



Lawyering in the time of COVID-19: a NewLaw 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 to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Here, we talk with **Tomoyuki Hachigo, Co-founder and Principal Lawyer at Sprintlaw**



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

We at Sprintlaw were well prepared to work from home as we had all of our infrastructure already set up for a fully remote workforce.

This was a deliberate choice we made when we started back in 2017 – partly out of necessity to cut costs as a startup working out of my apartment but also as we wanted to attract people who wanted to work more flexibly.

We have always believed that our team is most productive in an environment that allows them to work towards a goal rather than one where they feel like they're constantly watched.

That being said, having everyone work from their homes is something new and it has been a good opportunity to put our infrastructure to the test.

What does the day-to-day operation of your firm look like today compared to a couple of months ago?

As we were set up remotely from the start, the day-to-day operations of our firm have not changed a whole lot!

However, this has been a good chance for us to reflect on what's working best in our remote work set up, and how other firms can potentially learn from this.

What are the things that are working right now as your firm adjusts to this new normal of working from home?

Now that we have moved to a fully remote team, it has been a good opportunity to identify the main things that have helped us – and could help other firms – adjust to this new normal. Some key things that have helped us make a smooth transition to a fully remote workforce are:

1 Supporting our law firm with cloud-based tech infrastructure

When we set up in 2017, we were a new firm without any legacy systems to deal with and we were lucky to launch at a time where all the best software were cloud-based SaaS tools. This means that anyone with a laptop or a smartphone can pretty much work from anywhere, and it's set us up well for managing employees during COVID-19.

2 Automating routine tasks

Automating routine tasks like creating matters, having the engagement letter signed, generating invoices, dealing with trust accounts, sending updates to clients and so on. There are several workflow automation tools such as Zapier which you can use to automate these time-consuming administrative tasks. It might require some investment to customise workflows specifically for your firm, however it ends up being extremely cost-effective in the long run. Automation has allowed us to operate without administrative or secretarial staff!

3 Using good project management tools

When you go remote, project management becomes even more important as you can't just pop into someone's office and ask where something's up to. Project management software can help you keep track of this. For us, using good project management tools has also enabled us to provide real-time certainty about when a client's legal services will be completed, making for happier clients.

What have been the main challenges over the last few weeks?

One of the main challenges associated with working from home is that there's an increased reliance on accountability and self-motivation. We've found that establishing a culture of 'checking in' has been really effective in reminding everyone that they're part of a team to whom they are ultimately accountable.

In establishing this culture, we took inspiration from the operations of tech companies, as they have daily stand-up meetings and manage fully distributed teams across multiple time zones. The idea is simple, once a day you have a quick meeting updating the team on three things:

1. What they've accomplished
2. What they'll do next
3. Obstacles

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?

In times when the team can't get together face-to-face, it's important to maintain the social aspects of work. We've done this by taking online fitness classes together, holding virtual Friday night drinks, and checking-in individually with each team member to ensure they're doing okay.

We hold regular meetings each week where we update the team on our financial position, how our strategy is evolving to meet the unique challenges of COVID-19, and what public health recommendations they should be following.

“ We're aware that this is both a personally and financially stressful time for a lot of employees, so maintaining transparency across the firm has been crucial in supporting employees' mental health. ”

What are your best tips for working from home?

From a managerial perspective, it's really important to set and clarify purpose-driven goals for the team, especially when everyone is working from home.

If you're the kind of boss who manages by walking around, having your team work from home can be pretty daunting. We've found this can be overcome by setting clear goals for the team and investing in a culture that empowers staff to work autonomously. It's important to have a clear mission and well defined company values in order to give staff access to your own decision-making.

At Sprintlaw, we use a framework called OKRs (short for Objective & Key Results) to set goals for the team. The idea is to have a number of overarching objectives and clarify the goals and key results for each objective. Key results are specific outcomes that measure whether your team has achieved that goal.

You can use whatever framework suits your organisation, but the crucial thing is that you give the team a common purpose they can work towards. If the success of a business is built on proper goals and measures, how hard each person is working becomes irrelevant, as only the output matters. In other words, as a manager, you no longer have to rely on facetime to ensure that everyone is being productive.

This is particularly important for us as a law firm that only bills on a fixed-fee basis. Even for firms that are time-based, a pure input-based KPI such as billable hours does not provide individual team members with ownership over other factors that matter to the business, such as client satisfaction and profitability.

How do you think this sudden and unexpected need to work from home will change the way you operate once this crisis is over?

For us, not a lot will change as we were previously set up to support remote work. However, this period has helped us identify which elements of our remote work structure are most useful for other law firms that may be considering increasing their support for employees who wish to work remotely once the crisis is over.

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We believe this period will be a good chance for other law firms to realise that going remote is not only possible – it can also pay real dividends by creating a more flexible, productive and ultimately happier workforce.

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In the next edition of **Lawyering in the time of COVID-19**, we'll speak to corporate in-house lawyer Aaron Taranto about how he is continuing to work through the COVID-19 crisis – what's working, what's not and what he is learning along the way.

In the meantime, consider creating a [contingency plan](#) to make your firm crisis-proof and find the latest news, business updates and research materials to keep you on top of the current pandemic crisis at the [LexisNexis® exclusive COVID-19 information centre](#).