Navigating Hybrid Work for New Attorneys:

Integration as a Key to Success

By Rashida MacMurray-Abdullah, Esq., and Kay Nash

Prior to March 2020, the discussion about hybrid or remote work was often reserved for a small population of individuals with "unique" circumstances at law firms. Fast-forward two years later, the discussion has shifted to how lawyers can thrive in a hybrid environment. The global COVID-19 pandemic has upended what all organizations, including law firms, have embraced when it comes to productivity. To truly thrive in a hybrid environment, it is not as simple as converting everything that was designed for in-person and making it available virtually. To have the hybrid model of work really flourish, you must be intentional and purposeful about integrating new lawyers.

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Work is no longer defined by the four corners of the office. Work is where you are. At no other time in recent history has there been such disruption on a global scale. Gone are the days when a new employee would arrive at the office for the first day of orientation and have one-on-one support to help them integrate and navigate the office. While the required onboarding tasks can still be accomplished virtually, what happens to the information that new employees absorb from just touring the office? So much information can be acquired from non-verbal and other interactions such as what do people typically wear to the office, are doors open or closed, or do people in general seem congenial when approaching each other in the hallways.

At Wiley, our orientations have changed to better recognize the hybrid approach. Key elements of our hybrid orientation include:

- Sending a technology package to arrive at least two days in advance to reduce anxiety over how to log on and view meetings.
- Completing onboarding tasks and paperwork using the online portal (we use Silkroad for this purpose).
- Hosting orientation meetings mostly via WebEx, however, new attorneys may also come into the office during their first week to meet people as well. The core of orientation is one-on-one time with representatives from each department at the firm.
- Setting up mentors for each associate. Each new associate has a mentor in their practice group to help answer day-to-day questions and help train the new associate on how to best get their work done.
- Importantly, providing an integration plan to each attorney that covers their first few months at the firm. The plan includes several elements outlined below.

Integration should be an opportunity for new attorneys to learn about the firm's culture and the business strategies of the practice group(s). It also should be an opportunity to meet attorneys and other professionals across the entire firm that they may or may not work with on a regular basis. We know that rather than a traditional check-the-box onboarding experience, we can design a better experience for new attorneys. We believe the three key elements to effective integration in the hybrid world are:

1. Practice integration
2. Social integration
3. Creating a culture of belonging

Work is where you are.

Practice Integration Best Practices

- **Coordinate initial assignments.** In the hybrid model, it remains important to reduce stress for attorneys around how to get assignments. Identify the first assignment that the associate will work on prior to arrival. The associate should be told about their first project ideally after the completion of orientation to facilitate successful onboarding and integration without the added burden of trying to start working on an initial project.
- **Set up a one-on-one meeting with the practice group leader.** This meeting is a general "get to know you" session, including topics such as: what are the key areas of practice for the group, which partners handle what types of industries or niches, how do I get work, and who do I reach out to if I need help/advice on a project?
- **Schedule a one-on-one meeting with the work assignment partner in the group.** Subject matter should involve the same topics as the practice group leader meeting (and can be a combined meeting if needed) but should also include, but not be limited to, what to do if you need to say no to a project, how the work assignment partner interacts with associates, and the process for reviewing hours and productivity in the group.
- **Match new attorneys with mentors.** In our previous office paradigm, new attorneys would be assigned an office

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either near other lawyers in their practice group or — quite frankly — wherever there was an open office. The attorney would learn the unwritten rules on how to navigate the firm based on observation of in-office activities, hallway conversations, and visiting the associate next door for a quick question — or to blow off steam. But with hybrid work environments, mentors need to be even more intentional in connecting the dots across the entire firm. At Wiley, we promote having one dedicated mentor in the associate's practice group as one of the key pathways toward learning the new systems within the firm. Ideally, mentors have a checklist of items to cover with a new attorney in the group. Key to this list is where to access practice group resources, knowledge management (KM) repositories, checklists, filing resources like e-filing accounts, and bar numbers. They also serve as a "trail guide" to help the new attorney access other networks.

- **Integrate practice managers, paralegals and other professionals.** Practice managers (if you have them at your firm) are central to integration. Meetings with paralegals and other professionals in the group should be arranged as well as an overview of the mechanics of how professional team members and lawyers collaborate on a typical matter.

Social Integration Best Practices

In addition to meetings with department leaders, mentors, and those involved with practice group integration, networking internally within the firm must be intentional. Previous organic hallway conversations must be replicated as best as possible in a new hybrid world.

While most of these sessions can be done virtually, simply duplicating what we used to do is insufficient. In-person interactions provide for non-verbal communication that can be lost in a digital medium. The need to be able to cross-network across the firm beyond the individuals that a new attorney may meet in their practice group is an important success skill set.

Furthermore, social integration requires more intentional planning and scheduling to create exposure to a broad network. We have seen that intentional but casual conversations with two strategic groups — peers and partners — are essential to integration.

- **Peers:** Gallup's employee engagement research shows that "having a best friend at work" improves productivity and affiliation with the workplace. Although the firm cannot control who ultimately forms connections, creating more opportunities to find "go to" relationships among peers creates a benefit to the firm. These integration meetings could include small virtual coffees, in-person happy hours, or providing a small budget for an off-site event. One important way to leverage peer interaction is to look at the social or professional development events your firm is already doing — monthly happy hours, welcome receptions, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) events, or bar activities. Identify small groups to attend those events together and encourage the group to meet in advance and arrive together, or to do a de-brief session afterward.
- **Partners:** What we have found in our hybrid model is that partners assign work to those with whom they have established relationships. Getting to know junior associates was not something partners devoted extra energy to, and their ability to trust "new" attorneys has decreased. To counteract this, meetings must be organized by the legal talent team to make sure that partners are meeting new lawyers. Depending on the preference for these meetings, some partners may want a face-to-face meeting in the office. Asking for preferences and making sure both parties honor working in the office on that designated day is critical for success.

> **Simply duplicating what we used to do is insufficient.**

At Wiley, we have started an initiative where junior associates can submit the names of two partners that they would like to get to know better, and our team will organize "re-integration" lunches for those small groups. This same approach will be done with all new attorneys who start at the firm going forward.

A Culture of Belonging

In addition to practice and social integration, we want to create a culture of belonging that is woven throughout everything we do at the firm. Private practice can be an isolating profession, filled with independent work, high demands, and pressure for excellence. Our lawyers are performing at the highest level, and most recently, under changing and often traumatic circumstances.

This reinforces the need to feel seen, and to belong to a community. Because people spend so much time at work, we want to have an underpinning of support that is threaded through all our integration efforts. Three ideas to support our commitment to belonging are:

- **A one-on-one meeting with our Chief Diversity Officer.** Rashida spends time

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with each new lawyer when they start with the firm and sets up a check-in several weeks after orientation to provide yet another listening ear to the new lawyer. Often people may share different experiences, challenges, or questions with Rashida than with the legal talent team. This helps further refine and define the integration plan moving forward.

- **Three people to call.** One impact of virtual orientation is a loss of the concept, "who can I call when I need help?" We tend to crowd orientation with so much logistical information that it can be overwhelming when everyone at the firm says, "call me if you need anything!" It's important to create a simple card or graphic that reinforces the top people to call for help. At Wiley, our three people are:

  1. The Director of Legal Talent who is the one-on-one coach for associates on any issue.
  2. The Director of Practice Support who has been with the firm for many years, oversees our paralegals, and has a background in IT. She literally can figure out how to solve most problems at the firm or get the right resource involved.
  3. The associate's mentor. As we have said, having a go-to person in your practice is key and if trained and supported properly, mentors can act as a guide and advisor on most practical issues.

- **Providing a safe space.** Affinity group meetings can provide a safe space for many new attorneys to voice challenges and receive support. Group leaders should be trained to facilitate safe-space conversations in the workplace and provide resources to members. In addition, listening sessions with trained facilitators are also helpful. At Wiley, we have partnered with our local Lawyers Assistance Program to provide programming and have taken advantage of mindfulness programming available through consultants and wellness providers.

A Special Note About 2021 New Associates

For new associates rejoining our firm after being summer associates pre-pandemic, the transition back to the firm has been somewhat easier because they could re-establish their network. While feasible, it is still difficult to navigate. Our new associates who joined in 2021 unfortunately did not have the benefit of any in-person interaction with colleagues before returning to the firm in a virtual environment. Remote work environments are new to most of us and do not naturally lend themselves to be the forums that facilitate human connections with new employees. It should not be assumed that new attorneys will be able to easily navigate what it really means to be "hybrid."

There is tremendous opportunity for us to reimagine the possibilities of how we can maximize the developmental experience of new lawyers at the firm. How do we communicate the "unwritten" rules of our organization? Moreover, how do we account for the power dynamic between a new attorney who is seeking to make a good impression and having their questions answered to position them for success? Often, people like to have in-person conversations when showing vulnerability.

Hybrid settings can accommodate, but it must be intentional. Below are three strategies for your integration plans.

Strategy 1: Launch Firm-Wide Weekly Communications

If your firm leadership is not sending regular communications to all lawyers and professional team members, think about how you can

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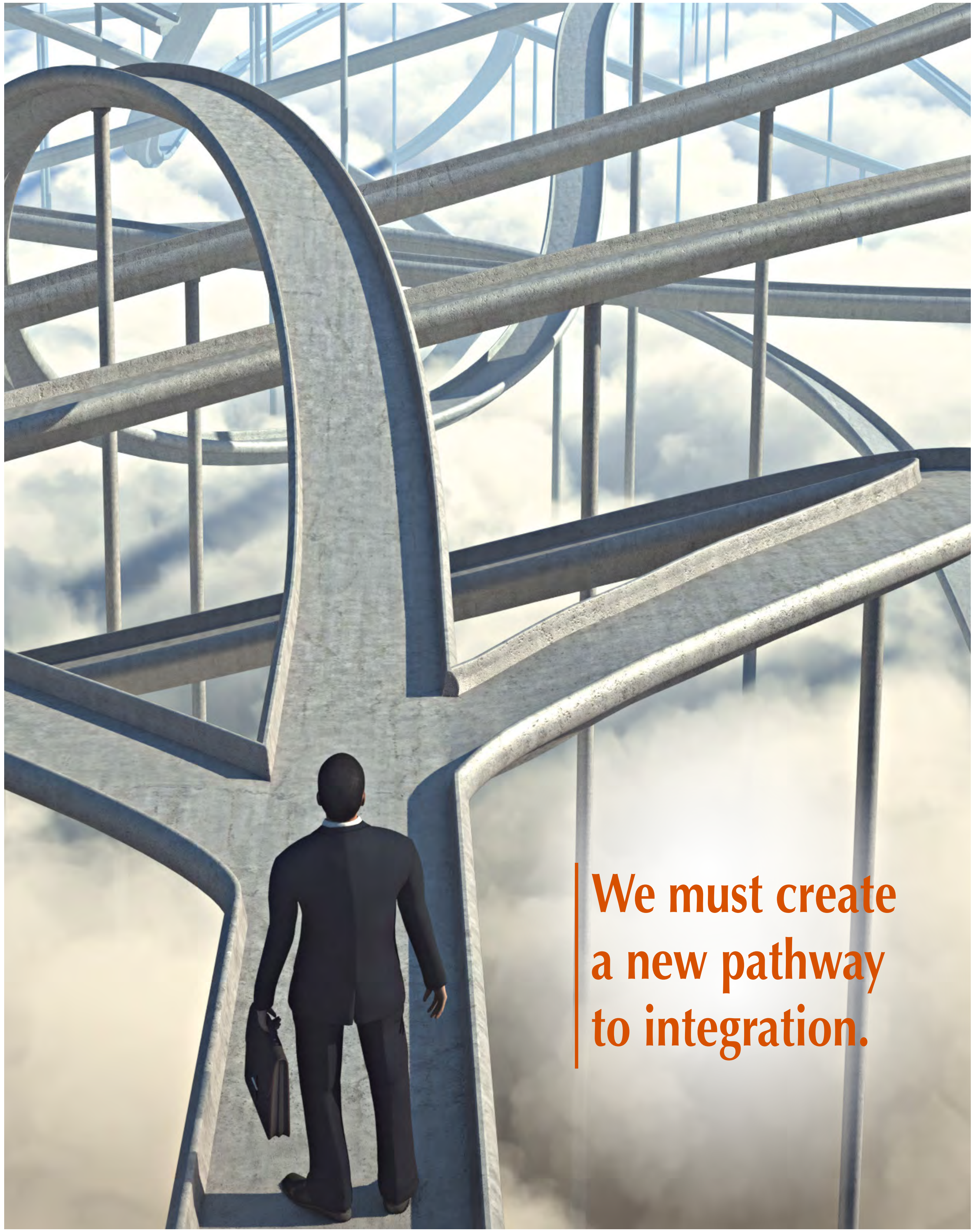

We must create a new pathway to integration.

create a weekly or monthly forum for communication. It may be that this becomes part of your role — a weekly email to your new associates highlighting three key ideas, such as sharing practical news at the firm, tips on how to get things done, or good news about a client win or other firm achievement.

We have all played the telephone game. It is fun (and occasionally concerning) hearing the message that resulted when the last person presents, often bringing laughter from the group to hear how the message morphed from person to person. It is the passing of the message and the various interpretations of the most important communication items that often shapes the distortion of the message. However, as a new attorney, playing the telephone game to receive all communications about the firm would not be enjoyable or inclusive.

For a new attorney joining your firm, you should expect that important tasks that people want to know how to do or where they sit in the organization is based upon the informal communication network within your law firm. To avoid silos, establishing a regular cadence for cross-functional communication and subsequent collaboration of attorneys and business professionals is paramount. In some ways, you may receive feedback (or push back) that this cadence is too frequent, however, for a new person to your law firm, this communication may serve to reassure them that they made the right choice joining your firm as well as provide an opportunity to help them find "their people." In a hybrid environment, you cannot assume that the right information will get to everyone.

Strategy 2: Schedule Check-Ins Every Month for the First Six Months

Remember, a new lawyer not only must learn a new role, but also adapt to the style and culture of their new colleagues. This can range from something as simple as how to refer to a client in a time entry to navigating the firm's document management system. These check-ins should be done by someone in legal talent who has a connection with the new attorney. This helps keep consistency in the integration plan and allows the new lawyer to create another "go to person" in their network. These touchpoints can be extended from the first six months to a year, depending on the needs of the new attorney. It is often said that a new employee does not hit their stride for at least 18 months.

Strategy 3: Put Technology at the Center of Everything You Do

One of the advantages of our new virtual environment is the ability to look into each other's homes and meet the human and furry family members of our colleagues. We have achieved a greater affinity with each other than

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previously thought possible. We realize that virtual meetings can make things easy. The reality is that they can save time. Therefore, to be inclusive, start with the premise that everyone is remote, which will drive the planning in a different direction. This consideration has required us to be more intentional about whether there are materials that need to be distributed in advance, or if, for example, we need to navigate A/V in advance to show a video or other presentation. Hence, if we start with that premise, when we are in person, the experience will be that much better.

Conclusion

Much has been gained in the transition to a hybrid model. One of the unexpected benefits of remote work is the ability to save time and money from not having to commute to the office but instead to the dining room or kitchen. Some attorneys were able to seamlessly transition to a new home office that greatly improved the balance between work and life. Another benefit has been the reemergence of family dinner time, or time at the end of the day for exercise or to get out in nature. For years, associates and other business professionals would wait until the partners (or supervisors) would leave the office (even with nothing to do) for fear that they would miss an opportunity to bill.

Previous organic hallway conversations must be replicated as best as possible in a new hybrid world.

For all that we have gained, we must continue to act with intentionality in our new normal, because the ways of working, learning, and developing have all changed. We have also changed. We must create a new pathway to integration. At its best, the hybrid model reinforces your firm's culture, confirms the new attorney's decision to join your firm, and showcases the agility and technology within your firm. And more importantly, it will help your lawyers thrive long-term in the hybrid world. +

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Rashida MacMurray-Abdullah, Esq. *(RMacMurray-Abdullah@wiley.law) is Wiley's first Chief Diversity Officer, responsible for translating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies into pragmatic programming and initiatives to achieve the firm's strategic goals. In this capacity, she serves as the firm's thought leader in the marketplace where she focuses on external diversity commitments and other calls to action. Throughout her career, Rashida has served in multiple diversity leadership roles and has implemented policies and programs designed to promote and empower professionals from underrepresented groups. She has almost two decades of diverse and dynamic professional services experience advising Fortune 500 and public sector clients involving business controversies and crises. She draws upon more than 20 years of client service experience leading engagements related to global corporate investigations, regulatory compliance, capital projects assessments, and forensic accounting. She has advised both law firm and senior legal executives in implementing innovative legal business operations, designing, and measuring key DEI metrics as well as the strategic procurement of legal services.*

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Kay Nash *(knash@wiley.law) is the Chief Talent Officer at Wiley where she provides leadership to the firm's human resources function and serves as a strategic business partner to firm leadership. Kay has over 25 years of experience in the areas of talent management and career development. Her experience includes the development, implementation, and alignment of people, processes, programs, and policies to drive the firm's business goals. In her role at Wiley, Kay leads the human resources, legal talent, and practice support departments and creates initiatives to attract, develop, and advance the firm's talent at all levels from professional staff to partners at the firm. Kay is a certified Senior Professional in Human Resources and is a frequent speaker on legal talent and leadership topics and a dedicated member of NALP, having previously served on the Board of Directors and several committees and task forces for the organization. She currently serves on the Professional Development Quarterly advisory board. She is also a member of the Society for Human Resource Management, the Professional Development Consortium, and the HR Alliance.*