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Part 3: A look at COVID response in Pittsburgh law firms

By Zandy Dudiak

The COVID-19 pandemic hasn't been all bad for the legal profession.

The *Lawyers Journal* talked with three representatives from different size firms with offices in downtown Pittsburgh to get a perspective on how the pandemic has changed the way they operate today. While recruiting and pandemic fatigue remain as challenges, the ability of colleagues to work and meet remotely has saved firms, attorneys and clients time and money since Gov. Tom Wolf ordered a shutdown of businesses and courts on March 19, 2020.

Those interviewed are Sandra Fantini, legal administrator, Papernick & Gefsky, a small firm with eight attorneys; Mark Hill, COO, Houston Harbaugh P.C., a medium-sized firm with 37 lawyers; and Kathy Sullivan, CHRO, Clark Hill, a large international commercial law firm, with 27 offices and 1,200 colleagues.

LJ: Looking on the positive side, what was one good thing that changed in your firm because of COVID?

Kathy: I do think the pandemic has presented some opportunities. Lawyers have been doing things the same way for 100 years. We have had to reimagine how we work. Lawyers have adapted very well to technological changes. Those previously resistant have been forced by necessity to be resilient.

Mark: The pandemic forced us to get out of our comfort zone regarding technology and the reliance on paper. We found that we can work remotely and be just as effective and responsive to clients, if not more so. We also found that we can work with digital files as opposed to paper files. While that last part is not true for everyone, we are seeing more paperless files being opened.

Sandra: We found that our flexibility made for efficiently handling client cases remotely. We have been about 80% paperless in our office for the past 10 years, and because of that working remotely was easy and required only technology changes.

LJ: Did the shutdowns or the pandemic itself create any delays in court cases or increases in pandemic-related cases?

Kathy: Our practices have been very busy. Transactions have been at a high volume, and there has been new work because of the pandemic related to the CARES Act, PPP loans and other pandemic-related implications.

Sandra: I don't think COVID caused any transactions to "blow up." We have had to delay a closing or have cases

delayed because of hospitalizations, client exposure or COVID infection. Litigation in the courts has been postponed or delayed because of a party having COVID. But it hasn't been crippling. One issue we had was that Philadelphia was behind in recording deed and mortgage transactions. We had postponed some appeals, postponed cases and had some delays in recordings in some areas, but now everything seems to be back on schedule.

LJ: Have recruiting and retention strategies changed in law firms at all?

Kathy: It was a challenging market going into the pandemic. At this point, some people are "rethinking" their lives. Some have opted to retire. It's a challenge replacing them. We are interviewing remotely to hire new lawyers. We have open positions and a lot of opportunities. Legal practice support is also changing and may continue to be remote. Not necessarily from home but maybe not in the same location. Being open to innovative ways of working will be key.

Mark: The biggest work challenge created by the pandemic in my opinion is recruiting. I am not sure where everyone went, but I know there aren't many people out there looking for legal jobs. We continue to use the traditional recruiting methods to attract talent, but we are also trying to think outside of the box. We have also spent a lot more time creating retention plans. We try to stay up on the latest articles regarding recruiting to better understand what current job seekers find as important must-haves in a potential employer.

Sandra: Employment is the biggest post-COVID challenge. That's the struggle right now for all of us. I don't know where everybody went. We've been trying to hire someone since August. I think what COVID did for a whole generation of people was open them to examining their quality of life. We have been trying to hire someone since summer of 2021 and have found few candidates in the marketplace. Of those interviewed, about 90 percent volunteered that they were vaccinated. The vaccination didn't impact my decision on hiring them or not.

LJ: Do you feel comfortable with where everything is now?

Kathy: It's a new normal. Pandemic fatigue is a real thing. The pandemic is dragging on and causing people to have fatigue with Zoom meetings and the lack of interpersonal contact. We must find a way past this. The COVID-19 pandemic is very real. We did lose a few employees to COVID. It really has had an impact on everyone's overall well-being.

Mark: I believe we are as comfortable as we can be. We often ask our staff and attorneys during individual and group

meetings via Zoom if they feel safe being at the firm and if there is anything we could be doing better regarding our COVID-19 protocols. To date, everyone has said they feel safe and are appreciative of the communication of the firm's management team.

Sandra: Everyone in the firm was eager to get back. We were always flexible before COVID, but we have fine-tuned remote working so that it's easier and we are prepared for another shutdown wave, should that happen. We've weathered it, adjusted to the new routine and we're doing well. This was an unknown that hit all of us. It's required patience and flexibility. It's brought mental health to the forefront. Unfortunately, people were already worried about different things. This really pushed a lot of people. The pandemic is not going away, but together we will get through it. ■