

Covid-19 and a Change in the Legal Information Landscape

Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic drastically changed the information landscape. For us it exponentially increased our workload and unequivocally demonstrated how much value we could add to the business. The skill set of information professionals is in demand like never before, changing many of our roles for the better. This article, written by Felicity Cross, discusses the effect the pandemic has had on her department and what that means for our profession as a whole.

Keywords: legal information; digital content; law firms; Covid-19

LOCKDOWN AND UNCERTAINTY

The 23rd March came and went and life in the UK changed dramatically. The government asked everyone who could, to stay at home.

As I'm sure many people do, I remember hearing the announcement. I also remember the confusing and conflicting media reports that followed. My husband is a freelance journalist and his primary contract is with a weekly print magazine. The prime minister had said people could leave their homes if they were; "travelling to and from work, but only where this is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home." It was then widely reported in the news that people could only travel to and from essential work. The Guardian reported on the 24th March that; "PM says people can only shop for basic necessities, limits exercise to one form a day, restricts travel only to and from essential work and tells UK to stay at home"¹. I remember having a long debate with my husband as to what that meant; what was actually allowed? We didn't think anyone could argue that printing a weekly magazine was essential, but printing a magazine at that scale could not be done from home. So would the printers be able to go to work or not? Could people travel to work where that work could not be done from home or could people only travel to work if it was deemed essential. Was he out of a job or not? We came to the inevitable conclusion that we would just have to wait and see (his job was fine as it turns out, but a worrying couple of days nonetheless). The position was clarified later that week.

CONFUSION

Sadly, this was to become a trend of the pandemic; the government would make announcements, no-one would be clear as to what they meant and subsequent statements would be made clarifying and changing advice and guidance. Unfortunately, this is still happening to this day, as I write the guidance on face masks in schools has

done a 180 degree turn. I have lost count of the number of times I have written, and read, words to the effect of; "we are awaiting clarification" or "we are expecting further guidance from the government". Briefings have been given, policies announced, glaring holes and problems pointed out. Sometimes changes are made, sometimes they aren't. This has created a huge challenge for professional services firms and law firms in particular. But as it turns out keeping on top of this ever growing mountain of information is just the challenge legal information professionals were made for.

Despite knowing it was coming and our law firm preparing for weeks I still think we were all caught off guard at the scale of the changes that lockdown created. We were definitely not prepared for the speed at which information, regulations and guidance grew and changed. In the weeks that followed, information became like a diamond rainstorm; precious and important, but also very painful when it hits you on the head all at once.

DEMONSTRATING VALUE

The pandemic has undoubtedly propelled Knowledge and Information management teams into the spotlight and allowed them to show their value in so many ways. This is a trend that was already happening in a lot of law firms as Knowledge teams were morphing away from traditional hard-copy based library tasks to getting involved in new projects and initiatives like organising precedent banks, firm intranets and developing new service lines such as business intelligence. For a while now we have been demonstrating value in new and sometimes unexpected ways. But nothing could have prepared us for the changes and opportunities brought about by this pandemic.

In those first few weeks there was what can only be described as an onslaught of information; from the government, the media, and professional organisations. Our current awareness feeds were overwhelmed and so were

our senior leaders. There was so much information that needed to be understood and processed in such a short a space of time that help was essential. Covid-19 posed law firms with challenges that Knowledge Management teams, with their unique areas of expertise, could solve. For one of the first times in my career our senior leaders were desperately in need of the core skills of a librarian; curation, selection, analysis and delivery of information. And I am proud to say we rose to the challenge. Our small team became busier in those months of lockdown than we had ever been before. Couple that with the burden of childcare, caring for older relatives and dealing with shielding, it made for a very stressful time. Looking back I'm not entirely sure how we all got through it in one piece. But we did, supporting each other as best we could from a distance; our daily team video calls became the highlight of my day, a chance to share problems, discuss solutions and to laugh when we could.

WORKING VIRTUALLY

Thankfully, our team has worked virtually for years, with the exception of 2 members of staff we are all based in different offices and 3 of us work from home on a permanent basis. So we are used to working collaboratively from a distance and since everyone has been transported into the remote world, the technology we have access to has just got better and better. This really helped us make a running start with the new services we had to develop. As a small team I'm not sure we would have been anywhere near as successful if we weren't so used to working together from different locations. Being able to communicate effectively over phone and video conference is a core skill in the new world and really important if you need to deliver consistently with different people working on the same product or service on different days.

Checking in with each other constantly was key to this, we have a daily meeting where we have a chat and catch up with each other generally and then cover any work issues, people can join the call if they want to but don't have to. This was something we had established before lockdown, although previously it was only 3 days a week. Having this already embedded in our working lives made it so much easier than it otherwise could have been to keep talking, keep communicating and keep working together effectively. That said, technology has also played an enormous part in enabling us to develop and deliver new services. I'm not sure how we got by before we could work simultaneously on the same documents and share screens during a call at the touch of a button "can I share my screen" has become my new catchphrase.

RAISING THE PROFILE

Over the 6 months prior to lockdown we had slowly been raising the profile of our Knowledge Management

team and our new Business Intelligence service line. We had built relationships with departments we had never really worked with before, like Business Development, General Counsel and IT. We had been gaining ground slowly, working to understand what the business needed, developing reports and demonstrating our expertise in research, analysis and the presentation of information. We were slowly winning people round and garnering trust in our abilities, by consistently delivering helpful, relevant and analysed information. As it turned out this could not have been better timing for us as a team within our firm. When the time came people knew what we could do and how we could help.

MANZAMA

Manzama is the current awareness tool which we use, and although it does have its faults (mobile app functionality in case anyone from Manzama is reading!) I cannot praise it highly enough. In fact I don't know how we would have got through the last few months without it. Almost overnight we were providing curated and analysed feeds to our Executive board on a daily basis, covering developments affecting practice management, clients, competitors, colleagues, legislation changes, practice area changes and emerging trends. Manzama made this possible and part of its success for us was the functionality it has for more than one person to work on a newsletter or group feed at one time. It enabled us to share the load without compromising quality and consistency. It also enabled us to see who was reading the newsletters and which articles were being read. This proved a really valuable tool, not just to see what was being clicked on but to boost our morale, we knew that what we were providing was useful because everyone kept reading it. As a side effect of this piece of work I am now the most knowledgeable I have ever been. However, I'm not sure this makes me the most appealing socially distanced picnic guest, as I now have the tendency to come out with fascinating facts like "during lockdown cycling was often at 3 times its pre-pandemic levels, it's coming back down again now though".

BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE RESEARCH SERVICE LINE

I had always hoped when I started working on the Business Intelligence research service line a year ago that we would get to this point. However, I expected it to take many years, with a lot of bumps along the way. As the move to home-working has been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic so has appreciation of the value of business intelligence research. Being able to understand and articulate a fast moving market has become a key skill, along with being able to source relevant statistics and then tell the story around them. Translating

“hard” information into an accessible, readable format and articulating what that means for our business and our clients is now a significant part of my job. This is not without its pitfalls, over the past few months I have developed a number of insightful, well received reports based on government statistics. The updating of these has been painstakingly built into our regular work patterns along with detailed notes and instructions, only for the government to completely change reporting methods overnight. This inevitably has resulted in a complete overhaul of a complex piece of work with absolutely no notice. Don’t misunderstand me, those changes have always been for the better, but they are very challenging nonetheless.

VALUABLE SKILLS

The effect of the pandemic on our service lines has been enormous, our work has changed, I believe, for the better. Business intelligence research is about providing the right information at the right time to the right people to help inform strategic decision-making. I think it is a natural progression for legal researchers, like me, to move into this type of work. We have the core skills that are required; the ability to find information quickly, to assess and select what information is needed and then to present it in a way that adds value and enables it to be easily understood. The wide-ranging changes in the legal market brought about by the pandemic make these skills even more valuable. To be able to support our firm in this way at this time is incredibly rewarding and something everyone in our team is able to contribute to. And as an added bonus our legal researchers are now also seeing more complex and varied requests come in as our reputation grows. The opportunities at the moment seem to be endless as requests for work increase, coming in from different parts of the business, with more and more people finding out what we can do, and how we can support them in different ways.

FAQS ON THE INTRANET

As well as the explosion in requests to our business intelligence service line, the other major shift in our workload has been adopting responsibility for organising the FAQs on the intranet. The aim of these is to help colleagues understand how to operate in this new remote world. Again this called for KM professional’s key skills of organising knowledge and making sure people have access to everything they needed to know. This ranges from how to access funding for home working equipment and what the firm’s policy on electronic signatures is, to what to do if they need something printed and how to access wellbeing resources. Making this wide array of information easily findable for stressed and harassed

colleagues and making sure it is kept up to date was, and still is, a mammoth task. Again we are proving our worth, continuing to improve the findability of information and to investigate technologies with the potential to make it even easier.

This type of work is not always easy, particularly as we liaise so closely with so many other departments in conditions that are sometimes less than ideal, balance caring responsibilities, general anxiety and stress and learn to use new technology. We have to be sensitive to other department’s priorities and resist the urge to stamp our feet and say “but we know best”, instead the way forward is a delicate one, using negotiation and influencing skills. Our relationships with other departments have grown positively and although it is hard at times having to involve so many others in our work, we, and the work we do, is all better for it.

RESPONDING TO UNCERTAINTY

Brexit is now firmly on the horizon and this too will present many challenges as the potential for legal and economic positions to change very quickly is evident and worrying for a lot of people and businesses. The government’s current track record on communicating changes happening at pace is not a positive one. The possible effects of a 2nd wave of Coronavirus in the winter combined with Brexit in this uncertain environment is worrying. However, in many ways thanks to the pandemic, our profession is more prepared than it has ever been before to use the skills we have and the tools available to us to make sure our lawyers and senior leaders have the information they need to support our clients. As one of my friends put it; “you provide the information they need in the quickest way possible - of course you’re busier than ever!”.

The Wolters Kluwer 2020 ‘Future Ready Lawyer Survey’ found that 73% of lawyers thought that coping with the increased volume and complexity of information would have an impact on their firms.² With the government proving time and again that decisions can be reversed and legal positions changed with almost no notice, the importance of having the best access to information cannot be overestimated. This is absolutely what we are seeing as information professionals in our day to day roles. Over the past few months we have been called on more and more to assimilate, assess, summarise and disseminate information to support our lawyers in helping our clients and senior management in making the right decisions for our business.

This is a world of information twists and turns that we could never have anticipated, but thankfully we have the skills as Knowledge and Information professionals to navigate our way through it.

Footnotes

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2020/mar/23/uk-coronavirus-live-news-latest-boris-johnson-minister-condemns-people-ignoring-two-metre-distance-rule-in-parks-as-very-selfish>.

² https://img.en25.com/Web/WoltersKluwerLRSUS/%7Bde3a3f01-91ed-4f24-8243-29545a31f2e8%7D_FRL2020_WPpdf?elqTrackId=9648361C9C870EF599D746890A9C4D19&elqaid=2112&elqat=2 (last accessed 31st August 2020).

Biography

Felicity Cross started her career in the archive and library of publisher HarperCollins when e-books were just coming into being and she was a part of the changes in the company driven by this development. This sparked her interest in what makes companies successful and in how they react as the world changes. Since then she has worked for several different organisations before landing at Irwin Mitchell LLP. Felicity started as a legal researcher and now very much enjoys being in a position to use her interest in companies, markets and the general state of the world to support strategic decision making at Irwin Mitchell.

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Managing a Law Firm Research Service from Home: from ‘What’s Zoom?’ to Trainee Induction Week from a Bedroom

Abstract: In this article Ian Hunter considers his experiences, learning points and recommendations on running an international law firm research service from home for 6 months, after being sent home at one hour’s notice. In the article he considers working from home, including the psychological benefits of having a ‘journey’ to work, providing a research service and a library service, managing a team and the use of communications technology.

Keywords: legal information; digital content; law firms; ways of working; working from home; Covid-19

WORKING FROM HOME

When working in the office I have my own office with two desks, two chairs, two large screens, generous shelving, a whiteboard and a printer/scanner/photocopier just around the corner. I now manage an international team and run a research service supporting lawyers across the world from an Ikea desk in a corner of my daughter’s bedroom. In March, that would have been unthinkable. In practice, it hasn’t been so bad.

What has been surprising is how quickly we have all adapted to this and how the business of the law firm carries on pretty much as usual. We can manage without many of the offices and files full of paper and without printing copies of vendor contracts and other documents in order to review them, and can in fact process and authorise invoices electronically.

Shearman & Sterling had been monitoring the pandemic situation for a while and as a result staff were sent home early in March. I left the office expecting to be