

Lawyering through COVID-19: An In-House 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 **Brent McAnulty, General Counsel at TVNZ**



BRENT McANULTY
General Counsel
TVNZ

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

We were well advanced. The fire at the neighbouring Convention Centre site in October last year saw us out of our building for two weeks, and we learned a lot from that experience. This included investing in more laptops and accelerating our migration to cloud-based services.

How did the day-to-day operation of your team differ in Alert Level 1 compared to Alert Levels 3 or 4?

We were largely back to normal in the way we operate [at Alert Level 1].

“ During Level 4 we had separated our news and operations teams into two squads to reduce the risk of and manage a positive COVID-19 case eventuating at TVNZ. ”

During Level 4 we had separated our news and operations teams into two squads to reduce the risk of and manage a positive COVID-19 case eventuating at TVNZ.

When social distancing was relaxed at Level 1, our news programmes had more face-to-face interviews and less reliance on video calls.

We use Microsoft Teams more. We had installed it early last year but like many others I was very slow to utilise it – amazing what a pandemic can do to change your work habits! Even in Level 1, our CEO uses it for a weekly video call where he and our Executive Team answer questions from across the company.

“ We need to stay vigilant to protect the position we have all worked hard to create. ”

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

Media was deemed an **essential service**, so we had some people work from our buildings through all alert levels.

The lawyers, compliance and comms people in my team could all do their job from home.

What were the main challenges during the lockdown?

Ensuring we stayed on air, and that our people remained safe!

It is important that we remain accessible to New Zealanders to report on what was happening and to ensure important messages were getting through. This meant more liaison with Government and officials – we even set up a new Home Learning channel from scratch in a week.

Like most media, we have seen huge consumption of our content but advertising has taken a hit. Our challenge is to retain the audience and regrow the revenue.

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

One benefit for the team has been access to online learning. We used the opportunity to “attend” more [online] seminars than we would normally – not just on the law but also personal development and resilience.

“ We used the opportunity to “attend” more [online] seminars than we would normally – not just on the law but also personal development and resilience. ”

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?

I have confessed to many people that there were aspects of lockdown that I really enjoyed: not travelling, being at home with family, the change of pace, the access to exercise and food (hopefully with some balance). For me it was somewhat a mental health break, even though the threat to public health and the economy were very apparent.

I am lucky to lead a team that is very supportive of me and each other. During lockdown our team started each working day with a short video call. As the weeks went by it became less work-focused and more about us as individuals – what we were watching, our diverse background, introducing a fact of the day. Amazingly the team grew closer even while working apart.

When I suggested that daily calls had run their course, and tried to reduce them to weekly, I got a strong response. So it remained a daily check-in, and I’m really pleased it did. I also had individual conversations with each of the team during lockdown.

When we entered Level 1, TVNZ had to make some hard decisions on cost, and this has impacted roles across the business. It has been important for our team to provide the appropriate support to those impacted, many of whom we are close to, while still providing the service expected of us.

What are some of the pandemic protocols you put in place for your organisation?

We were constantly updating our guidelines in response to the environment we were in.

Under Level 4, essential employees working in our buildings were required to stay in designated work areas, using clearly mapped entry and exit paths. Our news teams out in the field had to maintain social distancing when interviewing people, a process for sanitising microphones and complying with Ministry of Health guidance on travel restrictions.

As we moved to Level 3, we used QR codes to track movement between building zones.

Under Level 2, more of our team were able to start working from our offices again. Floor occupancy was limited to approximately 50% of normal levels to ensure physical distancing, and occupancy limits were introduced in lifts and meeting rooms.

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

We have certainly embraced more flexibility – whether it is occasional working from home, changes in hours, or more use of video conferencing. I also think we are more tolerant of people not being available when we expect them to be.

What are your BEST TIPS for working from home?

- 1 Stay in touch with your team. And make time for them individually.
- 2 Try and keep to a routine as much as possible. I found that days working at home had a tendency to slip away. It doesn't need to be planned to the minute, but if you are looking to take an exercise break or pause in the afternoon, stick to it – just like you wouldn't miss a scheduled meeting.
- 3 Don't expect that everyone is working to the same schedule – or even to the same pattern they did when they were in the office.
- 4 If working from home is going to be more regular, then have the best set-up you can. Your desk, chair and lighting are so important.

What advice would you give fellow lawyers about getting back to normal who might be struggling with unforeseen changes in their careers?

We tend to label ourselves as lawyers from distinct practice areas. It is never too late to retrain or try something else – if you have the fundamentals in place (good work ethic, strong analysis, good communication skills, calmness under pressure) then moving into another area of law or career is not as hard as it seems.

Above all else, enjoy what you do. If you don't, find something that you do.

“ How fortunate are we to live in a country which has so far escaped the worst of COVID-19, grows more food than it needs, and has so much to offer when we want to take a break? ”

My family and I had an amazing week in the South Island during the recent school holidays and you forget how bad it could have turned out for all of us.

Explore our **free media tracker** from LexisNexis® Newsdesk with interactive charts providing near real time insight into the way coronavirus is developing across the global media landscape. Find the latest news, business updates and research materials to keep you on top of the current pandemic crisis in New Zealand at the [LexisNexis COVID-19 information centre](#).