

STARTING A JOB REMOTELY

For lawyers settled into their career journey, there can be many perks to working from home. But what about the graduates who were just getting started when Lockdown 2.0 hit? **RACHEL SETTI** explores.



For those in well-established legal careers, remote and hybrid working brings with it challenges and rewards, the pros and cons of which are well documented. On one hand the opportunity to dispose of the daily commute, and increased personal autonomy, is welcomed, though on the other hand burnout and home-work delineation are front and centre problems.

However, I'd like to focus on our colleagues who are new to the profession - graduate and junior lawyers. For them problems related to remote and hybrid working arrangements are magnified for many reasons. Issues include, but are not limited to, reduced learning opportunities, limited relationship building, and restricted ad-hoc support, all of which are the building blocks for any successful legal career. A further (perhaps less obvious) issue, is graduate lawyers are less

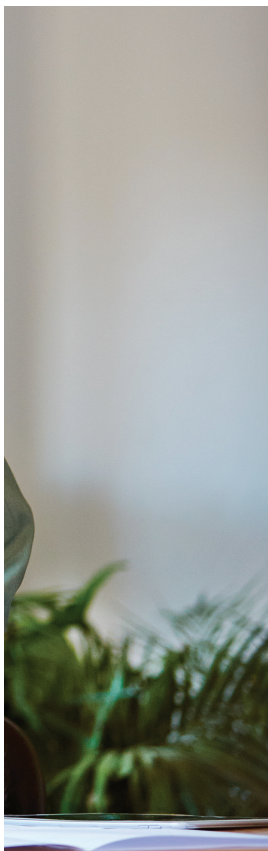
likely to have the resources required for comfortable remote working. They may live in smaller quarters than their senior colleagues, or be juggling a young family, yet still need to maintain focus and productivity. Unsurprisingly, a Black Dog Institute resilience toolkit reports that law students and young lawyers are the most vulnerable cohort in the profession.

Adults learn through trial and error, direct experience, practice, consolidation, and meaningful exposure to relevant information, but these learning principles are not easily accessed in remote working circumstances. Young lawyers have reduced access to observation opportunities (often referred to as "learning by osmosis"), exposure to client meetings, ad-hoc discussion with their seniors, camaraderie building, organisational culture immersion and so on. In fact, such is their detachment that

many new recruits complain that they wouldn't recognise their colleagues if they saw them on the street.

It stands to reason that providing a well-considered induction for graduate lawyers joining under remote working conditions is a worthwhile endeavour.

Here are some considerations: organisational culture is difficult to convey when working remotely, though proactive role modelling can make all the difference. For instance, consider the "always-on" culture that remote working has produced. Whilst long working hours is a longstanding issue within the legal profession, new graduates are eager to please and will take cues from senior partners and associates as to how to structure their day. If their seniors are sending emails well into the evening, graduates are likely to follow suit. Proactively consider the messages you impart



to your graduates so that you can lead by example.

Remote working unfortunately lends itself to increased ambiguity and miscommunication, especially for less-seasoned professionals who are unfamiliar with the firm's organisational culture. To address this, ensure clarity and structure when briefing junior lawyers including specific deadlines, format, and reporting requirements. In doing so remember to balance this with "stretch" goals (high effort, high risk goals that encourage growth) and a level of autonomy commensurate with the lawyer's capability. In other words, collaborate (ask, don't tell), maintain a two-way feedback loop and include regular, informal, individual and group check-ins in lieu of office kitchen conversations. These needn't be long meetings, though they are vital in providing opportunities for relationship development, and help ensure that questions, concerns and queries are addressed early.

We all have different work and communication styles. Some naturally prioritise tasks, only calling on others to discuss specific work content, whilst others focus on developing relationships and achieve goals by accessing their networks. They prefer frequent and ongoing interactions. Neither is right or wrong, though teams function best when their members tai-

lor their communication to differing styles. To this end, observe and explore your graduates' working styles and agree on preferred communication modes that accommodate you both. This also applies to training courses, which now often provide several options for content delivery. Consider a combination of interactions including email, phone, online and walking meetings which can be done in person with those in your LGA or within 5kms of home (at the time of writing). A client recently conducted an induction meeting with a new lawyer while walking along the beach. Apart from discussing business, the relaxed environment helped them develop interpersonal connection and trust, arguably the main building block of any solid working relationship.

The current remote work environment has opened the door to new working norms, and fortunately there are some silver linings. Capitalise on them. Take, for example, online meetings: they lend themselves to camera-off, inconspicuous observation of seniors conducting meetings (with client consent), which is far less intrusive than in-person interaction. It illustrates that with some imagination we can use the gifts that remote working has bestowed us and, just possibly, it may even lead to some better outcomes for junior lawyers. **LSJ**

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WITH ANNA HINDER

Q: I have a new team member and they keep letting me down. I've tried to be patient and understanding, but it's now getting really annoying. What can I do to improve things?

A: At the point where things have become annoying it's going to take a combination of patience and trust to improve things. Defined by Mayer, David and Schoorman back in 1995, there are three different ways we can feel let down in working relationships. To make positive changes in each of these areas it's going to take a deep breath and a good dose of patience (and preferably don't try to combine with home schooling).

Ability to meet goals. If the person has been letting you down on the productivity front, the focus needs to be on solid delegation and supervision. Ensure you are giving the same resources and assistance you would give a perceived high performer to avoid setting up the person to let you down again. Focus on expectations to be met and impact when they are not. Don't forget to make it safe to let you know if things haven't gone to plan. Try not to rely on "take care of this" or "over to you" – unless their degree was in mind reading rather than law, it's not giving them a chance to meet your expectations.

Care and concern. Missed details, a lack of interest and not being proactive are all ways that a team member can let you down when it comes to care and concern. Just like a well-wrapped item that arrives safely in the post, trust can be lost, and annoyance grows when people don't take care. Ironically, the more care you give to a team member, the more likely they are to display care towards you and your clients. It's a form of discretionary effort and if they feel that it's not seen or acknowledged it can reduce over time. A little bit of positive feedback can go a long way when the working relationship has become tense. A simple thank you that acknowledges effort, rather than taking things for granted, can make a difference.

Integrity. A final way a team member can let you down is with their integrity – or the lack thereof. Where a person hasn't acted in line with your or the firm's values, where a code of conduct has been breached or where dishonest behaviour has come to your attention you need to discuss it openly and constructively. The key area to pay attention to is their reaction to the issue being raised. Did they miss a deadline and try to blame it on someone else? Did they make a mistake and not take responsibility for it? Did they show interest in understanding things from your perspective? Aim for the type of patience that you would give to a client meeting with this team member to repair things and be able to move forward.

These are all hard things to do in face-to-face communication and can be more challenging when working remotely. Be clear about what type of improvements you would like to see and the benefits for both you and the other person. Finally, try to focus only on the part of trustworthiness that is most critical and then move to another. Regards, Anna



Anna Hinder works with professionals to improve the performance of firms, teams and individuals. Anna looks for practical solutions to tricky people problems that are informed by the best available research. [linkedin.com/in/annahinder](https://www.linkedin.com/in/annahinder)
searlstreet.com.au