



LAWYERS AND LAW FIRMS. A
SERVICE OR A HYBRID
WORKPLACE?

LET THAT POINT SINK IN.



First National Lockdown

Did Boris Johnson's announcement of the first national lockdown on the 23rd March 2020 prove to be the tipping point in the way legal services are delivered and consumed?

In the lead up to the national lockdown legal services were primarily delivered by lawyers working out of physical offices, supported by full teams of highly skilled colleagues, professional support staff, administration, facilities and maintenance management teams all working together in seamless harmony. Additionally, over the last decade or so, most law firms had taken huge strides forward in embracing the digitisation of the management of professional services, through case and document management systems, client portals, document vaults and tentative steps into the world of artificial intelligence.



Legal Offices



Clients streamed into well appointed offices occupying some of the most expensive real estate locations in cities throughout the country. In many instances, no cost was spared in creating a welcoming and inviting environment for clients that reflected the brand value proposition of the law firm and quality of lawyers within the establishment. Partners, associates, paralegals, secretaries and a raft of support staff all attended the office on a daily basis to ensure that the customer service experience for the clients was unparalleled.

Legal professionals criss-crossed the country attending court hearings, client meetings, arbitrations and mediations amongst a raft of other client centred services that required face to face or that personal touch.

Then came COVID-19.

Boris Johnson's announcement.

Everything changed.

The country ground to a standstill

We were all told to work from home where possible.

adaptability

Lawyers and the wider legal profession adapted extremely well to this challenge. They had to. The provision of professional legal services was in huge demand as government, businesses, individuals and society in general grappled with the legal ramifications of these seismic changes to our 'ordinary' way of life. These are just some of the innovative ways that lawyers found when they had to. As professionals their services were required. They just had to find new and more efficient ways to provide those services to their clients. They did so from home.



Lawyers worked from home but found new and efficient ways to communicate with clients, colleagues, partners and other professionals. Video conferencing from home offices, remote hearings, mediation via Zoom or Microsoft Teams or Cisco Webex, VPN connection to the main office.

They did so around looking after their own family and children. They also had to do so taking into consideration the family and children obligations of their clients. The provision of their professional services was not limited to 9-5.30 nor was it limited to a physical space. Many argue that the provision of these professional services from home was purely an essential 'sticking plaster' to cover the worst period of the national pandemic. You could probably argue it was.

SAFETY

First. Second. Third Lockdown.

After the first national lockdown came to an end, we thought it was all over. It wasn't. A second national lockdown was followed by a third. As we approach the end of the third national lockdown, with a gradual easing of restrictions, we find that many legal professionals have become even more proficient at working from remote locations. IT infrastructure has provided safe 'bubbles' for lawyers and professional support teams to work in different ways, that enable them to continue to provide the best advice and service to clients whose legal needs remain undiminished as the pandemic continues to leash uncertainty and disruption to the way we live our lives.

We haven't mentioned furlough.



Let that point sink in.

At the start of the first lockdown, the government furlough scheme kicked into action. Many support roles, maintenance, admin and office cleaning roles were affected. Thankfully the government scheme supported them. Whilst on furlough they were not allowed to work. Many functions that were ordinarily available to support lawyers were reduced or simply not available. Lawyers took on a lot of responsibility for liaising directly with clients, setting meetings, producing letters, emails and documents. It did take some adjustment and no doubt created many sleepless nights for lawyers wondering how they were going to manage a video conference call with six or more people or a mediation with clients around the country. Despite many teething problems, these challenges were overcome and clients embraced the changes.

Taking all the above points into consideration, many law firms continued to provide first class services to their clients throughout the pandemic through innovative use of technology and remote working, notwithstanding reduced staffing levels, reduced meetings and reduced travel times. Law firm profits inevitably benefitted. Law firms were able to continue to provide first class services through their lawyers who were mainly working from home during 2020, and for the first quarter of 2021.

BCI Business Continuity Plan

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So what learnings can we take from this as we begin to emerge, we hope for the final time, from the current national lockdown? The main takeaway appears to be that the true value of the service provided is greater than the ‘usual’ place from which the service is delivered. If true, this presents a series of challenges for leaders within law firms who are tasked with planning and navigating the future of their business.

What strategies ought to be considered by professional services businesses as they assess their ‘return to the office’ options. Might this include a strategy requiring all staff to return to the office as part of a pre-pandemic model? Might this include assessment of a hybrid working model, part-office and part-remote? Might this include a full remote working strategy? There is no single right answer to these points, but they do require exploration, debate and honest discussion.

learn



Costs

Cost of the building.

After staff, the biggest fixed overhead of many firms is the cost of the building, or lease. Some questions that may be asked will include: 'Do we need quite such a big building or so many offices / floors?' 'How can we as a business continue to provide the same level of service with fewer fixed overheads.' 'How are we going to manage more effectively the flow of clients and staff in our office space post COVID?'

The reality is that the effect of COVID is going to be around for some time. It's virtually impossible to say how long. What is clear is that there will remain an obligation for law firms to provide clean, safe and accessible environments for both clients and staff for many years to come.

We were recently in discussions with a senior partner of a large regional law firm whose lease on their main office was coming up for review. The main issue being assessed was how can we continue to operate with the same numbers of staff, from smaller offices? Do we really need such large, and expensive offices, when we can be more efficient if we adopt the best of remote working with a smaller, more efficient and technologically advanced office. If we reduce our office space by 50%, how do we help partners, colleagues and staff use the smaller office space?

This example is probably indicative of a large number of businesses who which to embrace the flexibility, efficiency and fiscal benefits of learnings over the last year.

Hybrid Workplace.

Hybrid Workplace offers the chance for teams to work together in the same space and at the same times – when they want to. Meetings with clients will still happen face to face as will hearings and external colleague meetings. But do workspaces and meeting rooms need to be kept available for specific people or colleagues – at all times? Moving to smaller, more efficient office spaces will require better planning and management, be available 24/7 and offer better data to help manage and maximise office utilisation. After all, the office is, at the end of the day, the biggest cost overhead that needs to be managed most effectively.

The world of digital office utilisation is both complex and crowded but there are not many who focus exclusively on the hybrid workplace with a clarity of focus on office utilisation and workplace efficiency in the period post-pandemic. What is clear is that the pandemic highlighted the true value of lawyers is in the provision of the specialist knowledge and advice which is equal to if not greater than the location from where the services are delivered.

New Wave Workspace

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