

Lawyering through COVID-19: Embracing Technology | A Boutique Law Perspective

The COVID-19 pandemic is creating once-in-a-lifetime challenges and change. For lawyers, creating a new work from home routine and establishing boundaries has been the critical first step in establishing a new normal. In this series, we talk to lawyers from different sectors of the industry about how they've adapted during the early weeks of this global pandemic.

Here, we talk with **Dushan Delic and Shaghil Hasan, Partners at SD Legal Limited**, a boutique law firm structured to embrace technology to improve service and reduce fees while delivering excellent results for their clients.

This interview was conducted while the country was at Alert Level 1.

How prepared was your organisation to respond to the pandemic crisis in terms of your “work from home” arrangements and capabilities?

Our network and computer system had been designed from ‘day one’ to operate as our own cloud, including remote access. We are strong believers that technology enhances our practice and improves the delivery of our services. While we used it to occasionally work from home throughout the years, the COVID-19 pandemic was the real test at a firm-wide level. When the crisis hit our shores, VPNs were immediately added to our staffs’ computers, and everyone took their individual iMacs home on the afternoon the lockdown was announced.

“ We are strong believers that technology enhances our practice and improves the delivery of our services. ”

Our phone system is also cloud-based, so the ability to be able to answer phone calls from home was quite crucial during those uncertain times, especially for our clients. **Microsoft Teams** was quite a useful tool for our staff to communicate and collaborate on documents as required.

SHAGHIL HASAN



DUSHAN DELIC



Partners
SD Legal Limited

What does the day-to-day operation of your firm look like in Alert Level 1 compared to more restrictive Alert Levels?

All staff operated on their own individual iMacs from home, which was as easy as taking it home from work and connecting to the internet. In terms of access to network, electronic files and our workflow, not much changed. However, Alert Levels 1 & 2 allows for physical meetings with both clients and others (such as mediations, settlement meetings, etc.). Virtual meetings through Zoom or Skype were useful during Alert Level 3 and above or in an emergency, but everyone still preferred to have face-to-face meetings.

What were the things that worked for your firm as it adjusted to the new normal of working from home?

Due to our systems already being setup and available to be accessed remotely, it was a relatively smooth transition to working from home. We implemented electronic files quite early in our firm, minimising the use of physical files as much as possible. That strategy has certainly paid off for us in this unprecedented situation. Having daily contact within the team over the phone or Microsoft Teams kept the team productive and connected throughout the lockdown.

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What were the main challenges during the lockdown?

The lack of access to printers and scanners from home came up as an issue at times. Printers are clearly not as prominent in the homes as they once were, so we had to resort to scanning the documents via phone apps that would convert an image into a ‘scanned’ document. While it was slow process for larger documents, it was a workaround solution. Another challenge was the witnessing of documents due to the fact that people could not meet in person, until the remote witnessing protocols were worked out by the profession a couple of weeks into the lockdown.

Another hurdle was staff management and motivation. This was a challenge during lockdown, but steady, open communications and check-ins not related to work matters kept us working as a tight unit. It’s easy to feel like you’re on your own island when you’re working from home, or even work too much. Make it a priority to let your staff know you have their best interests in mind as well as the clients’.

How has COVID-19 affected your practice area?

“ Having access to electronic files as well as Lexis Advance® and research database is critical to our practice, and that worked smoothly. ”

Mental health is a key concern at the moment with all the changes and uncertainty – are you doing anything in particular to support your own mental health or your employees’ mental health?

“ Our staff was encouraged to adopt a structured working style while being in isolation at home. That meant taking regular breaks, exercising, and understanding that the usual ‘9 to 5’ schedule was no longer feasible in the new landscape. ”

We attended health and wellbeing webinars, which gave tips and ways to manage stress and anxiety both in personal and work lives.

Trust in our team members with lowered expectation in the circumstances not only managed everyone’s stress levels better, but the feedback that we received was that people were more productive even though it took them less time to complete some tasks than it did at the office.

As New Zealand moved through each Alert Level, was your firm able to put systems in place?

We created health and safety procedures for each Alert Level, including hygiene practices, social distancing, contact tracing of everyone who came on site and regular cleaning of all surfaces.

Has the need to work from home during lockdown changed the way you operate when the crisis is at Alert Level 1?

Having been thrust into this ‘experiment’ with the rest of New Zealand, we are now much more comfortable with the idea of working from home. We have seen it work for us with minimal disruption and are therefore ready for when or if another lockdown is required. In the meantime, working from home is an option to our team members at any Alert Level.

5 Best Tips for Working from Home

- 1 **EMBRACE TECHNOLOGY!**
- 2 Transition to electronic files early and before it is needed, minimising the need for reliance on physical files
- 3 Take regular breaks and time away from the computer
- 4 Get fresh air throughout the day, walks are great
- 5 Acknowledge that working from home is not the same as the office, distractions can happen but they are of different nature at home (kids, family members) so managing time is important

What advice would you give fellow lawyers about getting back to normal who might be struggling with unforeseen changes in their careers/ specialised area of practice?

“ Look at ways technology can enhance the delivery of services and improve your clients’ experience. ”

Don't be afraid to ask for help. In the days leading up to Alert Level 4, we had several meetings and discussions with practitioners from other similar sized firms to discuss ideas and challenges we all were facing. It is incredible the level of support that our colleagues are prepared to provide despite everything going on around us.

Change is inevitable. By adapting to change you empower your practice to always be ready for whatever crosses its path.