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## **In-person workplace collaboration and support offer benefits - by Scott Naigles**

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COVID-19 profoundly changed how and where corporate employees work. With the pandemic in the rear-view mirror, a debate is underway about the merits and efficiency of work-from-home versus in-office attendance. But there is a third way that is getting less attention: the benefits of on-site corporate support.

This model is mutually beneficial and provides advantages for employers and employees alike. Many companies experience a divide between their corporate employees, who work from home or a corporate office, and on-site operations employees. But with more on-site collaboration, companies can improve efficiencies and culture.

On-site corporate support is often overlooked in the workforce discussion. There are three reasons why this approach is beneficial to a company: Improved collaboration, increased company performance and expansion of professional development opportunities.

At Suffolk, our project teams must work on job sites to manage our construction projects – buildings cannot be constructed from a Zoom screen or an office. We have thousands of operations personnel and subcontractor workers in the field. On the corporate side, there are hundreds of office employees. While responsibilities differ, both types of employees are on the same team.

As an in-house lawyer, my office is located at Suffolk's corporate headquarters in Boston. However, I spend most mornings on construction sites working with project teams. I started this practice years ago to close the divide between operations and corporate employees. As a lawyer, I did not have a natural skill-set in construction, and my lack of understanding created barriers that translated to inefficiencies. I learned about construction operations by spending countless hours walking job sites and asking questions. I learned about field operations, project management and the life cycle of complicated projects. As a result, I can more effectively provide legal advice and risk management support.

This approach has strengthened relationships between our corporate legal team and operations employees. Instead of a faceless lawyer in a corporate office, disconnected from the company's operations, I've carved out an active and valued role at project sites.

These efforts have paid off over the years. For example, I formed a strong relationship with a particular superintendent. During a recent project, he proactively contacted me at the start of the project for legal guidance and on-site support. Instead of waiting for issues to become disruptive, we worked together to avoid issues and kept the project moving.

Second, on-site corporate support creates greater efficiencies for the company. As a lawyer for a construction company that builds large, complicated projects, timing and communication are critical. Our project teams work at a feverish pace and demand prompt and pragmatic advice. With real-time visibility into the project, I can support their needs quickly instead of wasting time getting up to speed.

For example, a high-rise in downtown Boston recently experienced a delay due to unforeseeable subgrade conditions. Weeks prior, I had walked the project and became familiar with the conditions. When engaged by the operations team, I quickly advised on next steps and helped ensure the company's and our client's schedule was maintained and financial risk was minimized.

This proactive approach is atypical for most lawyers. Normally, lawyers are tasked with negotiating a contract and then resuming a reactive role, interacting with the project team only on an as-needed basis. This reactionary approach often results in delays and higher cost for all parties.

It takes significant effort to integrate the corporate and operations teams for any business – especially in a virtual world where corporate employees are often siloed. But with greater collaboration, teams can develop synergy and create a stronger working environment.

Finally, practicing hands-on work creates learning opportunities. By becoming a regular and active presence at job sites, I have become proficient in a field in which I previously had no experience. Further, I have trained operations employees to guide them on best risk mitigation practices to increase our collective knowledge base and teamwork.

With over two decades of experience as a construction lawyer, I have found passion in applying my legal expertise to improving operational efficiency, bridging the divide between corporate and operations employees. For corporate employees still searching for a more inspiring career, it may be right under your nose. A hands-on, proactive approach can be a powerful springboard to build relationships and learn a new field or position.

The future of work remains a contested debate between employees and employers. Numerous polls have captured workers' desire to maintain flexibility. More and more companies are instituting stricter in-person attendance policies. Introducing the value of on-site corporate work and practicing this model could create much-needed momentum for our workforce. So, the next time someone starts arguing forcefully for or against in-office or remote work, remember there is a third way that could yield a positive result for everyone.

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