

Flexibility in the Face of COVID-19: When Culture and Technology Align

Written By **Angela P. Doughty, CIPP/US** (apd@wardandsmith.com)

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We didn't know what we would be asked to do during the pandemic, or how flexible we would all need to become to continue work during this unusual year.

Here are just a few examples of how Ward and Smith has aligned our technology, our processes, and our clients-first culture to "pivot" to serve our clients during 2020.

e-Files Only: Ward and Smith has used a secure online platform for document management for years, and this year, during the middle of the pandemic, we converted to a 100% e-file system for all internal document management. This allows anyone in the firm to access whatever document is needed, reducing any inefficiency caused by lack of access to a physical file. If you wonder how we can pull something from five years ago so quickly, that's how!

Webinars: Ward and Smith is known for our events. We put on several large conferences each year and enjoy seeing our construction, employer, closely-held business, and in-house counsel clients and friends. But 2020 put a stop to that, and we pivoted to the Zoom webinar. The firm has now hosted more than a dozen webinars on topics ranging from "Community Association's Directors and Officers Coverage" to "How Cancel Culture Affects Corporate Counsel."

Virtual Court Representation: We also think of ourselves as a "high-touch, high-quality" firm, and prefer to meet with our clients, opposing counsel, and judges in person. However, 2020 had other plans. We now have multiple dedicated video rooms set up for court proceedings that are completely platform-agnostic and wired for quality video, including backgrounds and lighting, and quality sound. We can take care of our client's business virtually as needed or required by the relevant jurisdiction, via Zoom, WebEx, Skype, Go To Meeting, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, BlueJeans, CourtCall, or Adobe Connect.

Online Services: This year, more than ever, clients needed help over a screen-only interface. Ward and Smith introduced four new services offered online. We helped businesses determine whether they should take a Paycheck Protection Program ("PPP") loan via our PPP Loan Maximizer; we offered an Online Liability Waiver Review for businesses operating during the pandemic; we created the "LGBTQ+ and EEO Handbook Policies Review," a convenient and cost-efficient review of a company's employee handbook and Equal Employment Opportunity statement related to nondiscrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity; and we offered "The Essentials Package," simple online wills and trust documents from Ward and Smith Board Certified Specialists in Trust and Estate Law that go beyond any "do it yourself" kit.

All of these projects required a level of technology and teamwork from the firm's stakeholder departments and were delivered quickly in response to the needs of clients during COVID-19. Many of our senior team members are trained in process improvement and project management, and that common language helped all of us pivot, respond, and succeed.

Co-Managing Director Brad Evans remarked, "We knew we were a flexible, resilient culture before the pandemic. We had to work remotely due to flood damage in New Bern and hurricane damage in Wilmington, so our team's processes and secure IT solutions were already in place. What we didn't expect is how well our people would respond to a long-term change in how we operate. I tell people that I'm relieved and thankful that we are able to be so flexible in how we deliver our services. We have some staff and attorneys who are fully remote, working from their homes, or in some cases, in another state to be closer to family."

Brad continued, "We have some who are regularly coming into our offices, and following all of our strict mask and sanitization protocols. We have a few who are bouncing back and forth depending on what they want to do, and how much they miss seeing their colleagues."

Co-Managing Director Devon Williams added, "It's been amazing to see how adaptable our team can be, and now, how comfortable we are jumping into each other's homes via our Zoom platform. In some ways, it's easier to see people face to face because we're a 'camera-on' workplace, and encourage our team members to check in with each other."

Devon closed our conversation about the alignment of culture and technology with, "We joke that asking 'How's your mom doing?' is the first sentence some of our attorneys ask in a meeting. But that sense of caring about each other is what keeps us close, and I value it."

Ed. Note: Angela Doughty leads the firm's Intellectual Property Practice and is also Ward and Smith's Director of Legal Innovation. She is responsible for moving the firm through the implementation of process improvement, design methodologies, and innovative technology.

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