



Will the pandemic change our working patterns forever?

– By Dave Seager, Managing Director, SIFA Professional

“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent; it is the one most adaptable to change” – Charles Darwin.

Firms and individuals had to adapt swiftly to the lockdown in 2020, so hopefully as we need to adhere again, we are in a stronger more positive position now to adopt those learnings and practices. Law firms, indeed, all businesses providing valuable professional services, will no doubt be enhancing how they work with their existing and new clients remotely. Even with vaccines in full roll-out, the question to be asked must be, is remote working still seen as a transitory alternative or, in some cases, as a new normal?

We have all become very accustomed to client and team meetings in the virtual world and certainly this medium has demonstrated it can support a highly personal and effective interaction, for those elements of the process not requiring a wet signature.

From a business management perspective, whether it be that of a financial advisory firm in my world or their law firm partners', remote meetings are cost and time efficient. It would not be unreasonable for firms to consider the impact that travel and office costs have on their balance sheets, considering the proven viable alternative.

In addition, we cannot ignore the view of individual employees and last June, a survey of over 2500 solicitor staff, by **RollonFriday.com** revealed that over 42% wanted to either work only one or two days in the office and a further 10% had no desire to return to an office environment at all. I have read and witnessed younger staff value the team camaraderie of the office environment, whilst perhaps more senior team members are content to continue working from home. Before the pandemic only 2% wanted to work permanently at home, so the impact of the pandemic on our thinking has been marked.

For firms and individuals therefore, there are many choices to be made, and none of them are easy. The SRA has helpfully issued guidance and continues to do so, for lawyers working remotely and has made it clear that it would expect to see all processes established for staff interacting with clients that way, to be documented. This means more work for the COLP, who already must implement firm-wide practices and processes expected under the new Firm Code of Conduct.

A law firm will need to agree on remote working processes,

such as the remote execution of wills. Thankfully, the SRA in its guidance and the **Law Society has issued support** for your thinking on this. On this subject, I would strongly urge you to speak to the financial planning partners you have selected for your third-party referrals, because they are receiving and encouraging enquiries on their clients' wills and will be looking to refer to a trusted and robust process.

Therefore, 10 months on from the start of the first lockdown, the question of remote is here to stay. Having had to adapt and adopt more flexible policies, firms have reported in many areas that it has not impacted efficiencies. I hope that management and COLPs will embed the secure, compliant systems expected for sharing documents and communicating with colleagues, professional partners such as financial planners and accountants and, of course, their clients. If this is the case, we can – for now – be confident in our staff working remotely and, in the future, perhaps become comfortable with the notion that working in the office or at home will become an individual choice.

This should be based on the situation and the individual needs of the client. I have little doubt that all law firms, as indeed financial planning firms, will want to include at least one face to face meeting during the advice process. Whether this is in the office at the beginning of the process, essential perhaps for a new client, or at the end will vary and the use of technology will allow this. Because of this, working from home, will, in my opinion, become part of the new normal for many but not all and how this is managed will be the key to its success. ■

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