

MANAGING JUNIORS AND NEW JOINERS IN THE “COVID NORMAL”

Managing junior members and new joiners to your team is a well-known and well-documented business challenge — but doing this in an entirely remote setting is a whole new ballgame. Since March 2020, most companies have had little to no face-to-face meetings, and many employees are yet to even set foot in their office. This presents managers with new challenges and opportunities.

While a large part of Lawyers On Demand’s (LOD’s) workforce has been remote for over a decade, we’ve typically found that our more junior lawyers and paralegals have predominantly worked in the office. Now that this isn’t possible, we’ve been doing a lot of thinking about how best to support this group. As a result, we’ve prepared a guide on best practice for the remote management of juniors and new joiners.

As well as drawing on our expertise, we spoke to leading General Counsel, thought-leaders and paralegals across Europe and the Asia-Pacific. We married their feedback with organisational management thinking from leaders in institutions like Cambridge, MIT and Harvard, distilling their advice into six categories:

1) Think about the width and depth of your communications

We have more communication channels than ever. Just think about the notifications you receive on an hourly basis — texts, emails, phone calls, social networks, and instant messages (like WhatsApp, Slack or Teams). Then add in the burgeoning demands of video conferences across multiple different platforms. Our communication landscape is so fragmented that you can easily get lost in the sea of options.

To combat the communications confusion, you might consider a “comms playbook”, sometimes referred to as “rules of engagement”. This will provide your new joiners with a clear reference on “when to use what”, tailored to your organisation. Email might be for substantial matters or with external parties; Slack might be for communicating with different business functions (like IT or finance); and WhatsApp might be for more casual or social interactions. This will be equally helpful for juniors, who’ve spent a lot less time working in businesses than the senior members of your team. This may even be their first professional job.

“One GC told us that she sets her communication expectations with new joiners straightaway — on a day full of meetings she wouldn’t respond to email, but she can respond to more urgent requests over Teams, for example.”

You also need to consider the impact of the richness of communication. A glib assumption that people make is that the more high-fidelity the communication, the better. And in some ways, that’s true. Video does enable us to communicate with body language. But this doesn’t immediately equate to better. As Assistant Professor Ella Hafermalz said on our LODcast on remote work, sometimes low-fidelity is a better option — it doesn’t invade so far into our home lives. There is a balance to be struck here, but don’t assume that video calls should be the default medium.

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2) What structures are you giving them?

This is about providing your juniors and new joiners with clarity about what you want. Particularly early on in a new relationship, the less left to chance or assumption, the better. Tell them how you want it delivered (format), when you want it by (deadline) and the kind of information you expect to receive throughout the task, project or matter (updates). One easy way to ensure you’ve been understood correctly is to get them to playback the instructions.

Part of providing structure is giving them the flexibility to work in a life-friendly way. Often our minds jump straight to the difficult balancing act many working parents and carers must manage, forgetting that many juniors are in tricky home situations because of COVID. Living in a cramped flat-share means back-to-back video calls can be a real challenge — not just on the communal internet bandwidth but also because of the human fatigue that accompanies long video calls held from inside someone’s small bedroom.

“One GC introduced 15-minute bi-weekly ‘huddles’ to quickly align, prioritise, delegate (including upwards delegation) — but also to reduce longer, more draining meetings.”

Early on, it’s likely your new joiner or junior will have a lot of questions. There are a couple of strategies here you might want to adopt. If you are managing a team of juniors, you might consider setting up an hour a week as a time you’re available for any questions or consultation. Another strategy that you should consider is assigning them a buddy. This should not only allow your new joiner or junior to ask questions more freely but also allow you to focus on other priorities. The buddy system has been established as a key element in successful onboarding and a way to boost productivity.

3) Training & development 2.0

One of the biggest concerns we're hearing from the market surrounds how juniors can grow and develop outside of the office environment. As a profession, the law has been comfortable with how it trains juniors. You bring them into the office and present them with some structured, formal training, but the bulk of the learning is done in situ: sitting with seniors, learning from colleagues and taking part in some client-facing work. The concern here is around the degree to which this is replicable in a virtual environment. But perhaps the problem needs to be reframed — it's not the degree to which you can replicate that experience; it's finding the best way to train juniors in a digital environment. It's the time to reimagine, not re-create.

In some respects, parts of your training program should become easier. Getting your juniors involved in the more strategic discussions is easier than before — for example, they can dial into client calls or senior leadership meetings as silent members with ease.

"One Head of Legal found it easier to take trainees and junior lawyers to senior-level meetings because they could join on Zoom with their camera and microphone off — something perhaps a little easier than them sitting in traditional physical meetings. This meant they could attend a wider variety of matters than before."

Spend time to put pen to paper on your training and development policy. It should be a key part of your formal talent management strategy — something covered in detail in our recent report with Terri Mottershead – *Building the next in-house legal team*.

4) Culture is more than your statements

Culture is not a list of value statements. It is not a ping-pong table or a SodaStream. Put simply, culture is the quality of human experience and connection. Culture lives through people's interactions, so your focus should not be on aspirational declarations but on how your people are interacting with one another. Focus on creating a knowledge-sharing culture — a place where people feel encouraged to ask questions, share insights and collaborate without hesitation. Without the physical proximity of working in an office, this is easier said than done. Leadership here can often be done by role-modelling the virtues you want to see — ask questions, share what you're working on and show them your multidisciplinary workstreams.

Beyond the encouragement of an open, knowledge-sharing culture, think about asking your juniors and new joiners what support they're after. This can help provide grassroots-style self-organisation and greater buy-in from them. It's also one of those things that is so obvious it often gets overlooked. Some of the best ideas can come from juniors and new joiners, who can offer a fresh perspective — so ask them what they think!

At LOD, we have been using a "Random Buddy Generator" for our HQ staff since the start of COVID, and it's been enormously successful and even praised by Professor Heidi Gardner on her guest appearance on our LODcast on remote work. Beyond the onboarding buddy mentioned above, you might think about randomly pairing up your remote workforce with a buddy on a weekly or fortnightly basis. This is even easier now with innovations such as the Icebreaker-Bot for Microsoft Teams, which essentially automates the process of allocating a buddy and setting up a meeting time.

5) A genuine focus on well-being

You need to go beyond platitudes and offering an EAP (employee assistance program) helpline. You need to check in on your juniors and new joiners proactively and regularly. You don't need an academic journal to tell you that if your workers feel ignored, they won't perform their best.

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To combat any feelings of abandonment or isolation, we recommend a multi-pronged strategy: weekly check-ins, buddy systems (as mentioned earlier), wider corporate social activities, and ensuring they always have someone to talk to about how they're getting on. Another part of the strategy is to provide your workforce with mental health days and to take the lead in encouraging healthy and sustainable working practices.

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6) Opportunities and risks

The COVID crisis, like many crises before it, offers us both challenges and opportunities. It's clear from speaking to the market and reading more widely that the first reaction is to ensure the well-being of your team. One of the biggest risks for your juniors and new joiners is to feel abandoned or isolated — and ultimately disengaged from your team.

It's important to remember the real opportunities that can present themselves. Reverse mentoring has been growing in popularity across the board, and one of the General Counsel we spoke to found it a neat way to 'kill two birds with one stone' — help your juniors network and learn from seniors, while also helping those more-experienced practitioners with their issues, often technology-based.

Conclusion

Out of sight cannot mean out of mind. With your workforce working remotely, it's vital to ensure your newest and most junior team members are properly supported. Hopefully, this has helped provide structure for **your** thinking and some practical and actionable points.

Paul Cowling



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