

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> <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>.

<sup>2</sup> [https://img.en25.com/Web/WoltersKluwerLRSUS/%7Bde3a3f01-91ed-4f24-8243-29545a31f2e8%7D\\_FRL2020\\_WPpdf?elqTrackId=9648361C9C870EF599D746890A9C4D19&elqaid=2112&elqat=2](https://img.en25.com/Web/WoltersKluwerLRSUS/%7Bde3a3f01-91ed-4f24-8243-29545a31f2e8%7D_FRL2020_WPpdf?elqTrackId=9648361C9C870EF599D746890A9C4D19&elqaid=2112&elqat=2) (last accessed 31<sup>st</sup> 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

back the following week or the week after, so while I had a laptop I did not have a printer, office workstation, whiteboard, notepad, post-it notes, running shoes... it was mostly the post-it notes that I missed!

As a working from home novice, I immediately established myself at the dining room table, but then: (1). I realised that the dining room is the coldest room in the house (this was early March); (2). my large computer screen arrived; and (3). my children's school closed. Fairly soon afterwards I moved upstairs.

I am relatively luckily in at least being able to set up shop at a desk in a corner of my daughter's bedroom rather than attempting to work in a communal area. This has obvious benefits in terms of a secluded place to work but also psychological benefits from working in a different place to where I relax: I still have a 'journey' to work. Colleagues who work in their lounges or dining rooms have said they struggle to 'switch off' in the evening.

It has been shown that different people have different preferred methods of communication and I freely admit to preferring email for important conversations, then phone, then finally face-to-face if necessary: an unforeseen advantage of working from home.

## **PROVIDING AN INFORMATION SERVICE: THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORK?**

The first aspect of our service to be impacted by lockdown was the most traditional – books. I have been looking at moving the book collection online for several years but negotiations generally fell at the pricing hurdle: one large publisher quoted a price that was triple our print spend to make all their books available online. Subsequently I have been moving titles from print to online piecemeal, so I can see most of the collection being online rather than print as a result of gradual increments rather than a single large-scale move.

At the beginning of the pandemic, publishers that I contacted offered e-books on a limited free trial basis, but I did not want to not take up their offers in order to avoid exhausting their goodwill despite colleagues wanting me to do so 'just in case'. I also offered the lawyers the option to have certain key texts shipped home to either me or a professional support lawyer but there was no take up for this.

One of the first things I did was to circulate lists of core texts to each practice group, indicating which were available online and which were not.

The Office Services team (mail and photocopy room) has carried on operating throughout lockdown, with a reduced staff, and has been very effective at retrieving books from the library in order to scan chapters. I have now done several video tours of my own library directing people to the relevant shelves.

I took the opportunity to question practice groups about print renewals (even though I do this every

October for the forthcoming year anyway) and managed to cancel two loose-leaf titles and one print journal.

The biggest regular part of our day is producing current awareness bulletins and these continued uninterrupted; in fact, we had a net gain in circulation.

Our enquiry statistics for this period have yet to be consolidated but anecdotally there have been fewer day-to-day enquiries from lawyers, but at least as many business development research requests from the marketing teams.

My wider group launched a daily current awareness bulletin for the partnership, monitoring everything from fiscal, macroeconomic and corporate regulatory measures in countries around the world to lockdown restrictions in countries where Shearman has offices, which takes up a big part of the day.

All this resulted in me and my team working longer hours than we did in the office, so early in lockdown people on radio phone-ins and in newspapers articles suggesting 'what to do to keep yourself occupied' fell flat... Fitting in the lunchtime run or weights session has been more difficult than it was in the office: initially there was a 'guilty' feeling when working from home, meaning that one feels one should be available at all times.

Large business development research projects can be more difficult without two large screens to copy and paste from, but I find there are actually fewer distractions at home than in the office. My team carries out Companies House filings for the practice groups and in particular several large annual filings. We received one of these in June, consisting of around 50 filings and a detailed audit trail which translates as 16 hours' work. Even this was manageable.

Negotiating subscription renewals did not feel any different: I found I actually preferred using my mobile phone with hands-free kit than the office desk phone as I could move around while talking.

At the time of writing I am still several weeks away from preparing the 2021 budgets for 11 offices. Last year this involved two large screens, much printing on A3 paper and at least one Saturday morning in the office. It will be interesting to see how this goes.

I did not cancel subscriptions to any online research tools as a direct result of lockdown - and usage statistics suggest lawyers' consumption of information was unchanged.

## **TEAM MANAGEMENT**

I oversee one person in London and last year expanded to take in one in Hong Kong and one in Frankfurt - so as two of the team are in other offices there was not much difference as far as they were concerned; in fact, they were more willing to video-call via Zoom than they had been in the office. In the early days of lockdown I launched a weekly virtual coffee break for the European offices.

I felt I had monitor the workflow of the London person more carefully at first, but this stopped when we fell into more of a routine.

I had to ask one team member not to respond to emails late in the evening: this makes it difficult to control communication and sets an unwelcome precedent, and is another example of people feeling they should be available at all times.

## TECHNOLOGY (AND DRESS CODES), AND SOCIAL DISTANCING IMPROVING SOCIAL LIFE

When working from home it's okay to dress casually most of the time, but not all the time. Team video calls revealed a higher percentage of beards than is usually the case and mostly casual dress, and I was definitely part of that statistic. This was okay until I conducted a new joiners' induction session and realised I was unshaven and wearing a T-shirt. I now keep a shirt hung up on the outside of my wardrobe to grab in an emergency. Other than this, the induction sessions did not feel any different from conducting them face-to-face in a meeting room.

Many people used Shearman backgrounds when using Zoom but I found they distorted the image sometimes (long hair has a habit of disappearing, for example) and I am lucky enough to have plain white walls behind me anyway.

One lawyer video-called me with a quick query when she would normally phone or email. I thought this was a nice touch; an example of social distancing improving social contact.

Shearman's annual charity quiz night attracted a record number of entrants – around 160 individuals in 23 teams – so an improvement as a result of doing things virtually rather than in person.

Outside of the core service the HR team launched an office Facebook group: as well as news of Firm initiatives and events this quickly evolved into a place to share photos of walks with dogs, clapping for the NHS and gardening and DIY projects: again, closer contact with some colleagues than one would experience in the office.

Outside of work I have seen friends more often than I would normally, albeit via Zoom rather than in person.

'Mute audio' and 'mute video' became very useful phrases. I generally stayed on video but when attending a webinar that does not require much interaction it can be useful to mute both sound and video in order to carry on working. In certain applications this can speed up audio as well.

I am now modifying my two and a half hours of trainee induction sessions for Zoom.

## CONCLUSIONS

Once one is logged on and into the office mind-set, working from home is not actually so different, particularly if one can work in a different room from where one eats, sleeps or relaxes.

I have realised that I don't need to keep print copies of all those past invoices, conference notes, training notes, publisher catalogues and user guides (my archive of *Legal Information Management* is obviously an exception).

At the time of writing many law firms are preparing for staff to return to work on a voluntary basis from mid-September, but other firms have closed or reduced offices permanently. Personally, I don't think there will ever be a complete return to normal, but working from home has its upsides for both employers and staff.

## Biography

**Ian Hunter** is the Regional Content & Research Manager (EMEA) Global Knowledge & Research at Shearman & Sterling LLP.