



Précis Paper

How Are Young Lawyers Surviving COVID-19?

Abstract – New graduate lawyers haven't tasted collegiate legal life and have been struggling with working remotely. Barrister Reimen Hii is used to support from colleagues and is seeing its effects too. He discusses with lawyer Ben Ryan, who was a member of the Queensland Law Society Early Career Lawyers Committee throughout 2020, how to navigate choppy legal waters during COVID-19.

Discussion Includes

- Effect on how you run your business
- Work/life balance
- Mental health
- Stories during COVID
- Rethinking your future
- Changes to commitment to profession
- New normal
- Advice for law students

Précis Paper

How Are Young Lawyers Surviving COVID-19?

1. In this edition of BenchTV, Reimen Hii (barrister) and Ben Ryan (lawyer) discuss the impact of COVID-19 on new lawyers and experienced barristers more familiar with collegiate support.

Effect on how you run your business

2. Early on, in March-April 2020, there was a period when everyone was unsure what to do, especially the courts. In the federal courts, there was a period where a lot of matters had to be adjourned because the court was still trying to grapple with how to deal with the pandemic. The Family Court was always busy and it wasn't unusual for the court rooms to be packed with people.
3. In Queensland, while there was that lull in the first two months while everyone was adjusting, that resulted in the traditional end of financial year rush getting pushed towards September, October, November so it was overwhelmingly busy towards the end of the year.
4. In court appearances have had a drastic change in how they're done and how they feel.
5. Around the office, it was quite a challenge to set up remote work, with significant upfront costs. After the initial heartache of setting up for online it was possible to cope but there are a lot of horror stories of people having to come into the office as they were unprepared or not able to work at all from home. There are Cyber security issues if systems are not properly installed and secured.
6. It has changed the way we run our business. The collegiality of the legal profession has meant people are helping each other out. Mentions and interlocutory matters are being managed. There's still a bit of trouble doing trials by video link. Interestingly, it has resulted in more cases being settled at the "foot" of the courtroom steps, whether that's a good or a bad thing.

Work/life balance

7. The days of 8 to 5 work are certainly long gone for a lot of people. It's hard to switch off when you're so accessible. This will be a long-term issue as it has been previously.
8. Set some boundaries and give yourself some breaks. Some people try to keep to a normal work schedule and mentally prepare for the day and then mentally log off.
9. We each have to find our own way to find a balance or we face burn out.

Mental health

10. A routine is important.
11. A lot of colleagues are struggling with work from home.

12. Resources include the LawCare and the QLS resilience and wellbeing portal. Also, the Queensland Young Lawyers Association (QYL) – join your local group, it's nice to feel that there are others battling with the same things.
13. The Bar Association offers something similar for barristers at BarCare (www.barcare.org.au) where they help fund confidential and free counselling and mental health services. Members can access these services, speak to someone and get diagnosed if that's necessary, where they're struggling, and there has been a bit of an uptake of those services during COVID.
14. Reimen is on the Queensland Committee of the Asian Australian Lawyers Association. Having that network has been very supportive during COVID. Some have faced behaviour from members of the public which has caused anguish. It gives a chance to debrief. At the Bar, people are sole practitioners, depending on your Chamber group you might not have that support there.
15. Find a group that resonates with you. It's useful in many ways. You have the opportunity to expose yourself to a lot of different practice areas and even look at different career paths.

Stories during COVID

16. We haven't been able to have as many face-to-face events. A lot of contact involves going online.
17. A lot of organisations have offered their CPD for free.
18. In one case where everyone was still getting used to the technology, malfunctions with the technology in the court have resulted in people relaxing, being less uptight.
19. Law graduates had only just met their Supervising Director and their team when COVID sent them home. They're sitting with nothing to do and haven't established connections with their colleagues yet.
20. Very few people have a nice even workload. You are either flat out or have nothing to do. It's a challenge for young lawyers or junior lawyers to pick up the phone to call their Supervising Director.
21. It has highlighted the importance for junior lawyers to have frequent contact. Find a way to do it with weekly or alternate days zoom meetings. There are horror stories of junior lawyers sitting at home staring at the wall. COVID has highlighted the need for team meetings. Don't be afraid to ask.

Rethinking your future

22. This year has forced everyone to take a step back and ask 'is this what I'm happy doing?'
23. More organisations are offering bar practice exam study courses.
24. It has given people an opportunity to reflect and try different things. There's time to reflect on your practice, style of advocacy. A lack of work hasn't always been a bad thing.

- 25. Long-lasting changes are likely to be around infrastructure – being more flexible about working from home, picking up side work like tutoring.
- 26. It has led to a lot of introspection in the profession.

Changes to commitment to profession

- 27. A lot of lawyers have been admitted into their professional careers and with COVID had their world thrown around. A number of law graduates have not joined the profession.
- 28. One great thing about COVID is it has forced everyone to a lot of self-reflection and to reconsider their careers and some decide to go off and do something else.
- 29. The language in the response of the profession is very reminiscent of the time of the GFC. But what it does is open up opportunities to think creatively and take a more unconventional path in your legal career.
- 30. Reimen went to Cambodia and developed a life-long interest in humanitarian law. He suggests considering something like AVID – Australian Volunteers for International Development (www.australianvolunteers.com) where they recruit volunteers using their legal skills to capacity build in a foreign country.
- 31. There's no need to throw your hands up in despair. This is an opportunity to see what options are available, what you can do with a law degree.
- 32. Have a look through LinkedIn, see all the lawyers in your area.

New normal

- 33. Changes have included adoption of flexible working style, more adoption of new technology, document management systems, asking everyone to send paperless briefs.
- 34. The new normal for the profession will mean further integration of technology, mentions, application of video links for witnesses overseas. But there is still a set of principles we need to work to.
- 35. Blurring of the legal role, a shift towards not just being a legal advisor, you can support someone having a legal dispute. An expansion of the legal role, bringing more human nature to the role, within the confines of your practising certificate.
- 36. It's critical that there's a shift away from looking at people as a dollar value.

Advice for law students

- 37. Don't let COVID put a stop on what you want to be doing. You can't put your life on hold. Don't give up on a legal career or any career because of COVID. Get involved with local committees, volunteering. The skills you employ to assist at a Community Legal Centre you will also employ in the law.
- 38.** If you are concerned about the possible lonely nature of working for yourself as a barrister, reach out to other barristers, ask if you can shadow them, see what life is like in the role.

BIOGRAPHY

Reimen Hii

Barrister, Inns of Court, Brisbane

Reimen practises across a number of areas of law - alternative dispute resolution, commercial, common law/personal Injury, equity, family law, guardianship and international public/administrative law. He co-founded the Queensland branch of the Asian Australian Lawyers Association and was recognised as Australian Young Lawyer of 2019 by the Law Council of Australia.

Ben Ryan

Lawyer, Hillhouse Legal Partners, Brisbane

Ben works primarily on commercial disputes, structuring and intellectual property matters to help clients achieve strategic and commercially sensible results. Ben has been a member of the Hillhouse team since 2013, transitioning from Law Clerk to admission. He became a solicitor of the Supreme Court of Queensland in 2018.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Organisations

Asian Australian Lawyers Association www.aala.org.au

Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) www.australianvolunteers.com

BarCare www.barcare.org.au

LawRight www.lawright.org.au

Queensland Law Society Early Career Lawyers Committee

Queensland Young Lawyers

Abbreviations

ICL – International Criminal Law

IHL- International Humanitarian Law

PLT - Practical Legal Training

CPD – Continuing Professional Development