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Webinar - Covid-19 crisis management: what law firms should be doing for themselves and their clients

A webinar presented by the IBA Law Firm Management Committee
19 March 2020, 1300 – 1400 GMT

Chair

Tahera Mandviwala, TDT Legal, Mumbai, Website and Communications Officer, IBA Law Firm Management Committee

Moderators

Hanim Hamzah, Zico Law, Singapore, Senior Vice Chair, IBA Law Firm Management Committee

Stephen Revell, Freshfields, Hong Kong, Secretary-Treasurer, IBA Law Firm Management Committee

Speakers

Hwa Soo Chung, Kim and Chang, South Korea (part of the firm's Covid-19 crisis management team)

Maria-Pia Hope, Managing Partner, Vinge, Stockholm

Shannon Selden, Debevoise & Plimpton, New York (part of the firm's Covid-19 crisis management team)

Rosario Zaccà, Joint Managing Partner, Gianni, Origoni, Grippo, Cappelli & Partners, Milan

Synopsis

The IBA Law Firm Management Committee, in its continued effort to support its members during the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, put together a panel of highly experienced law firm leaders from around the globe for an interactive webinar on this topic. Panellists from different jurisdictions, including those severely affected by the virus and others anticipating its fast spread, candidly discussed their experiences so far in dealing with the Covid-19 outbreak, and explored Covid-19 crisis management for law firms and their clients.

Report

The Chair, Tahera Mandviwala, introduced the webinar as being an effort to timely share experiences and thoughts on how law firms can best tackle the sudden Covid-19 crisis. She explained that the webinar would be divided into two segments – the first, dealing with the internal aspects of Covid-19 crisis management for law firms, and the second, dealing with the external aspects, including assisting clients.

Stephen Revell moderated the first part of the webinar. Various matters relating to internal crisis management were discussed including issues relating to agile working, travel restrictions, interaction and communication with clients, change of strategy, use of technology and business development and maintaining visibility.

Hanim Hamzah moderated the second part of the webinar. While discussing the external aspects of crisis management for law firms, key issues including working of courts and litigation practice, dealing with and assisting clients on virus driven matters like employment, force majeure, stock exchange disclosures, handling AGMs, etc., remote meetings with clients, setting up special Covid-19 teams, and proactively interacting with clients, were discussed.

Hwa Soo, who is part of Kim & Chang's Covid-19 response team, shared her experiences from South Korea. The firm has put social distancing measures in place. Professional staff are encouraged to work from home, while a staggered shift system has been introduced for non-professional staff. The firm has also set up a Covid-19 task force made up of senior partners and health and workplace safety lawyers. Taking social distancing seriously, most client and internal meetings are remote and the firm is taking a long term view for clients. As there is a surge of requests from clients on Covid-19 issues, extensive information and advice are being provided through newsletters, and selected advice is being provided pro bono.

Maria-Pia Hope is the Managing Partner of Vinge, and she shared her experiences in dealing with a Covid-19 positive case within her firm. The firm had to close the office and their staff have been working from home since. To keep everyone informed and connected, they have weekly virtual staff meetings. These are not strictly work-related and sometimes include contests like cutest pet, to keep things a little light and keep everyone's morale up. The firm also realised that there is a need to have clear thinking around data security. It continues to investigate the impact of GDPR on working from home. Their situation also made them realise that they had to take the crisis seriously and develop a business continuity protocol. They are now monitoring the situation very closely and are thinking not only about how the firm's current technology can support working from home, but also how the firm's budget and staffing requirements for the long term would have to change. Client work is still flowing in, enquiries by clients include concerns relating to the changing macro-environment due to the pandemic.

Shannon Selden is part of Debevoise & Plimpton's Covid-19 response team. She joined us from New York. Globally, with the exception of the Hong Kong office, their staff have been working from home since 15 March 2020. They only have a few staff members working in the office to ensure that servers and systems are running smoothly. The firm's technology has been enhanced to enable staff to work from home productively. All 150 partners worldwide stay in touch through phone calls and video conferencing to ensure that the partnership is on top of the situation and to discuss the firm's overall approach. The firm has created an online central repository for sharing information with clients as the situation continues to unfold and they have sent out targeted emails to particular clients on specific issues. They have also ensured that clients are briefed on the continuation of services specially for litigation matters. They have seen many new matters and questions coming in for capital markets and M&A (especially enquiries around whether deals are going to be closed or changed due to the crisis).

Rosario Zaccà, Joint Managing Partner, Gianni, joined us from Italy, one of the hardest hit jurisdictions at the time of the webinar. They have also made efforts to properly communicate with their staff and clients to ensure everyone knows that the firm is there for them. They have invested in technology to ensure that their staff can work from home productively. They have also, through newsletters and the like, been keeping their clients abreast with the

ongoing developments as the government announces new measures. Current client queries in Italy mostly relate to employment, contracts, supply chain and manufacturing issues that are affected by the lockdown.

While concluding, all four panellists emphasised the importance of constant and effective communication with clients and staff. The audience was very interactive and raised several queries which were also addressed by the panel.

The IBA Law Firm Management Committee will continue to make best efforts to help and guide its members through these unprecedented times. Do keep an eye on the Law Firm Management Committee page for news, updates and events relating to Covid-19.