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The Ethics of Practicing Law Remotely: How to Ethically Navigate the Remote Practice of Law Post-Covid

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page(s)
Table of Contents.....	i
The Ethics of Practicing Law Remotely: How to Ethically Navigate the Remote Practice of Law Post-Covid.....	1
I. Introduction	1
a. The Covid-19 Pandemic Led to a Sea Change in the Way We Work	1
b. Ethical Implications of Remote Practice	1
II. ABA Formal Opinion 498, March 2021	2
a. The Same Ethical Rules Apply to Both Traditional and Virtual Law Practice.....	2
III. Competence and Diligence	2
a. ABA Formal Opinion 482.....	2
b. ABA Model Rule 1.1	3
i. Comment 8 to Rule 1.1 – Keeping up with Technology.....	3
c. ABA Model Rule 1.3 – Diligence.....	3
d. Texas Disciplinary Rule of Professional Conduct 1.01 – Competence and Diligence.....	4
e. Managing Risk Factors Involved in Remote Practice	5
f. Maintaining Competence also Means Maintaining your Mental, Emotional and Physical Health.....	6
g. Scams Targeting Attorneys	6
IV. Communications	6
a. Model Rule 1.4.....	6
b. Texas Disciplinary Rule of Professional Conduct 1.03	7
c. Duty to Communicate Remains the Same – or is Probably Increased	7
d. Failure to Communicate is one of the most common complaints in State Bar Grievance Proceedings	8
e. Beware of Unfortunate Emails	8
V. Confidentiality of Client Information	8
a. Model Rule 1.6.....	8
b. ABA Formal Opinion 477R	9
c. Texas Disciplinary Rule of Professional Conduct 1.05	10
d. Texas Ethics Opinion 648	11
e. Texas Ethics Opinion No. 680	12
f. Tips and Tools for Maintaining Confidentiality.....	12
VI. Supervision.....	13
a. Model Rule 5.1 and Comments	13
b. Model Rule 5.3 and Comments	13
c. Texas Disciplinary Rule of Professional Conduct 5.01	14
d. Texas Disciplinary Rule of Professional Conduct 5.03	14
e. Virtual Practice Requires the Same, if not More, Diligence in Supervision	14
f. Policies, Procedures and Training of Employees in Reasonably Secure Methods of Electronic Communications	15
i. ABA Formal Opinions 477R and 498.....	15
ii. BYOD policy.....	16
iii. Virtual Private Network (VPN)	16
iv. Clean Desk or Clean Screen Policies	16

VII.	Technology Safeguards	17
a.	ABA Formal Opinion 498.....	17
i.	Hard/Software System Security.....	17
ii.	Ensuring Remote Access to Client Files and Data.....	17
iii.	Video Conferencing and Virtual Meeting Platforms.....	18
iv.	Virtual document and data exchange platforms	19
v.	Smart speakers, virtual assistants, other listening-enabled devices	19
b.	Best Practices for Cybersecurity	19
i.	Require strong passwords	19
ii.	Two-factor/ multi factor authentication	19
iii.	No Unsecured or Public Wi-Fi	20
iv.	Virtual Private Network (VPN)	20
v.	Firewalls and Secure Router Settings	20
vi.	Maintain Current Anti-Virus and Anti-Malware Software	20
vii.	Keep Software Current – Install Updates Immediately	20
viii.	Supply Encrypted and Secure Laptops.....	21
ix.	Do not use USB devices that are Not from a Trusted Source.....	21
x.	Storage and Backup of Remotely Created Data	21
xi.	Save Data on Firm Network – Not Personal Devices	21
xii.	Use Reputable Vendors for Cloud Services	21
xiii.	Encrypt Email or Use other Security to Protect Client Information	21
xiv.	Encrypt Electronic Records that contain Sensitive/Confidential Information.....	22
xv.	Do not Open Suspicious Attachments or Click on Unusual Links	22
xvi.	Use Websites with Enhanced Security.....	22
xvii.	Do not have Work-Related Conversations in the Presence of Smart Devices	22
VIII.	Safeguarding Client Property	22
a.	Trust Accounting Rules	23
b.	Texas Disciplinary Rule of Professional Conduct 1.14	23
c.	Unearned fees, Trust accounts and Operating Accounts	24
d.	State Bar of Texas – A Lawyer’s Guide to Client Trust Accounts	24
IX.	Interstate Virtual Practice and the Unauthorized Practice of Law	24
a.	ABA Formal Opinion 495.....	25
b.	Texas Rules on Unauthorized Practice of Law	26
i.	Texas Disciplinary Rule of Professional Conduct 5.05	26
ii.	Definition of the Practice of Law in Texas – Texas Gov’t Code § 81.101.....	27
iii.	Ethics Opinion 686	28
iv.	Ethics Opinion 597	28
v.	Ethics Opinion 516	29
X.	Conclusion.....	30

The Ethics of Practicing Law Remotely:

How to Ethically Navigate the Remote Practice of Law Post-Covid

By Carrie Johnson Phaneuf and Michelle D. Daniel¹

I. Introduction

a. The Covid-19 Pandemic Led to a Sea Change in the Way We Work

The unforeseen events of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 forced many businesses to close their doors temporarily and move day-to-day operations off-site, requiring employees to work remotely. Thankfully, enhanced technology already in existence, such as Zoom™ and Microsoft Teams™, developed even more rapidly in response to the dire needs of the pandemic, allowing remote videoconferences. Cloud-based document storage services, readily available wi-fi, and other technological developments allowed attorneys and even entire law firms to practice law from virtually anywhere.

Surprisingly, the shift to remote work appears to be permanent. As one commentator recently noted, only a third of workers are back in the office full time, and executives expect that number may fall as low as 20% in the future.² Law firms are no exception. A 2021 survey of legal professionals found that 53% of law firms intended to allow attorneys and staff to work remotely full-time once offices reopened after the pandemic, and 70% planned to allow part-time remote work for lawyers and law firm staff,³ with the result that more and more law firms now allow attorneys and staff to work remotely all or part of the time. It is hard to imagine a more dramatic change for a profession that, historically, “has been defined by in-person interactions: between lawyers and their clients, between opposing counsel, and through face-to-face discussions or contested hearings in court with all parties present to resolve clients’ matters.”⁴

b. Ethical Implications of Remote Practice

Not surprisingly, this dramatic change—working almost entirely from home, without colleagues and support staff close by—also created a host of new logistical and ethical issues for attorneys, affecting duties of competence, diligence, communication, confidentiality, supervision, as well as the unauthorized practice of law, to name just a few. This paper is intended to give guidance on what the ethical rules for attorneys require with respect to the remote practice of law. **(Disclaimer: this strictly an ethics paper, and not a tech-based paper. To ensure that your firm meets the technical requirements necessary to fulfill its ethical duties, we**

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² *The Office is Dying. It's time to Rethink How We Work*, THE EZRA KLEIN SHOW (Aug. 16, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/column/ezra-klein-podcast>.

³ Nicole Black, *A Remote Work Ethics Roundup*, ABOVE THE LAW (Dec. 9, 2021), <https://abovethelaw.com/2021/12/a-remote-ethics-roundup/>.

⁴ Wisconsin Formal Ethics Op. EF-21-02: Working Remotely, at 1.

strongly encourage you to retain expert consultants to review your computer systems, internet connections, and document management systems and upgrade them as needed). Having said that, we will offer the following overview of the ethical implications of the remote practice of law.

II. ABA Formal Opinion 498, March 2021

About one year into the pandemic, the American Bar Association issued Formal Opinion 498, “Virtual Practice,”⁵ to specifically address many of the ethical issues raised by the remote practice of law.

a. The Same Ethical Rules Apply to Both Traditional and Virtual Law Practice

ABA Formal Opinion 498 affirms that the same ethical rules attorneys are required to follow every day, concerning competence, diligence, communication, confidentiality, and supervision, apply equally, if not more so, to virtual practice.⁶ In other words, if you are prohibited from doing something in person, such as communicating with certain witnesses during trial, or from sharing confidential information, you are still prohibited from doing so if you are working virtually. To meet your ethical obligations in this new age of virtual work, you must make sure that your firm’s technology, policies regarding those you supervise, and each attorney’s out-of-office virtual work environment is consistent with your ethical obligations.

III. Competence and Diligence

A lawyer remains bound by his duties of competence and diligence in all types of circumstances, even in the face of disasters such as hurricanes, fires, flooding, and pandemics. In 2018, the American Bar Association Committee on Ethics and Professional Responsibility issued ABA Formal Opinion 482, “Ethical Obligations Related to Disasters.”⁷ Although we could not know in 2018 that there would be a pandemic in 2020, Opinion 482 provided much guidance to attorneys in the early days of the pandemic as it related to virtual practice.

a. ABA Formal Opinion 482

In the event of a disaster, where an attorney may be unexpectedly thrust into practicing virtually, attorneys must have a business continuation plan to keep clients apprised of their matters and to keep matters moving forward competently and diligently.⁸ This includes “implement[ing] reasonable measures to safeguard property and funds of clients or third parties,

⁵ ABA Comm. On Ethics & Prof’l Responsibility, Formal Op. 498 (2021).

⁶ *Id.* at 2-3.

⁷ ABA Comm. On Ethics & Prof’l Responsibility, Formal Op. 482 (2018).

⁸ See Hannah Dyal, *Are You Ready Now? Building a Disaster Plan for your Law Practice*, TEXAS BAR JOURNAL, June 2021, at 518.

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