



Lawyering through COVID-19: A Large 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 **Craig Graham, General Manager at Cavell Leitch**

Craig was interviewed during Alert Level 1, prior to a return to higher Alert Levels in New Zealand.



CRAIG GRAHAM
General Manager | Cavell Leitch
Property, Resource Management, Litigation, Trust and Estates, Relationships (Family), Employment, Immigration, Business.

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

We are a digital office and have electronic files along with fit for purpose software. We also happened to be part-way through a complete IT upgrade which included new laptops and greater cloud connectivity. Our recently developed flexible working policy also contributed to us seamlessly transition to working from home.

What does the day-to-day operation of your firm look like today (in Alert Level 1/2) compared to a couple of months ago (in Alert Level 3/4)?

The review and further development of our flexible working policy allows our business to look at the gains achieved while working from home and pair this with meeting the needs of our team.

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The lockdown allowed us to review the way we do things and where possible implement efficiencies, such as a reduction in printing and scanning, electronic signing and having meetings via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. It also meant we looked deeper into the technology we have available to us and how to best leverage it to allow us to work remotely as a business.

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

Our team adapted really quickly to the new normal of working from home. Everyone understood that the country was in the same position and quickly looked at how they could make the most out of the time at home by embracing the technology we had and taking on best practices while working from home.

We developed a 'Cavell Community' newsletter which came out twice a week, with input from staff, as one way of keeping everyone connected and up to date with each other from afar. The team quickly got into the swing of virtual coffee catch ups, virtual team stand up meetings and dress up Friday's.

Electronic signing of documents and fully electronic billing is not something that firm had done which worked really well throughout lockdown.

What were the main challenges during the lockdown?

Initially there were some remote connection teething problems and our local internet infrastructure probably struggled to start off with.

“ There was also the challenge of thinking differently about how we do everyday tasks.

and how we rely on people sitting right next to us or being down the hall.

This pushed the team to adopt new practises and seek new ways of connections.

which have been embraced and continued since our return. ”

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

There is still a sentiment of uncertainty within the economy, our teams at present are working to capacity but there is still the reservation that things could potentially slow down or that another lock down could occur. We review our business performance regularly, monitor the external environment and at the same time update our forecasts and realign our business as we gain confidence.

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 have continued to communicate the availability of our Employee Assistance Programme through the use of OCP. This has allowed our staff and immediate family to utilise professionals, free of charge, to assist them with their needs.

We have recently surveyed the team regarding their wellness and the impacts of remote working. Out of this has come an updated wellbeing programme which will include a new mentoring programme, lunch and learn sessions and an updated flexible working policy for staff.

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

- New workplace health & safety measures
- Client meetings/ interactions
- Office protocols & guidelines for shared spaces & common areas

Before the lockdown, the firm implemented a business continuity team to consider all the processes the business needed to have in place to be prepared for numerous scenarios. We worked through a Business Continuity Plan that assisted us through the Alert Levels and the requirements each one had for the business and for our staff.

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This allowed us to plan ahead for each Alert Level. The business continuity team ensured that the office was well prepared for staff's return with social distancing, hygiene and contact tracing protocols in place. The firm initiated its own contact tracing system to ensure it was aware of all staff and public movements in and out of the office to keep everyone safe. We had a staggered return to the office where staff had the option to continue working from home, client meetings would be held virtually, and public access was reduced until it was safe to open the office back up.

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

I think there has been a new appreciation for each other and the office since moving to Alert Level 1 and having people back together again. We aim to support the increased communications with each other, whether working in the office or working remotely. We have embraced the new normal and the ability to hold meetings with a combination of some people taking part virtually and some people being there in person, this includes meetings with clients.

Treat working from home like going to the office, the commute is shorter, but be rigid with your time, get dressed to go to work etc.

Keep communication regular with all staff, making sure to check in regularly with people across the business.

Also, communicate clearly on expectations so you know you are on the same page.

Best tips for working from home?

Create a separation between your workspace and normal home life.

Be able to shut the door on work every day.

Nothing is impossible, work solutions out for business practices which you believe aren't able to be done from home, generally they can be.

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?

Now is the opportune time to regroup and review your business in the context of a new landscape. Post lock down is an opportunity to look at ways of doing things differently. The post Covid landscape has meant that law firms will require regular contact with clients to ensure they can service their needs in a fast changing and uncertain environment.

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Don't drop the ball on keeping in touch with clients, keep that business development work up as the pie is going to be smaller for a while, you want to make sure you grow your share of the pie.

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Our approach through this whole lock down is to prepare for the worst, make sure that levers are ready to pull early enough to make sure that you can survive on a down-turn. Its easier to restart the engine, then to all of a sudden have to turn everything off.

Vigilance is important. Re-forecast regularly and keep an eye on finances, because when cash runs out it's too late. Also maintain business development and marketing initiatives. If this gets dropped, once business returns to normal the gap is too large to bridge.

Visit the [LexisNexis COVID-19 Information Centre](#) to find the latest news, guidance notes, resources and developments relating to the pandemic.

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