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*Magazine of the International Legal Technology Association*



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**SUMMER 2017**  
ISSUE 2 | VOLUME 33

# Turning the Conventional Law Firm Structure on Its Head

By taking a different approach to the conventional practice of law, Culhane Meadows has found ways to deliver exceptional, highly efficient client service using innovative technology combined with top-notch legal counsel, thereby creating a new business model for the legal profession.

by Heather Clauson Haughian



## Transforming Big Law into Smart Law

The firm of Culhane Meadows was formed in 2013 by four attorneys leaving a larger firm. They invited several colleagues in four other cities from that same firm to join them with the goal of forming a more cohesive collaborative law firm environment where attorneys could deliver high-quality legal services with minimal operating expenses. To do this, the firm has leveraged emerging technologies and eliminated costly overhead (no extravagant offices, superfluous support staff or other expenses that bring little value or benefit to clients).

At Culhane Meadows, legal services are provided exclusively by partner-level attorneys who have substantial experience in large law firms and as in-house counsel for respected corporations. Like its traditional law firm counterparts, Culhane Meadows has created a working environment that encourages deep collaboration among attorneys across all geographies. Unlike traditional law firms, Culhane Meadows' clients enjoy significant cost-related efficiencies because there are no associates learning their craft on the client's dime and office space is available for use on an a la carte basis, eliminating costly, long-term lease obligations. The firm's partners work remotely, coming to their local offices at least once a month for regularly scheduled office meetings or for firm-hosted client meetings.

As is common with large firms, Culhane Meadows has created a working environment that advocates for attorneys to work together regardless of an individual practitioner's location.

The founders reconfigured the conventional law practice financial models to encourage firmwide collaboration without the fear of losing client credit by sharing client contacts and working new business together. Both attorneys originating business and attorneys working on client matters receive fair compensation based on an objective formula.

## The Technology of Modern Law

Essential to the success of Culhane Meadows' innovative business model was finding the right technology and services to support it. The goal? To find technology that would grow with the firm but not add



costly infrastructure or full-time IT staff. To that end, the firm sought leading-edge, cloud-based solutions to more securely manage the firm's documents, email and accounting and billing needs.

Even more mission-critical was obtaining technology capable of fostering and sustaining Big Law-style collaborative relationships among partners at a much lower cost. Firm management researched and identified appropriate technology and vendors. As a result, Intermedia provides hosting services for email. The firm uses the SecuriSync file-sharing portal for secure collaboration on documents with clients and partners and Skype for Business for video calls between partners and to share screens while collaborating on documents.

For its list server, the firm employs a "Google Groups" format that also functions as the firmwide virtual water cooler. Worldox Cloud handles document management for all client documents. Collaboration on internal projects such as firm retreats is executed on Teamwork.com. The firm uses Bill4Time as its time and billing solution, with custom reporting built for the firm's unique partner draw calculations as well as key reports from Bill4Time to allow total transparency in firm finances for all partners.

As its foundation, Culhane Meadows designed its technology platform to support the firm's core values: innovation, collaboration, integrity and transparency. When, for example, one of the firm's trademark partners discovered a more cost-effective vendor to manage international trademark billing issues and proposed the idea, a committee of technology advisors who are partners at the firm reviewed the software and implemented it with great success. This newer technology permits the firm to eliminate costly wire transfer fees and currency exchange charges, resulting in a direct cost savings for the firm's clients.

### Supporting the Vision: How It Works

Because Culhane Meadows comprises attorneys and entrepreneurs who are keen collaborators, for most professionals who join the firm, the collegial environment gives them autonomy yet support as needed to provide a positive setting for themselves and to offer better client service.

Attorneys set up their own computers with step-by-step onboarding documentation provided by the firm. Additional assistance for those who need it is provided by an approved IT vendor familiar with Culhane Meadows' operations.

Culhane Meadows' chief technology officer and chief information officer work closely with onboarding attorneys to be certain they have the systems in place to ramp up quickly. Biweekly, 15-minute supplemental Join.Me tech support sessions cover "how-to" topics to help partners become more efficient in their daily practices. These sessions are recorded and archived so the attorneys can access them 24/7.

### Security and Compliance

Maintaining a secure environment, especially in a cloud-based operating system, is key. Culhane Meadows relies on the high level of cybersecurity offered by Worldox document management for keeping client documents safe, readily accessible, searchable and indexed for all partners at the firm to use and securely access 24/7 from any location. Instead of trying to become an expert in managing the required security protocols to maintain the integrity of servers that house all the firm's client data (especially in light of all the recent malware attacks), the firm allows the experts at Worldox (and their hosting provider, Rackspace) to manage these issues, given that they are certified compliant with ISO 27001, SSAE 16 and ISAE 3402, and PCI DSS and have fully redundant backup systems when issues arise. This is important to clients and builds confidence in the firm's ability to protect sensitive documents and communications.

Attorneys can focus on the practice of law and leave security concerns to expert vendors who stay on the cutting edge of technology. The firm also has a detailed security policy that all attorneys must follow. This helps ensure that systems are configured properly to protect sensitive files and that encryption is used.

### Encouraging Collaboration

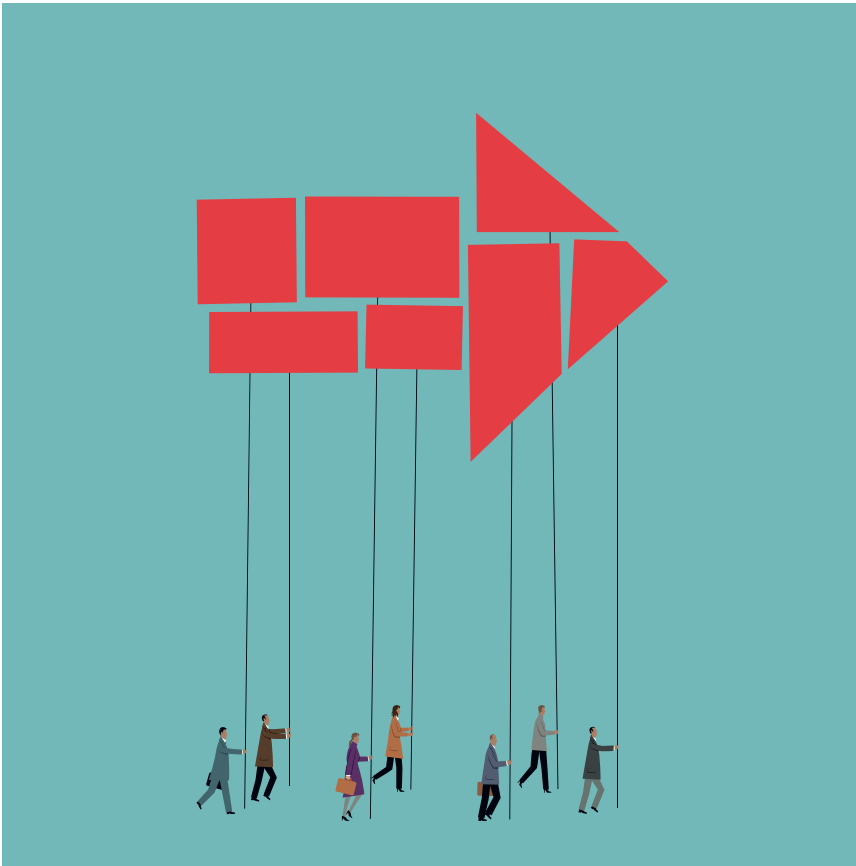
Fostering a collaborative environment among a geographically dispersed partnership requires effort. Once a month, Culhane Meadows hosts an all-firm conference call as well as in-person meetings for each



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**The entire system is designed to support the firm's core values: innovation, collaboration, integrity and transparency.**



**Clients also benefit from having attorneys who control their billing rates and fee structures.**

attorney at the office with which they are associated. As needed, attorneys who are traveling may also attend the monthly meeting at an office not in their home city.

Not all of these meetings are work-related. To build esprit de corps, office members frequently get together for a community service activity or recruiting happy hours. In addition, the firm holds an annual three-day partnership retreat for meetings and social events.

**Benefits for Clients**

Clients quickly learn that when their attorney joins Culhane Meadows and “moves to the cloud,” nothing changes in their attorney-client relationship. Clients continue to work with their attorneys of record as well as Culhane Meadows’ colleagues who also have substantial expertise and experience. The client simply no longer sees fancy artwork on the walls because the firm has no walls. They aren’t greeted by a receptionist because the firm doesn’t have one. When calling, they get their attorney — a partner with over a decade of experience, not a third-year associate. And because the

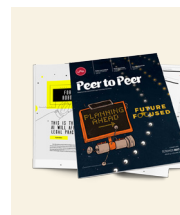
firm is not passing along needless overhead, they see a dramatic rate decrease.

Clients also benefit from having attorneys who directly control their billing rates and fee structures. Such flexibility ensures that the firm can attract and retain large clients as well as startup companies and smaller organizations. This provides an excellent opportunity for the firm’s attorneys to represent clients that would have been “priced out” of having such high-level service at conventional brick-and-mortar firms.

**A Promise Delivered**

The firm that began with four founding partners is now nearly 60 attorneys strong. It has sustained such accelerated growth, in part, because it employs scalable, flexible technology platforms. Attorneys interface with clients directly, without gatekeepers, and can set the most appropriate fee structures for their clients.

Whether the attorney is in Atlanta, New York or any of the firm’s seven offices nationwide, Culhane Meadows’ unique business model provides opportunities for its attorneys to deliver better client service and a balanced work-life environment. In creating a model where attorneys truly enjoy collaborating with one another — turbo-charged by innovative technology delivering efficient, cost-effective and streamlined operations — Culhane Meadows has succeeded in turning the conventional structure of law practice on its head to deliver a win-win situation for the firm’s clients and partners. **P2P**



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