too. So for example, if you have a 5 o'clock Zoom, there are some days where I'll head home before it and then I can log in and do it from home so I don't have to worry about getting home super late. So there's plus sides and downsides.

Rachel Dikovics: For sure, definitely gives a lot more flexibility for where you are. So even if you come into the office, maybe you just leave in the middle of the afternoon and I see a lot of people doing that these days and I certainly do that myself to make sure that I'm home before traffic ideally, and then if I have more things I need to do before the end of the day, it just works out easier to go home in the middle of the day. So what advice would you guys have based on your experiences for incoming junior associates we have some new associates starting in about a month I think, to acclimating to law firm life and building connections at the firm?

Amanda Cipriano: I think my advice would be to be present, make yourself known with the people you want to work for. And whether that's with the mid-levels who will be assigning you to cases or with partners, I just think you want people to remember your face especially if you summered, just to get your name out there. And show up to events, go to the little happy hours we have. We just got an email today that they're having snacks and drinks in the lab. Go to those things and socialize with people because it's a lot easier to build connections social setting rather than cold-calling a partner or knocking on their door asking if they have time to introduce yourselves to them. I think you

just really need to be present when other people are present and just try to be as involved as possible.

Brianna Ferrante: Yeah, I agree. I also think from a learning perspective, it's a lot easier to ask someone questions and not be spinning your wheels for too long before you realize you have to. When you actually know the person and have conversations with them and not just an email address to them, I think it definitely enhances your learning experience. I think the first year, two years really, it's just a bunch of new things all the time and I think having relationships and people you can ask questions to really helps that whole process just go a little bit smoother and more enjoyable to the extent.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah. I think also it's good for juniors to understand that the first few years are really critical to the relationships that are going to take you through your whole career, or at least your time at the firm. I think especially if you're starting out as a junior associate and you're right out of law school and you're fairly young, as Brianna said earlier part of the job is being available and really putting in the time as a junior associate and it sort of builds you this goodwill credit, I think, so that later down the line, if you need to be in person less because whatever it is, you have a kid, you're doing a construction project at your house, there's all kinds of reasons. You have a parent who needs extra help.

There's all kinds of reasons that you might need to take down your time in the office, and I think if you have this sort of filled cup of time that you've been around, people know you, they already trust you, they already understand that you're somebody who has put in a lot of time to these firm activities. I think it gives you a lot of credit and goodwill from people when at some point you need to take a step back in terms of how often you're visible because if you already have been visible for a long time, that's a lot easier to do than if it's your first year and nobody knows you and then you're also not around.

Amanda Cipriano: I think that applies to when you're making mistakes. I mean this a lot of time is our first job and a legal job is not necessarily an easy one so you're going to make mistakes, but if you're remote making those mistakes and you're not seeing how to fix them, that person you made the mistake with may not want to work with you again. Whereas if you had a personal relationship with them, you'll be able to talk through the mistake, see how you can fix it for next time. And they'll be probably more willing to give you a second chance instead of just being able to write you off easily because they don't have to see you in person.

Brianna Ferrante: Also, with respect to just like your work pipeline, I know it's different group to group, firm to firm, but the way deals are staffed and the way you meet your hours, you have to be top of mind for partners and mid and senior level associates when things come in, and I think being present is the best way to do that. Otherwise, what distinguishes you, especially in the beginning when you're all brand new and nobody has more or less experience than anybody else, being just present and being top of mind is what really will help you get a well-rounded first year or two of experience and just hit that learning curve running.

- Rachel Dikovics:** Yeah. That's another reason that building good relationships as a summer associate if you are one is really helpful because then when you come back, people already know you and maybe you have already distinguished yourself as somebody that people really want to work with, and they're going to immediately go to you and try to put you on their cases. Any last words of wisdom? Amanda is about to leave us for a while to go clerk, and this is her last episode for some time. So any words of wisdom to share with our listeners?
- Amanda Cipriano:** I just think when you're starting, it's so important to find out what works for you. And so just from listening to everybody here today, it sounds like we all have different work styles and different hybrid schedules work for us, but I think the important part there is that the hybrid schedule for us. So many people have different things going on in their lives and they found so many creative ways to get the work done, and that's been one of the reasons why I've loved working here and the four years have been so different from when I started until now, but seeing that flexibility, seeing women who are active in their kids' lives, seeing men who are active in their kids' lives, that's something I looked for when applying for a firm. And being able to do that in their own specific way I think is so important. And I think people who will come to this firm, I think that'll be one of the things they'll value most.
- Jessica Kriegsfeld:** I totally agree. As more junior person, I see the longevity at this firm. I see people making the hybrid schedules work as life happens, and that makes me want to stay.
- Brianna Ferrante:** Yep, I agree. I think that the ones who are here the longest and are most fulfilled in their careers are the ones who take the initiative to be integrated and make those relationships, and it's kind of just makes you sticky because you want to be here and people like you.
- Rachel Dikovics:** Awesome. Well, thank you guys so much. This was such a fun conversation. Thanks Amanda, for all of your hard work. So thanks for tuning in to another episode of the Women's Initiative Network "Real Talk". We'll see you next time.
- Rachel Dikovics:** Thank you for listening to today's episode. Please subscribe to our podcast series at lowenstein.com/podcasts or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, and SoundCloud. Lowenstein Sandler podcast series is presented by Lowenstein Sandler and cannot be copied or rebroadcast without consent. The information provided is intended for a general audience. It is not legal advice or substitute for the advice of counsel. Prior results do not guarantee a similar outcome. The content reflects the personal views and opinions of the participants. No attorney client relationship is being created by this podcast and all rights are reserved.