

300-Lawyer Barclay Damon Announces Reopening Plan As Pandemic Persists

BY CHRISTINE SIMMONS

NORTHEAST regional firm Barclay Damon says it is planning to reopen all 12 of its offices, allowing attorneys and staff to return while also keeping remote work as an option—possibly a permanent one—for those who prefer it.

The 300-attorney firm is one of the first law firms to announce its plans for reopening, offering an early sign of how firms will adjust moving forward. And much will be at stake: The coronavirus pandemic has caused about “10 years of evolution in 10 weeks,” managing partner John Langan said Tuesday, citing long-term changes in the workplace and how the firm will take up office space and approach adding new talent.

With its roots in Buffalo and Syracuse, most of Barclay Damon’s offices are in New York. Right now, several regions of the state outside of New York City have begun reopening under Gov. Andrew



John Langan and Connie Cahill, leaders of Barclay Damon (courtesy photos)

Cuomo’s phase one plan, with only certain sectors allowed to resume most operations.

Law firms, along with other professional service firms, are allowed to open under phase two of the state plan. That phase is expected to begin soon in parts of the state, if safety conditions continue to improve.

Connie Cahill, deputy managing partner who will become the firm’s top leader next year, said the firm’s Rochester and Syracuse offices could open next week, following by Buffalo and Albany within days,

assuming Cuomo green-lights phase two in these regions.

As for other offices, Cahill said the firm’s New Haven office in Connecticut never completely closed, operating with a skeleton crew, while the firm’s Boston office could reopen in June under 10% capacity, the amount allowed by state authorities there.

Barclay Damon will limit office occupancy to about 30% in each office and may increase that slowly, Cahill added.

Offices “will be fully reopened for client meetings, for appropriate gatherings, and for those

attorneys and staff electing to work from the office,” the firm said. At the same time, “there’s no pressure” for attorneys and staff to return who don’t want to, Langan said.

Barclay Damon leaders said working from home for part or all of the week will remain an option for all attorneys and staff in 2020, and it will be reviewed as a possible permanent option at year-end.

“We think it’s going to work,” Langan said about attorneys and staff having the option of working from home permanently. “That’s our goal, that’s our hope.”

The firm began rethinking whether returning to the office should be mandatory when about two-thirds of respondents in an internal firm survey said they were uncomfortable with the idea. The firm’s lawyers, including associates, were already working remotely on some days before the pandemic, Langan said.

He added that the firm’s remote work has so far been effective and successful. “Clients are being served. We’ve not missed a beat. Projects are going on, we’ve closed deals,” Langan said.

“There’s still that group of lawyers and staff who are dying to get back,” Langan said. “We want to accommodate people who want to be in the office,”

while the firm wants to have group gatherings later on, he said.

Just like many other firms across the industry, Barclay Damon has seen demand decline and has opted to institute pay cuts. There’s been a “softening” of demand and collections, as clients continue conserving cash, Langan said, though he added the firm is doing better than originally expected.

“I would anticipate, for the year, if we’re not down 20% in revenue collections, I’d be surprised and pleased,” he said. “We’re worried it might be more.”

The firm already cut staff, attorney and partner pay several weeks ago, ranging from at least a 25% cut in pay for equity partners to 15% pay cuts for staff and associates, to improve cash flow.

Langan said the optional return to work was not a cost-cutting move.

“Why not listen to the crisis, why not adapt to the disruptive force in a way that turns a terrible situation into a positive,” Langan said about the long-term changes at play.

Eventually, “when the pendulum settles back in the middle,” Langan said, “you’ll have less people in the office on a daily basis. You’ll still have people in their office on a daily basis but it will be their choice.”

Meanwhile, Barclay Damon has already seen changes in its search for talent, considering people in places that wouldn’t have been evaluated before, because of the flexibility to work remotely, Langan added.

Overall, he said he believes midsized and flexible firms such as Barclay Damon may benefit from the changes brought on by the crisis, finding more opportunities with clients that are under pressure to control legal spend.

Barclay Damon is one of several firms planning an office reopening, Langan said, citing a group of leaders from about 17 firms who are also making reopening preparations across the country. “Everyone of them has a plan and is doing that in phases,” he said.

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