



Lawyering through COVID-19: Taking a team approach

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 areas of the industry about how their firms adapted to the different stages of this global pandemic.

Russell McVeagh partners **Caleb Hensman**, **Kirsten Massey** and **Cath Shirley-Brown** provide their insights and learnings from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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



CALEB HENSMAN



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

Caleb: Last year the fire at SkyCity’s Convention Centre in October forced dozens of businesses to close their doors, our Auckland office included, as the city filled with thick black smoke from the blaze. While this was an inconvenience at the time, it helped us test our business continuity plan and without realising it, prepare for the impact of COVID-19. Investments in technology over the last year have ensured our entire firm was prepared for moving to complete remote working when needed.

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Kirsten: Prior to lockdown, most of our people were already set up to work from home so we were fortunate to be able to move pretty seamlessly to working completely remotely with little impact on our ability to work with clients and our teams.

What does the day-to-day operation of your firm look like today (in Alert Level 1) compared to a couple of months ago (in Alert Level 4)?

Cath: In Alert Levels 1 and 2, we have been able to move back to more normality and with the majority of our teams working based back in our offices – it has been great to be back working together in person again and meeting up with clients. With travel restrictions in place, we were unable to host our annual scheduled Alumni Function in London but we still went ahead and held it virtually via webinar. It was lovely to see some friendly faces and hear updates from life, lockdown and work in London.

Caleb: When the entire country was in Alert Level 2, we took a precautionary and staggered approach to returning to our offices and our teams continued to work from home and began to spend more time in our offices on a shift/rotation basis, as **Team “Russell” and Team “McVeagh”**. In Alert Level 3, the large majority of our teams continued to work remotely, while in Alert Level 4 and Lockdown, everyone was working completely remotely. When our Auckland and Wellington offices were operating at different Alert Levels, we wanted to ensure we took a cautionary approach until more was known about the risk of community transmission.

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

Kirsten: There are two things that stood out for me that worked for us – one internal and one external. Internally, it was our regular firm-wide calls, which were key to ensuring that everyone felt informed and connected. Externally, it was being able to connect with our clients via webinars and share our thoughts, including on legislation changes and the potential impact of the changing environment.

Caleb: Increasing and prioritising our internal communication was important to keep us connected and provide our people with certainty throughout this period of change. All of our partners and managers were in regular contact with their teams and clients to check in with them and to see if there was further support we could provide. Personally, I got to know and connect with team members and clients through weekly firm-wide webinars, virtual coffee catch-ups, quizzes and birthday celebrations. It also extended the team to kids, pets and other family members.

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What were the main challenges during the lockdown?

Caleb: The implications of moving up Alert Levels, including school and day-care closures, changed how everyone managed life and work commitments. Businesses have been working through challenges within their own organisations and facing many new ones in the current environment. Many companies are being forced to re-examine the way they currently do business.

Kirsten: Being relatively new to the firm, staying connected with colleagues and clients was a key challenge. Daily calls with two partners in my area were vital and coffees and glasses of wine via Zoom worked surprisingly well.

How has COVID-19 affected your practice area and how are you managing any unexpected issues?

Caleb: We expect that all areas of our firm will continue to see work through the change in environment caused by COVID-19. Some areas of our firm may be busier than others, such as our finance, restructuring and insolvency, construction and employment teams, but the extent of the economic downturn and the impact on our clients remains to be seen. We are obviously keeping a close eye on developments and planning accordingly.

Cath: There has been a decrease in M&A activity, and it remains to be seen over the coming months exactly how this will play out. However, things have not dropped completely off a cliff – sale processes are continuing, and we are seeing new mandates. Having had two “tours” in London, the first immediately post 9/11 and the second right in the eye of the GFC, and having been very busy both times round, I am trying to retain an air of (very) cautious optimism. Throughout lockdown, our team continued to assist clients with a number of **notable transactions** helping to deliver results in what has been a turbulent environment for many corporates.

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?

Kirsten: I tried to get out of the house for exercise every day, even if for nothing more strenuous than walking our dog. This was unfortunately (more than) balanced out by my children’s new-found interest in baking – but it was all good time away from my desk. In terms of other members of the team, I think that I did pretty obvious things. I tried to speak to people as often as possible, rather than relying on emails, and took the time to ask how people were doing and what they had been up to away from their desks rather than focusing straight in on the work (which I think we lawyers can be prone to, even when not working remotely from each other).

As New Zealand moved through each Alert Level, was your firm able to put systems in place for: new workplace health and safety measures, client meetings and interactions, office protocols and guidelines for shared spaces?

Kirsten: We are very lucky to have a fantastic business support team that made sure that we were able to operate (either in the office or remotely) within the changing guidelines. From hand sanitiser availability, to arrows on the carpet to ensure that we moved around the office in the most socially distanced way, to the technology to allow us to continue to meet clients remotely, we have had all the right systems and support in place.

Caleb: We have taken every step needed to keep our people safe and support our clients, with a number of health & safety measures in place to ensure the wellbeing of our staff and clients including:

- **Informing our people** about the precautions they need to take – reinforcing the need for personal hygiene and hand washing,
- Ensuring **contact tracing, physical distancing, self-isolation** and travel requirements are adhered to;
- **Connecting with clients** in meetings via audio or video conference; and
- **Hosting virtual events & webinars** to avoid cancelling or postponing in-person opportunities.

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?

Cath: Lockdown (in any form) is a frustrating time in terms of unpredictable work-flow and uncertainty. Take advantage of downtime (if you have it) to take stock of your personal network and engage with both current and former colleagues and clients. One of the biggest lessons I have learned over my career is the importance of developing and maintaining your contacts – reaching out to your network to reconnect is good for your personal well-being and may well bear fruit in terms of identifying future work opportunities.

Caleb: The current situation has helped us all to re-examine the way we operate and do business. Look to further understand your strengths and risks to help better respond and prepare for a change in circumstances. Preparing for economic downturn and a range of scenarios, and being able to adjust to the evolving situation, will help you lay the groundwork now for future success.

Kirsten: It is easy to say and harder to do, but it is important to try to think about the changes positively and look for the inevitable opportunities. Even if there is not work in the area or of the type you might have planned, there will be other work which you can take advantage of to gain experience and skills that will assist you in your future career.

What are your BEST TIPS for working from home?

- 1 With turmoil comes opportunity – look for opportunities within and resulting from the chaos.
- 2 Keep in contact with your network of clients, customers and friends.
- 3 Think about redeploying talent within your business to support busy areas.
- 4 Look after your people.
- 5 Learn from this experience (the positives and the negatives) to plan for the next crisis or period of change.

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