



Isolation Doesn't Always Mean Loneliness — A Corporate Legal Team's Victory Against COVID-19

Skills and Professional Development



“And once the storm is over, you won’t remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won’t even be sure, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won’t be the same person who walked in. That’s what this storm’s all about.”

? Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*

It was noon on March 15, 2020, in Bangalore, India. The sudden announcement of a nation-wide lockdown caused waves of panic among the entire Infosys legal team working on the second floor of Building 2 of the Infosys head office. Right in the middle of a client negotiation, I had to rush home upon hearing the government announcement. I was filled with shame and embarrassment at ending the meeting abruptly, but I had no choice. I raced outside to see that everyone was running around, packing belongings to vacate the building as soon as possible. I thought, well it’s only 10 days, and picked up my laptop and left. Little did I know that those 10 days would turn into months and maybe an entire year.

Today, it has been more than nine months since the onset of COVID-19. Many lockdowns around the world have lifted, yet we are still far away from our old lives. The pandemic has caused a huge change in much of the world’s working model. Clients and service providers are exploring new ways of conducting business. Changes to our clients’ business models create new challenges for legal, from contract to employee structure. But this pressure is an opportunity for our creative minds to create better solutions for our clients, our teams, and our organization.

By mid-March, COVID-19 had already spread across Europe and the United States and was slowly entering India. With about 1.3 billion people, India is a populous country. The very thought of COVID spreading through a nation with layered economic classes, many below the poverty line, scared me. All Infosys offices across the globe were locked down, and we were mandated to work from home (WFH).

Working from home used to mean something different to me. It was a day with fewer work hours since I would mostly apply for WFH on days when I had some other personal appointments or commitments to take care of. But not this time. It was taking the form of a new normal, day after day. It was not just WFH, it was isolation within the four walls. The first few weeks of lockdown were filled with spikes of anxiety, stress, laziness, and chaos. It was the first time that our entire team was working remotely and trying to attend client meetings, handle kids, do home chores, and more. It was as if our entire routines and structures of our lives were destroyed by COVID-19 overnight. We were all confined in our homes and juggling different personal and professional commitments.

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The Infosys Legal Team (ILT) is a dynamic and multidisciplinary team of approximately 130 legal professionals operating from various locations worldwide. We are headed by our General Counsel Inderpreet Sawhney. We have members in Bangalore, India (headquarters), London, Frankfurt, New York, Indianapolis, San Francisco, Sydney, and Shanghai. The team primarily consists of the members of Infosys Limited (IL), Infosys BPM (IBPM), and EdgeVerve (EV) legal teams and other subsidiaries. We function in an integrated manner, co-ordinate with various units and departments within Infosys, and support Infosys' growing business across verticals and geographies.

The ILT negotiates agreements with various parties on behalf of Infosys, drafts and advises on company policies, advises on legal compliance with respect to global operations of Infosys, employment, labor, and HR related issues, and advises on risk mitigation and management measures that may be adopted by the company in all aspects of its business.

For the purposes of organization structuring and ease of resolution of issues, the team is divided by functions such as global commercial contracts, litigation, and insurance; global employment and immigration law; office of integrity and compliance; mergers and acquisitions and legal corporate matters; government and public affairs; and further sub-divided by the geographies: Americas, United Kingdom, Europe, APAC (Asia Pacific, comprising of Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, and other Asia Pacific countries), and IMEA (comprising of India, South Africa, and Middle East countries).

Soon, we realized that the lockdown was not going to end anytime soon. Our General Counsel Inderpreet Sawhney came up with the idea of initiating a group chat on Whatsapp so we could share ideas and pictures of steps we were taking to stay centered and calm amid this worldwide pandemic.



We traded recipes of our favorite meals.

This was followed by a very positive initiative by our manager Florian Lorenz who ensured that we had all the necessary infrastructure to WFH, taking extra care of our desk requirements, network connection, etc. COVID-19 did isolate us, but it could not make us feel lonely, as we found ways to connect with our team. We started having weekly video conferences to have some face time with our fellow colleagues and quarterly conferences with our leadership. Our leadership motivates us during these tough times, supporting us and ensuring no one is laid off. Our HR team organized monthly discussions on Fridays called *Chai pe Charcha*, which means discussion over tea. These discussions help us cope with the vacuum of not meeting our colleagues on a daily basis in the office. We celebrated Pink Day for awareness of Breast Cancer remotely, wherein team members made efforts to connect virtually in splashing pink outfits.



Team members wearing pink for Breast Cancer Awareness Day.

COVID-19 challenged the business of our clients and in turn us as a team. Infosys is a global IT leader in next-generation digital services, outsourcing, and consulting services with clients in more than 46 countries across the globe and in various spaces like retail, manufacturing, banking and financial services, engineering, energy, life sciences, and consumer. Infosys' business solutions and services help accelerate innovation, increase productivity, reduce costs, and optimize asset utilization.

We were bombarded with challenging situations, queries, requests from internal stakeholders on various aspects of our contracts like data security, business continuity plans, and safe work from home environments for our employees working at client sites or in client's networks. Clients started looking for a change in their business model. They wanted to shift from an onsite people model to an offshore model with more stringent security measures. As a team, we took measures to promptly notify our clients of the changes happening and the steps that we as an organization would take to ensure business continuity. We had to revisit our contracts and make suitable amendments to the necessary provisions. All this was supposed to be done on short notice and within a limited time period. Hundreds of thousands of our employees stranded in different locations had to be brought

back to their homes. This demanded enormous contract and employment related work for us as a team and collaboration with other internal stakeholders, like finance, tax, information security team, data privacy team, facilities (for migrating people), global travel desk team, Visa team, customer facing team, and project operations or delivery team. Numerous team calls across the globe at various time zones enabled us to navigate through this maze and fulfill the demand of the hour.

The clear boundaries of professional and personal life were becoming thinner and overlapping. We were working around the clock due to the absence of clear office hours. We had situations where we had to attend meetings with our toddlers right beside us. It demanded multitasking and proper planning. This is when as a team, we started setting boundaries to ensure that neither our professional nor personal lives were compromised at the expense of the other. Every Friday, our leaders send us a motivating email reminding us to take time off during the weekend to spend time with our families and do something that makes us happy.

Obviously, there are days when all the advance planning does not work, but on most days, it helps our team cope up with challenging times and maintain our mental well-being. We've planned online Yoga, exercise classes, a reading club, and kid's activities for our team members with children.



Keeping our children busy with arts and crafts.

As the days progress, we have found ourselves to be more in control of our day-to-day activities thanks to boundary-setting and empathy towards each other. Despite the chaos created by COVID-19, and the challenges that it has posed, we as a team are emerging from this storm stronger in all aspects. We are better lawyers, better parents, better team players, better cooks, and better human beings.

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Vijita Verma is senior corporate counsel at Infosys Ltd. She has more than 12 years of experience in commercial contracts and has worked with clients across the globe.

