



The Real Cost of Physical Mail for Remote Law Firms

Where manual mail handling adds cost, administrative work, and complexity to a remote practice

Law firms can now operate with far less dependence on a traditional office. Client meetings can happen virtually, case files can be managed digitally, and attorneys can collaborate with colleagues and clients from almost anywhere.

Physical mail is harder to leave behind.

Even a remote law firm still needs a reliable way to receive mail from clients, courts, government agencies, financial institutions, and other parties. This can include legal documents, checks, signed originals, notices, and other business correspondence. [VirtualPostMail's guidance for remote law firms](#) makes the same point: working remotely does not eliminate the need to receive and access physical mail.

The challenge is what happens after that mail arrives.

Someone still has to receive and sort it. Important documents may need to be opened, scanned, routed to the appropriate person, filed, forwarded, retained, or securely destroyed. If an attorney is working from home, traveling, or simply somewhere other than where the mail was delivered, another step is required to get that information into their hands.

Individually, these tasks may seem small. Repeated across weeks and months, they create an administrative workload that is easy to overlook.

The cost of physical mail is therefore more than postage. It can include staff time, scanning and document handling, forwarding and expedited delivery, storage, shredding, equipment, and other administrative costs associated with turning physical correspondence into information a remote team can use.

For firms that have reduced their physical office footprint, there is another consideration. Physical mail can create a location dependency in a practice that is otherwise designed to operate remotely.

This whitepaper looks at the costs and operational demands behind physical mail and provides a practical framework for law firms to calculate what their current mail process may actually be costing them.

Physical mail still requires a physical process

Receiving a piece of mail is only the beginning of the workflow.

Legal practices need processes for determining who is responsible for incoming mail, identifying documents that require action, routing correspondence to the appropriate person, recording relevant deadlines, and deciding what to do with physical originals.

This is not simply an administrative best practice. [Mail-handling guidance from the Oregon State Bar Professional Liability Fund](#) recommends establishing responsibility for opening and sorting mail, date-stamping incoming documents, scanning documents to the appropriate client matter, immediately docketing deadlines, distributing mail to the appropriate person, and determining how originals should be handled.

The guidance also identifies a more serious consequence of an uncontrolled mail process. Loose mail can be lost, misfiled, misplaced, or forgotten until after a deadline has passed.

For a remote law firm, those same controls have to work when the person receiving the mail and the person who needs to act on it may be in completely different locations.

A document might arrive at the firm's mailing address, for example, while the attorney responsible for the matter is working from home or traveling. Without a centralized process, someone has to bridge that physical gap by retrieving, scanning, notifying, forwarding, or otherwise routing the document.

[VirtualPostMail describes virtual mailboxes](#) as one way remote law firms can address this problem. Incoming mail can be received and scanned so that attorneys can access it digitally rather than depending on physical access to the location where the mail was delivered.

One piece of mail can create multiple steps

A manual workflow might include:

Receive → Sort → Open → Prepare → Scan → File → Route → Store or Forward → Shred

Not every piece of mail will require every step. A check may need to be deposited. An original document may need to be retained or forwarded. Other correspondence may only need to be scanned and routed.

The point is not that every piece of mail follows an identical process. It is that **physical mail creates work after delivery**.

And that work has a cost.

For context, the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) reported a mean hourly wage of **\$27.21 for legal secretaries and administrative assistants working in Legal Services in May 2023**.

That does not tell us how much the average law firm spends processing mail. There is no credible basis in the research reviewed for claiming that every firm spends a fixed number of hours or dollars on mail handling.

It does, however, give firms a useful starting point for calculating their own labor cost.

What Does Physical Mail Really Cost?

Start with the labor

Time spent handling physical mail × cost of staff time = direct mail-handling labor cost

Then add the other costs

- Scanning and document handling
- Mail forwarding and expedited delivery
- Storage and shredding
- Equipment and supplies
- Time spent routing and following up
- Delays caused by limited access to physical mail

Ask the broader question

What does our entire physical mail process cost us?

The costs that are easy to miss

Labor is only the starting point. The total cost of physical mail can also change depending on how frequently a firm needs to forward originals, send time-sensitive documents, store paper records, or maintain equipment for scanning and secure disposal.

Expedited and time-sensitive delivery

Legal practices sometimes need more than standard mail delivery. When an original document or other time-sensitive item needs to reach its destination quickly, expedited shipping or courier services add another cost.

For example, [USPS Priority Mail Express®](#) offers next-day to two-day delivery, with current retail pricing starting at **\$35.90 for a Flat Rate Envelope**. For local, same-day legal delivery, [OnCall](#)

[Legal](#) estimates that courier services can range from approximately **\$50 to \$400 or more**, depending on factors such as distance, urgency, location, and service requirements.

These costs will vary significantly from firm to firm. A practice that rarely forwards originals will have a very different cost profile from one that regularly handles checks, signed documents, or other physical materials.

That is why courier expenses should be calculated using the firm's actual usage rather than an industry-wide estimate.

Scanning, storage, and secure disposal

Turning physical mail into something a remote team can use may also require scanners, document storage, shredding, supplies, and the staff time required to manage those processes.

Some of these costs are obvious. Others are absorbed into existing office expenses and may never appear as a dedicated "mail" line item.

The same is true of physical storage. Keeping original documents requires space and a process for deciding what needs to be retained, where it should be stored, and when it can be securely destroyed.

The cost may be relatively small for an individual item. The relevant question is what those activities cost collectively over the course of a year.

The cost of getting information to the right person

There is also a cost that is harder to capture on an invoice: the work required to move information from the physical location where mail arrives to the person who needs it. For a remote team, receiving a document and accessing it are two different events. Someone may need to retrieve the mail, scan it, identify the appropriate matter or recipient, send a notification, upload the document, forward an original, or follow up to make sure a time-sensitive item has been seen.

The more manual handoffs a piece of mail requires, the more administrative work the firm has to support. A process that seems simple from the outside can involve several separate tasks before the document reaches the right person and becomes usable.

Calculate the cost for your own firm

There is no single number that accurately represents what every law firm spends managing physical mail.

A more useful approach is to calculate the cost using the firm's own workflow.

1. Calculate staff time

Start with the people who regularly touch incoming mail.

Hours spent handling mail per week × hourly labor cost × 52

For reference, the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) reported a mean hourly wage of **\$27.21 for legal secretaries and administrative assistants employed in Legal Services in May 2023.**

A firm can use its actual labor cost for a more accurate calculation.

2. Add direct mail-related expenses

Include costs such as:

- Mail forwarding
- Postage and expedited shipping
- Courier services
- Scanning equipment and supplies
- Secure shredding
- Document storage
- Other physical mail handling expenses

3. Look for costs hidden inside existing operations

Consider who retrieves the mail, who scans it, how it reaches remote employees, where originals are stored, and what happens when the person normally responsible for mail is unavailable.

Those activities may not appear in a mailroom budget, but they are still part of the process.

Your annual physical mail cost

Staff labor

+ forwarding and delivery

+ equipment and supplies

+ storage and secure disposal

+ other mail-related overhead

= Estimated annual cost of managing physical mail

The goal is not to prove that every remote law firm spends the same amount. It is to make the full workflow visible.

Once the costs are visible, firms can make a more informed comparison between continuing to manage physical mail internally and moving more of that process to a digital mail solution.

Cost is only part of the problem

An inefficient mail process does not only consume resources. In a legal practice, the way incoming mail is received, routed, and acted on can also affect whether important information reaches the right person at the right time.

That makes the next question just as important as cost:

What happens when the physical mail process breaks down?

When a manual mail process breaks down

The cost of managing physical mail is easier to calculate than the cost of something going wrong.

A document that reaches the wrong person, sits unopened, or is not routed promptly can create additional work. In a legal practice, where incoming correspondence may require review, follow-up, or a calendared response, it can also create unnecessary risk.

The [Oregon State Bar Professional Liability Fund's mail-handling guidance](#) recommends assigning responsibility for incoming mail, date-stamping documents, immediately entering deadlines into a docket or calendar system, distributing mail to the appropriate person, and establishing procedures for handling original documents.

It also warns against allowing mail to remain loose on a desk, noting that it can be lost, misfiled, misplaced, or forgotten until after a deadline has passed.

For a remote firm, maintaining those controls can become more complicated when physical mail and the people responsible for acting on it are in different locations.

The visibility gap

Consider a time-sensitive document delivered to a firm's physical address.

Has it been collected?

Has it been opened?

Who scanned it?

Was it sent to the correct attorney?

Has that attorney seen it?

Where is the original?

In a manual process, answering those questions may depend on emails, messages, individual employees, or separate tracking systems.

The issue is not simply whether the document eventually reaches its destination. It is whether the firm has a consistent way to know **when it arrived, where it is, who has access to it, and what needs to happen next.**

Physical access can also become a point of dependency

Remote work makes another weakness in a manual process more visible: someone still needs access to the place where the mail is delivered.

If the person who normally collects or processes mail is unavailable, the firm needs another process for ensuring important correspondence is still retrieved and routed.

That dependency can become particularly inconvenient for distributed teams. Attorneys may be working from home, traveling, in court, or operating from different locations, while the information they need is sitting somewhere else physically.

[VirtualPostMail's guidance for remote law firms](#) describes this as one of the reasons virtual mailbox services can support remote practices. Physical mail is received at a designated address and made available digitally, allowing attorneys to manage incoming correspondence without having to be physically present where it was delivered.

What changes when the mail workflow becomes digital?

Digitizing mail is not simply about replacing paper with a PDF.

The bigger change is what happens between **mail arriving** and **the right person being able to act on it.**

With a virtual mailbox or digital mail workflow, incoming mail can be received at a central location and made available online. Instead of relying on someone within the firm to collect, scan, and distribute each item, attorneys and authorized staff can access incoming mail remotely and decide what needs to happen next.

[VirtualPostMail](#) describes a virtual mailbox as a service that receives physical mail at a real street address, scans the exterior of incoming items, and makes them available through an online mailbox. Users can then request actions such as opening and scanning contents, forwarding physical items, or securely shredding mail they no longer need.

For a law firm, that changes several parts of the workflow.

Access is no longer tied to the delivery location

Attorneys and staff can review digitized mail without traveling to the address where it was received.

Fewer internal handling steps

The firm no longer needs its own employee to perform every step between receiving an envelope and making its contents available digitally.

Mail is managed in one place

Rather than relying on a combination of physical piles, individual inboxes, scans, and messages, incoming mail can be viewed and managed through a centralized online mailbox.

Physical items can still be handled when needed

Going digital does not mean every physical document disappears. Originals can still be forwarded when necessary, and services such as [VirtualPostMail](#) also support remote check deposit for eligible checks.

The goal is not to eliminate every physical piece of mail.

It is to reduce the amount of **manual work the law firm itself has to perform because that piece of mail exists.**

Manual versus digital: where the workflow changes

Physical mail managed internally	Virtual mailbox workflow
Someone at the firm retrieves mail	Mail is received at a designated address
Staff sort incoming envelopes	Incoming mail is displayed in an online mailbox
Staff open and scan requested documents	Open-and-scan can be requested digitally
Scans are manually sent to remote colleagues	Authorized users access mail online
Originals require separate handling	Forwarding can be requested when needed
Unwanted mail requires disposal	Secure shredding can be requested
Access depends on the firm's internal process	Mail can be managed remotely

For a remote law firm, the value of that change is straightforward: **the firm's mail process becomes less dependent on where its attorneys, administrators, or physical documents happen to be.**

What should a remote law firm look for?

Moving away from an internally managed mail process does not mean choosing a service based on price alone. Law firms should consider how well the solution fits the way their team actually works and the types of mail they receive.

A professional business address

For firms operating without a traditional office, a virtual mailbox can provide a commercial street address for receiving business mail without using an attorney's home address.

[VirtualPostMail](#) specifically recommends a virtual mailbox for remote law firms that need a professional address and a way to manage physical mail remotely.

Remote access to incoming mail

Attorneys should be able to see when mail arrives and manage it without visiting the physical location where it was delivered.

A virtual mailbox can provide an online view of incoming items and allow users to request actions such as opening and scanning contents, forwarding mail, or shredding unwanted items. [VirtualPostMail's virtual mailbox guide](#) outlines how these functions work.

Options for physical originals

Not everything a law firm receives can or should be treated as digital-only.

A useful solution should provide a way to forward physical items when originals are required, while allowing documents that do not need to be retained physically to be handled differently.

Check handling

Checks are another reason physical mail can remain part of a remote firm's operations. A solution that offers remote check deposit can reduce the need for someone at the firm to receive a check and take it to the bank manually.

[VirtualPostMail](#) includes check deposit among the services it recommends for remote law firms managing physical mail.

Privacy and access controls

Legal correspondence can contain sensitive information, so firms should understand how mail is received, stored, accessed, scanned, forwarded, and destroyed.

This includes considering who can access the firm's mailbox, how individual users are authorized, how physical documents are handled, and what security measures the provider has in place.

A workflow that can grow with the firm

A remote firm's mail requirements may change as it adds attorneys, clients, practice areas, or locations.

The right question is not only whether a solution can handle today's mail. It is whether the process can continue working without requiring the firm to rebuild an internal mail operation as the business grows.

When does switching make financial sense?

There is no universal threshold.

A solo attorney receiving a handful of items each month will have a very different cost structure from a distributed firm receiving checks, legal correspondence, original documents, and time-sensitive mail every day.

The comparison should therefore be based on the firm's own numbers.

Start with the annual physical mail cost calculated earlier:

Staff labor

+ forwarding and delivery

+ equipment and supplies

+ storage and secure disposal

+ other mail-related overhead

Then compare that with the cost of outsourcing the parts of the workflow the firm no longer wants to manage internally.

But cost is not the only consideration.

Ask:

- How often does someone physically retrieve the firm's mail?
- How much staff time goes into sorting, scanning, routing, forwarding, and disposing of it?
- Can attorneys access important mail when they are away from the office?
- What happens when the person responsible for mail is unavailable?
- How are original documents and checks handled?
- Does the firm have a consistent process for identifying and routing time-sensitive correspondence?
- Is maintaining a physical location partly driven by the need to receive mail?

The answers help reveal whether physical mail is simply a necessary business expense or whether the way it is being managed has become an unnecessary one.

The cost of physical mail is a choice

Physical mail may remain part of legal practice, but managing every step of that process internally does not have to be.

For remote and hybrid firms, the real question is what happens after the mail arrives. Who retrieves it? Who opens and scans it? How does it reach the right person? What happens to the original? And how much staff time, infrastructure, and administrative effort does the firm spend keeping that process moving?

Those costs are easy to overlook because they are spread across people, systems, delivery fees, equipment, and everyday administrative tasks.

Making them visible changes the conversation.

Instead of treating physical mail as a fixed cost of doing business, firms can decide which parts of the workflow still make sense to manage internally and which can be handled more efficiently outside the firm.

A virtual mailbox does not eliminate physical mail. It changes how much of the work created by physical mail has to happen inside the firm.

For a remote practice, that is the opportunity: keep the mail you need without maintaining the manual process around it.

What is physical mail really costing your firm?

Use the worksheet in the appendix to estimate the annual cost of your current mail workflow, then compare it with the cost of moving those tasks to a virtual mailbox.

[See how VirtualPostMail works for remote law firms](#)

Appendix: Calculate Your Annual Mail Cost

Use your firm's actual expenses from the past 12 months where possible.

Annual cost

Your firm

Staff time spent handling mail \$_____

Mail forwarding, postage, and couriers \$_____

Scanning, equipment, and supplies \$_____

Storage and secure shredding \$_____

Other mail-related costs \$_____

Estimated annual cost of physical mail \$_____

Calculating staff time

Hours spent handling mail each week × hourly labor cost × 52

Include the time spent retrieving, sorting, opening, scanning, routing, forwarding, filing, and disposing of physical mail.

For reference, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a mean hourly wage of \$27.21 for legal secretaries and administrative assistants employed in Legal Services in May 2023. Using your firm's actual labor cost will give you a more accurate figure.

Once you have your annual total, compare it with the annual cost of a virtual mailbox. The comparison should include not only the service price, but also which tasks would no longer need to be handled internally.

Current annual physical mail cost: \$_____

Annual virtual mailbox cost: \$_____

Estimated difference: \$_____

This calculation is intended as a framework, not an industry benchmark. Actual costs will vary by mail volume, staffing, delivery requirements, document types, and firm processes.

Sources

[Secretaries and Administrative Assistants](#)

Oregon State Bar Professional Liability Fund: [Mail Handling](#)

United States Postal Service: [Priority Mail Express®](#)

OnCall Legal: [How Much Is a Courier Service?](#)

VirtualPostMail: [Remote Tools for Law Firms](#) and [The Ultimate Guide to a Virtual Mailbox](#)