

# Lessons from the pandemic: how to blend old with new in client service

By Katherine A. Helm and Nathan Smith, Dechert LLP

SEPTEMBER 7, 2021

*Change is the law of life and those who look only to the past or the present are certain to miss the future. — John F. Kennedy*

Even prior to the pandemic, client service in BigLaw has become ever more starkly competitive at a local, national, and international level. For those who are seeking to seize the initiative and become change agents, the pandemic has offered an opportunity to evolve and improve the way in which lawyers foster existing relationships with colleagues and clients virtually.

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We are designing a new normal.*

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This article looks at the efforts that have served these authors well as cross-border colleagues over the past year and a half, the lessons learned through the process and how to benefit from integrative, sustainable change in a post-pandemic world.

## Keeping one's house in order

In order to thrive in what is, unquestionably, a new era, law firms must create a cohesive and unifying culture. Whilst this may seem axiomatic, the changes in working life and culture since we all went virtual have presented both challenge and opportunity to create this space. In some ways, the combination of a global health crisis and initiatives for social justice reform has made law firm life less hierarchical and more accepting of viewpoint diversity. We need to be intentional about these efforts as we begin to embrace a post-pandemic world. We cannot wait for normalcy to return. We are designing a new normal.

Explicit steps must be taken to engage with lawyers at all levels within a firm to embrace communities of people with different backgrounds and identities to bring the best range of unique perspectives to bear on client service. While partners are often the face of business development activities, it is frequently a team endeavour, particularly in terms of support and preparatory work. Partners and other senior lawyers will find it difficult to rely on that support without empowering their fellow team members. This is especially pertinent in view of the transition to a hybrid working model. Junior lawyers will need to feel engaged, but such engagement will need to be juxtaposed with the recognition

that the past 18 months have afforded a much greater degree of autonomy to the way in which junior associates work.

The move away from the centralised command and control model has been swift, but those firms that correctly recognise that it is permanent will have a head start on those who clamour for a reversion to the previous era. Junior associates have worked from home effectively without direct supervision, and so, going forward, they wish to feel trusted and autonomised.

Firms must also accept the inevitable truth that all employees will not be working in the office five days a week, 52 weeks a year. Inevitably, the hybrid model will triumph. However, firms must also not forget that, while people will appreciate the flexibility this affords them, it can also come at a price. It may be convenient to work from home on a personal level, but it can come with professional trade-offs. Remote life can limit mentorship opportunities for all attorneys, particularly those from underrepresented groups.

This is where it is important to use technology to enable people to feel connected, such as hosting remote social events. At Dechert, we hold "coffee roulette" meetings, in which half a dozen people (usually two partners and four associates) are selected randomly to meet online to talk informally about life and work.

## The video call culture

As with so many aspects of COVID-19, the onscreen environment of "Hollywood Squares" arrived suddenly and inevitably for many lawyers. Although there are plenty who bemoan the expedited cultural and professional change, the fact that virtually everyone now has access to, and is familiar with remote conferencing platforms such as Teams, Zoom, or an equivalent, brings with it a myriad of new possibilities. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the new video call culture has made an already small world that much smaller with its personalization and familiarity.

On cross-border matters, lawyers in international hubs such as London or New York can be as effective for overseas clients as someone who is in the same location and, for those firms with a substantial international presence, establishing cohesive trans-continental teams allows those groups to address a client's need at any hour of the day.

Whereas we used to benefit from the proximity of our local colleagues down the hall, now that videoconferencing is part of our daily routine, we habitually call on colleagues in London or Hong Kong in equal measure. As a result, we can draw on a much larger pool of multitudinous experience, perspective, and insight to best serve our clients (and hopefully not sacrifice too much sleep in blending the workday across time zones).

### Client shared technology

One aspect of developing client relationships erstwhile overlooked is the ability to work on documents together with a client through the screenshare functionality on most video call platforms. This feature provides a technical boon by offering collaboration with a “remote” client to draft work product on a live basis and can provide a tangible benefit in turning around a document in a shorter time. It also has the added benefit of cultivating both the personal and professional relationship, especially if there is a sense that you are “in the trenches” together, which is the solid foundation of all fruitful client relationships.

This roll-up-your-sleeves shared working environment also lends itself to coordinated brainstorming with clients and colleagues that are physically distanced. Many of our technological enhancements, such as webcams, broadcast-quality microphones and ring lights mimic the intimacy of an actual conference room and provide opportunities for lawyers and clients to generate a better understanding of each other as people, not just business professionals.

A person’s home background may offer talking points to help build a professional and personal rapport, such as the view from their window or a picture of a favourite sports team on the wall. Likewise, an “interruption” from a child or a pet during a meeting can provide a moment of levity to the team and such occurrences have become so commonplace that embarrassment or apologies are a thing of the past.

### Virtual bar conferences

It is no exaggeration to say that for many attorneys, their preferred annual bar conference was a highlight of the professional calendar, offering the chance to meet existing and potential clients, to build their individual and firm’s profile, and to stay up to speed with industry developments. The cancellation of nearly all such conferences for a prolonged period has been a source of frustration for those dissatisfied with the virtual substitutes.

But for those individuals and firms willing to confront the challenge, the well of opportunity springs forth from the desert of despair. We have seen first-hand the benefits of hosting remote conferences in place of similar events which used to be held in person. Speaking engagements at virtual conferences permit the participants to engage with a wider remote audience, and the events can be recorded and disseminated more widely for later viewing of those unable to participate in real-time.

When Dechert has hosted such conferences, it has given us the platform to enhance further client engagement by offering speaking opportunities to clients across the globe and to engage with their peers in the industry worldwide with the click of a button. This can help to build or cement a lawyer or a firm’s reputation as a leading player in the industries in which they operate.

### Content creation

In a similar way, the pandemic has also resulted in significantly increased content creation, such as remote workshops, seminars, and webinars, as a way of interacting with contacts. If deployed well, this can also be a great tool to interact with existing or new clients and to continue to build a platform and reputation, especially as people are now much more willing to engage with such content. However, as the adage goes, quality over quantity should be a key consideration with this type of content as its proliferation has led to a degree of saturation. Zoom fatigue is real and multitasking is an ever-present source of online disconnectedness.

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In this respect, the authors have found that smaller, targeted, and thoughtful focus on topics of direct interest to clients and their broadened professional roles during the pandemic can be a welcome respite from the seemingly 24/7 workday. Providing a product that delivers specific value as a timesaving mechanism is always welcome.

### Conclusion

We now have increased agency over our own workday experience, and it is an inexorable truth that how we spend our days is how we spend our lives. How will the changes of the past 18 months translate into a post-pandemic world? With sharpened focus, sustainability and staying flexible with hybrid work policies.

The greater sense of freedom and flexibility to think and act with increased purpose, intentionality and practice is one we should not squander as we move forward in developing our post-pandemic habits and routines. We need to practice being present and develop good single-tasking habits amidst the cacophony of incessant matters.

As challenging as 2020 and 2021 have been, with challenge comes opportunity and we now have a wealth of new approaches to enhance our professional profiles, cultures, and client service. Moving forward, a successful approach to client service and business development will inevitably involve a healthy and proportionate blend of the old with the new.

## About the authors



**Katherine A. Helm** (L) is a partner in **Dechert LLP**'s New York office. She is a frequent speaker and writer on women leaders and the business of law, across the U.S. and in Europe, and is a founder of the New York chapter of ChIPs (Chiefs of Intellectual Property), a global nonprofit organization with thousands of members dedicated to advancing and connecting women in law, technology and regulatory policy. She can be reached at [khelm@dechert.com](mailto:khelm@dechert.com).

**Nathan Smith** (R) is a senior associate in Dechert's London office. His practice focuses on the international protection, development and enforcement of intellectual property rights. The authors work closely together on the international discovery aspects of a U.S. pharmaceutical patent litigation.

This article was first published on Reuters Legal News and Westlaw Today on September 7, 2021.