



Looking Back At 2020

Law Department Management





Many people say they want to forget the year 2020. COVID-19 has had a distressing impact on the world, but I admire our global society showing that we are an adaptable and resilient human race. Without a doubt, our working environments will never be the same. In addition to COVID, violations against Black men and women across the United States led to prolonged protests and a surge of social justice movements. The tragedies leading to the protests have made the need to take action undeniable for organizations and individuals.

When COVID lockdowns started, legal ops teams were in survival mode. The focus in March and April was simply to keep legal departments productive and connected. As the year progressed, the mindset evolved to transitioning traditional business processes to a long-term remote environment. Our current state reminds me of a phrase by former White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel: “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. It’s an opportunity to do things that were thought to not be possible before.” Both COVID-19 and social injustice are troubling issues, but it’s what we do in these moments as a society and professional community that will drive positive change for years to come.

Working remotely full-time has changed the way we work. Keeping employees connected was a top priority early in the lockdown. Applications like Skype, Jabber, and Teams have replaced the in-person “drive by.” Using video to conduct meetings from our homes felt odd at first but is now a

universal experience. While these tools help keep people connected, worker isolation is a real issue that needs to be understood and addressed. Keeping everyone actively engaged and informed is a part of that process. Another new employment challenge is the on- and off-boarding of employees. When legal department personnel leave, what is the best way to welcome new staff without having any direct interaction? These are the questions we need to ask now.

One of the first changes we made in our legal department was a transition to performing notarizations remotely. Some of our staff had to go to banks during the lockdown to get documents notarized. As a risk-averse company, employee safety is a top priority, and this situation was not acceptable. The legal ops team and some of our department staff did some digging and learned we could perform notarization services virtually. Several of our notaries got remote online certified and communicated the change to the company. We now have a more efficient process available that can continue for years to come.

During the initial lockdown, many areas of the legal world were put on hold. The waiting period is now over; the legal industry is finding a way to continue in the new socially distanced world. A few months ago, if you had asked an attorney if they wanted to run a deposition, trial, or hearing remotely, they would most likely have told you absolutely not. The industry is evolving, and legal operations professionals are leading the way. Trials and hearings are taking place remotely and the legal teams involved need support to ensure everything goes smoothly. Legal ops team members are enabling these dramatic changes through establishing new remote best practice checklists and procedures, implementing applications, acquiring and setting up equipment, as well as generally helping with printing, e-signatures, and technical support.

Operations teams are also seizing the moment for making lasting changes regarding diversity and inclusion. Projects are moving forward that may not have had the needed support in the past due to lack of priority. Just as COVID-19 has reprioritized many efforts and resources, social justice movements have done the same. There are many different ways to make lasting change, refer to my September Legal Ops Brief column for suggestions and resources regarding diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Due to the many successes of remote work, companies and legal departments are actively assessing their workforce of the future. After months of process innovation and continued employee productivity, companies realize employees do not need to be in the office to be effective. And yet we are only now understanding some of the negative impacts of remote work and will have to continue to adjust. Legal ops teams are leading assessments and initiatives to change the way departments function. This past year was a long journey for legal ops professionals, from being reactionary and simply keeping the lights on in the early spring to permanently reshaping how corporate legal departments operate later that same year.

2020 Vision

For more lessons in-house counsel learned from this infamous year, visit ACC Docket's website: accdocket.com/articles/2020-insights.cfm

[Julie Richer](#)



LEGAL OPERATIONS AND DISCOVERY MANAGER

AMERICAN ELECTRIC POWER (AEP)