

Adapting in the face of COVID-19 lockdown

The pandemic is forcing law firms to change the way they work in order to meet new and ongoing client needs.

Over recent decades, professions the world over have had to re-shape their business practices in response to vast technological change.

The legal profession, however, steeped as it is in centuries-old customs, has been one of the slowest to adapt.

Principles such as confidentiality, attention to detail and risk minimisation are core to the professional practice of law, and many firms have been hesitant to move to a digital and more flexible world in which conferences take place online, signatures are provided electronically and staff work from home.

The coronavirus pandemic, however, is forcing change upon them and some have been able to move more quickly than others.

"During the COVID-19 outbreak, the legal profession has struggled to keep up," says Justine Taylor, a principal director at Uther Webster & Evans Solicitors (UWE), a general practice law firm based in central Sydney. "Legislators had to update our laws to allow for an online world whilst balancing security."

As social distancing measures came into play and NSW faced lockdown, UWE acted quickly to protect its staff and clients while maintaining the same high level of service, says Taylor. The firm's directors - Vivian Evans, Joseph Antoun, Michael Garvin, Kay Huntsman and Taylor - implemented new ways of operating, including establishing



UWE's Michael Garvin, Justine Taylor, Kay Huntsman, Vivian Evans and Joseph Antoun.

home offices and adopting digital protocols for court appearances and conferencing.

"We have been able to take COVID-19 in our stride and see these difficult times as an opportunity to acclimatise and evolve as a team," she says. "Because we are a general practice, our staff cover many areas of expertise. This has enabled us to adapt as we haven't been pigeon-holed into a specific area that has been brought to a standstill."

UWE has teams across areas including: litigation, family law, estate planning, estate litigation arising from disputes over wills,

powers of attorney and guardianship, insolvency and debt recovery, and criminal law, as well as conveyancing, leases and property law.

The pandemic has seen a higher demand for wills and estate planning, estate litigation and family law. These increases highlight the many distressing impacts of the coronavirus, and UWE has been able to provide advice and support while carefully maintaining social distancing measures.

In some areas the law itself has lagged the new reality. For example, the Electronic

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Transactions Amendment (COVID-19 Witnessing of Documents) Regulation 2020, which enables certain documents to be witnessed online, only came in to effect on April 22.

"While we waited for the law to catch up, UWE created our own unique protocol to execute wills and estate planning documents by video link that worked within the parameters of the law as it then stood," says Taylor. "The legislation has now caught up, but our system was implemented well in advance."

Given the far-reaching economic impact of COVID-19, the UWE team has also been advising clients in relation to insolvency and leasing, an area that has been subject to a number of legislative changes.

"We are expecting this to continue well after the health crisis has abated," says Taylor.

In this fast-evolving uncertain time, UWE has overcome the legal industry's more general resistance to change and maintained its commitment to assisting its clients, says Taylor.

"We continue to provide the same professional quality of service that we have always provided and we are doing so with a new set of tools at our disposal during times of isolation."