



Lawyering in the time of COVID-19: a Small 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 four small firm lawyers:



Leigh Evans
Principal at [Annex Legal](#)



Michael Ku
Partner, [MGL Lawyers](#)



Meldon D'Cruz
Principal, [Cruz Legal](#)



Sami Sara
Partner at [Lawcrest](#)

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

We had already started to dabble in cloud-based systems and started to put procedures in place to be able to work remotely, as the partners occasionally needed to work from home due to family commitments. It made sense for us to prepare ourselves as well and we are so glad that we did! When the crisis hit, we just had to make a decision for everyone to start working from home, reroute all our incoming office phone calls to mobiles via our cloud PBX system and get staff set up for email access from home.

– Michael Ku

We can work from anywhere in the world if we have our laptops, mobile phones and a decent internet connection. Our practice management system is downloaded to our laptops with an app on our mobile phone, we use a team chat function with WhatsApp and most of our client data is in the cloud. Our staff are used to working from home a few days a fortnight to accommodate personal matters, such as going to the doctor or dentist during lunch.

– Meldon D'Cruz

We were probably more prepared than most to transition to work from home, largely due to the fact that our firm was only established a few months ago and we are not tied to legacy systems or technology. While we could never have predicted what was about to happen, we wanted to have the ability to work from anywhere with an internet connection. We invested in cloud software and a line of laptops which have a tablet mode so that we can review and markup documents on screen. We did this because we wanted to run a paperless office (as much as possible). These decisions, meant that when it came time to work from home the process was as simple as packing our laptops and locking the office.

– Sami Sara

“ One of our strengths as a small and newly established firm is an ability to make decisions quickly and informally and we don't want to lose that now that we are working from home. ”

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

No change – all of my operating systems are cloud-based so it has been business as usual. The only difference is that now everyone else is operating the same way!

– Leigh Evans

It is such a different environment we are working in now. We had to re-tweak our processes and communicate via WhatsApp to give instructions to staff. It is hard to move away from the old habit of relying on paper documents but I think we are getting there.

– Michael Ku

Three months ago I sat three metres away from my business partner for 10-12 hours a day. Day to day decision making was as simple as having a quick conversation, often without even leaving my desk. One of our strengths as a small and newly established firm is an ability to make decisions quickly and informally and we don't want to lose that now that we are working from home. We now have the Microsoft Teams app open all day with several chats going on throughout the day between each other and our staff. We also text message each other a dozen times a day, bouncing ideas off each other and getting status updates on where files are up to.

– Sami Sara

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

Setting time aside for 1:1 meetings, reassuring staff and providing positive feedback has been well received. Having an off-site phone answering service to take client calls and messages has also been critical in managing unscheduled interruptions.

– Meldon D'Cruz

Cloud based solutions, both legal and non-legal are definitely the way to go in the current climate.

– Michael Ku

Replacing face to face meetings with video conferencing has been smoother than expected, and mostly seamless. Even when organising sessions with an older demographic, the transition to using video conferencing has not been as difficult as I would have expected. I've now used video conferences for networking, catching up with people and introductions to new leads. This is something I didn't think would work a few months ago.

– Sami Sara

Being able to rely on my established systems and processes to keep calm and carry on.

– Leigh Evans

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

Juggling working from home and home schooling has been a real challenge. I must say that I now have a greater appreciation of what teachers do. I was ready to throw in the towel after 1 day of home schooling! My workspace is set up in the dining room and, as you can imagine, things can get pretty interesting very quickly with two kids sharing the same dining table for work and home schooling. My kids have now learnt that when the phone rings everyone needs to be dead silent! Jokes aside, trying to balance the need to meet clients and also maintain adequate social distancing has also been a challenge. For now, we have delayed all non-essential client meetings until further notice.

– Michael Ku

“ Juggling working from home and home schooling has been a real challenge. I must say that I now have a greater appreciation of what teachers do. ”

Trying to manage the volume of calls from home, our phones are permanently charging due to the high level of usage. Also, ensuring internet continuity when the whole street seems to be using bandwidth has impacted our ability to have regular video calls, so we now try to schedule them in off-peak times to ensure the calls don't stall.

– Meldon D'Cruz

The isolation and lack of social contact. I'm the guy that might strike up a conversation in the lift or common area, and I'm usually the first to get a beer on a Friday afternoon. We've certainly tried to replicate that social connection as much as possible. There are plenty of jokes in the group chat and we had a virtual catchup for drinks last Friday. However, that feeling of being in your study at home alone for 10+ hours a day weighs on you. Other than that, I also have young children and they don't understand the difference between business hours and after hours. They just know that Dad's home, and that means attention.

– Sami Sara

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

It has been a pretty smooth transition so far I must say. The only issue we are facing now is the delivery of physical mail to our street or mailbox. Someone still has to manually retrieve the mail every week or so. We take turns doing this each week but always ensuring that we practice social distancing and hygiene when we are out.

– Michael Ku

It's mainly simple things that are now more difficult to do. For example, needing to print (for the things that just have to be in paper), getting documents posted, or checking the mail! The staff in our serviced office have been great, and thankfully they still have staff on premises to assist.

– Sami Sara

Our main issue is sticking to scheduled meeting times – because we are on our phones so much, we are constantly challenged with ending client calls in time to jump onto the next meeting. We are also seeing a blurring of start and finish times with work, often working much later than normal because we are already home and don't really notice the time slipping away. Another unexpected challenge is our elderly neighbours playing the same line dancing songs every day on full volume. It permeates through our walls (which are actually quite thick) but no one has the heart to tell the elderly neighbours they are too loud.

– Meldon D'Cruz

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?

We all keep in touch with each other via WhatsApp and occasionally via zoom so we can see each other to uphold our sanity. We joke a lot via WhatsApp so that helps to keep spirits up. Personally, I try to go outside to the garden to get some fresh air. I also take the kids out to ride their bikes around the neighbourhood whilst I jog behind them. We all need fresh air and also regular exercise in the current climate.

– Michael Ku

We have tried to include more personal conversation topics during our team meetings (as we would when at the office kitchen) to make everyone feel more engaged. We encourage more video calls so people can see their colleagues and morning and after work exercise so staff don't feel so sluggish. We have also found heightened anxiety in staff who want to know what will happen with their employment. The daily plethora of announcements of legal and accounting firms cutting staff hours and salaries coupled with redundancies is understandably causing concern across the entire profession, so we are having weekly discussions around our client workflow, cashflow, recovery rates and anticipated management decisions so staff are not caught unawares.

– Meldon D'Cruz

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

Given how well video conferencing has worked for a variety of uses, I'll probably use it more than I used to once things go back to normal. It's also reassuring to know that we can work productively from home, so I'll probably do it more often in the future.

– Sami Sara

“ Now that we can see that our staff can indeed still work effective from home, in the future, we can offer that flexibility to help them achieve a good work life balance. ”

At the end of the day the legal profession is still a personal service and some clients prefer face to face contact where possible. Now that we can see that our staff can indeed still work effective from home, in the future, we can offer that flexibility to help them achieve a good work life balance.

– Michael Ku

I'm hoping that it will change some clients' views on outsourced providers working remotely – some organisations haven't been keen to embrace the model previously and will hopefully now look at things with a fresh perspective.

– Leigh Evans

I think the legal profession, and most professional service firms, will partially reduce their physical office footprint. I say partially because its mostly the older generation of professionals that feel the need to supervise their staff face-to-face and they have heavily resisted allowing staff to work from home thus far. We have noticed that a critical aspect of our team is the need for face-to-face interaction which many of (particularly the younger staff), so post COVID-19 I anticipate that we will return to 3-4 days in the office and a flexi-day or two for staff to work from home, which is not a substantial change for our team currently.

– Meldon D'Cruz

What are your best tips for working from home?



It's not the same as working in an office, so don't try and force it to be. Focus on the tasks that you need to complete, not the hours that you need to work.

– *Sami Sara*



Have a defined workspace or area. Set work/home boundaries and try to switch off from work after a certain time so that you are not always at work to the detriment of the family. Lots of fresh air and exercise, unless you want to gain a few kilos after this crisis ends!

– *Michael Ku*

Take a bird's eye view of your to-do list and prioritise, prioritise, prioritise. Think about what is essential and what can wait. Carve out space and time to devote to work but build in some flexibility so that unexpected non-work demands don't stress you out. Reduce things to small chunks and do them when you can.

– *Leigh Evans*

It's not the same as working in an office, so don't try and force it to be. Focus on the tasks that you need to complete, not the hours that you need to work. You can also log in any time – so take the chance to spend time with the family during the day, if you can get stuff done after they're in bed.

– *Sami Sara*

In the next edition of **Lawyering in the time of COVID-19**, we'll speak to Tomoyuki Hachigo from NewLaw firm Sprintlaw 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](#).