



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

Here, we talk with **Amalia Stone, Special Counsel at Herbert Smith Freehills**



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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?

My firm, Herbert Smith Freehills, was really well prepared.

At a team level, we checked in with each other on how well our homes were set up with equipment – and importantly connectivity – that we'd need if we went into lockdown. So people who didn't have laptops and other mobility equipment were able to source that pre-emptively.

We already had a policy around working flexibly which meant that issues had already been worked through in relation to VPN, access to files, telephony, Skype, the robustness of our file management system, and working as a team in different places.

Our team leader had a checklist that had been prepared at a firm level that gave us helpful things to think about. This meant we could proactively take things home on a 'just in case' basis, in case the decision came overnight that we should all work from home.

Finally, we had a test run of the system where half of our Australian offices worked from home on one day, and the other half on the next day.

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

Apart from the fact that we're all in different places, work life continues in much the same way as it ever did.

Our team had a routine of walking to the kitchen together to make tea (green tea, hot) and catching up. We still do that, it's just our catch ups are now all virtual over a Skype link up so that we can still hear each other's voices. Although my team has vetoed web cam usage at that time of the morning.

We've been through one billing cycle and our legal team assistants and finance team made it feel smoother than ever. Talking to clients, emails with clients, drafting for clients – it's all very much the same.

There are fewer group meetings taking place, but we've instead had more email communication, and webinars to share information.

Meetings with clients are virtual at the moment and feel much more like teleconferences, but I'm finding that in most meetings people are happier than ever before to take the time to ask about other people's health, about their families and their isolation experience. In some ways, I feel like there's a more personal connection being made in those calls than ever before.

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

Right now, the firm is going above and beyond to communicate with its staff about its COVID actions and ensure we don't lose the connections that we've built by working in close physical proximity. For instance, our Sydney managing partner Juliana Warner sends us a daily email telling us what new things we need to know – always with kindness and compassion. Likewise, we receive emails and briefing from our executive partner Andrew Pike and video blogs from Justin D'Agostino, our CEO elect, that are often not just informative, but personal.

Several teams are making an extra effort to have social catchups over videoconferencing platforms.

“ I'm feeling surprisingly more connected to Herbert Smith Freehills than ever, and I've worked here for more than 20 years. ”

Because everyone is working remotely across the Herbert Smith Freehills globe there's been more information sharing about what we're all doing than perhaps might have been the case if we were all in our physical offices – especially in relation to COVID-19 related legal issues. And we were pretty good at information sharing previously.

There's a lot of talk, often, within firms of managing resources – meaning people. This last month has been more about making sure we, as people, are able to keep functioning as people – not just as resources.

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

There hasn't been much change – or challenge – that I've found in how I work with my clients and colleagues. It's been very much business as usual – just at more of a physical distance.

However, adjusting to working at home fulltime has revealed just how bad my water drinking and chair sitting habits actually are. Without a prompt to have a drink of water or change position I can find myself forgetting to move and dehydrated. In the office, there's always something happening to remind you to take action physically. In my home office, that isn't the case.

My last concern was whether, with the ability to be switched on 24/7, I would end up being that switched on. Fortunately, although work has been busy, that hasn't happened yet. Even if it did, I know my bed is ten paces away (approximately, I haven't actually measured).

### **What unexpected issues have cropped up? How are you managing these?**

We have a completion for which we're preparing, for which someone will need to be in a room with documents with at least one other person. I found myself quite anxious at the thought of that – and it wasn't even me who was going to be physically present. However, our Sydney office does have a contingency plan which enables the lights and air conditioning to come on, and includes plenty of hand sanitiser, to work through that eventuality.

I was also concerned whether our home system would be overloaded, between my teenagers participating in online lessons, and afterschool virtual socialising at the same time as I try to upload and download documents and talk on Skype while my husband does the same. Fortunately, we were transitioned to the NBN earlier this year and it's been very much so far, so good.

**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?**

Every day, I'm trying to reach out to a colleague who isn't in my team but is someone who I would normally run into in the kitchen, or the café, or in the lifts, and who I miss talking to. It's just for a quick couple of minutes to ask how they are, a bit of banter. It feels like life hasn't really changed all that much if I can still talk to colleagues in the same way I would if we were in the same office. I always find that even if I'm feeling a little down (which I will admit to, especially about 6pm as the darkness falls) feeling that connection gives me a positive boost.

I'm also making more of an effort to do some high intensity exercise with my Xbox Kinect and go for a slightly longer walk with my greyhound. I'm making use of those hours saved not commuting to get the natural endorphins flowing, which usually works quite effectively.

This weekend may see a baking spree now that I have some flour. Importantly, while I'm staying up to date as the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, I'm trying to limit how often and on how many sources I check to keep updated.

“ I wouldn't be surprised if more people, both law firms and clients, worked from home more often now that we've all learnt to trust each other to do that. I'm finding myself surprisingly optimistic about that part of the future. ”

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

I hope that we're able to maintain these more connected ways of working when we're physically able to work together again – across practice groups, offices, and lawyer/client businesses.

## What are your best tips for working from home?

Here's my five tips, in no particular order, for working at home during this COVID-19 pandemic:

- 1 Working at home can be very isolating, and for me, isolation leads to anxiousness and feeling down. I can alleviate that feeling by connecting with people, but emails aren't enough for me. If you can Skype or instant message, that's pretty close to having a chat, as a human. If it's possible to have a phone call, have a phone call. If it's possible to have a video conference, that's even better (and please, everyone looks terrible in webcam view).
- 2 Set a reminder to get up out of your chair frequently, and drink water.
- 3 Set some clear boundaries between the area in which you work in, and the areas of your home that aren't for work. This can help with the 'always on' blues. Also, make sure you remember to stop! Working from home, especially in these times, is a marathon, not a sprint. It's important to think about the long term. Part of that is your health, and – as it's been pointed out to me – bad sleep habits and blue light don't help.
- 4 Be more explicit with your colleagues and clients about what you're doing and when. You don't want there to be crossed wires about who is doing what when, and it's easy to get those things mixed up in email. Some members of our team work best in the morning and some better in the evening. It's good to explicitly say to people that you don't have an expectation that because you are working at 5am or 9pm, you don't expect them to be doing the same. Be respectful of other people's work and other commitments.
- 5 If you're giving feedback or instructions to your team members or negotiating with other lawyers over the phone or by email, take more care with your tone than you would otherwise. Make sure that you provide both positive and constructive feedback. It's too easy when we're all working at a distance to appear more curt than you intend, or to only focus on the point you want fixed, or changed. However, it's more important than ever, if you want to get what you want, to see the other person as a whole person, and treat them with respect.

In the next edition of **Lawyering in the time of COVID-19**, we'll speak to small law firms about how they're continuing to work through the COVID-19 crisis – what's working, what's not and what they're 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](#).