NOVEL RESPONSES: HELPING LAW FIRMS ANSWER CLIENTS’ COVID-19 QUESTIONS

LITTNER MENDELSON’S NOVEL RESPONSES TO THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

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By late February, however, the volume of direct client inquiries was beginning to overwhelm the shareholders. Library leadership was invited by the Chief Knowledge Officer to a strategic planning meeting to address the increased volume and urgent nature of these requests. Following this meeting, the needs of the Task Force attorneys were quickly matched with the unique skills of the firm’s librarians and legal information professionals. Littler’s Knowledge Desk and Knowledge Management Department were offered as key partners to meeting pressing client needs.

As client inquiries and concerns increased daily, the majority of their questions raised novel issues. A decentralized response process can sometimes lead to incongruous answers and to the frequent “reinvention of the wheel.” Providing consistency in the advice and counsel provided was paramount. The original Task Force grew exponentially as new areas of employment law were implicated in the situation, and transitioning from workplace safety issues to leaves of absence and compliance issues and matching the client’s need with the most focused subject-matter expert (SME) was critical.

Getting the Library Involved
With these issues in mind during the early stages of the strategic planning, library leadership offered to match the skills inherent in the research department with the needs of the Task Force. There was an immediate need to track incoming questions, assign the appropriate SME, and balance workloads among the Task Force members. In reviewing questions the Task Force received, it became clear that existing firm work product could assist in answering many of the repeated client requests. As documents were both identified and created, the information was categorized, curated, and stored for future use and easy accessibility. The Task Force needed better communication tools to share lessons learned with the firm, and there was both a need and opportunity to issue-spot and identify trends to enable the firm to provide...
proactive advice to clients. Finally, as the virus continued to spread, local, state, federal, and international laws were changing literally by the hour. The Littler Knowledge Desk and knowledge management (KM) department set up detailed monitoring of news and legal updates to keep the firm and clients informed. Each of these issues presented unique challenges and risks, but information professionals are well versed in averting such risks. We collect questions, answers, build repositories, and, with frequently needed information, create novel databases or tools for reuse. Applying these skills to provide much needed service to the Task Force proved invaluable.

Littler’s Knowledge Desk collaborated with KM attorneys and the KM Innovations team to build an internal SharePoint page of COVID-19-related resources structured with Littler’s taxonomy. These foundational resources provided a cataloging system that would be ready for the next wave of arriving materials supporting client counsel, as the pandemic and its employment law implications continued to evolve.

Tackling the Problem
The Knowledge Desk reviewed each incoming request, sending toolkits, providing curated information, and as needed, escalating questions to Littler attorneys for further review, response, or triage. The Knowledge Desk team offered expertise in tracking requests using already established systems in ServiceNow (a digital workflow management system), populating tickets directly from questions emailed to the Task Force, and creating new ticket request categories. By utilizing existing tracking tools, analytics were provided to manage the workload and provide insight for future planning purposes. Initially, workflows and procedures changed nearly every day as attorneys and legal information professionals adapted to the influx of requests and new partnerships. Librarians worked tirelessly to keep up with demand and create a fluid process, which resulted in a strong partnership with a single point of contact for attorneys.

BEST PRACTICES
Responding to New Opportunities

- Stay involved in the strategic vision of your organization to identify potential opportunities.
- Look for opportunities; don’t wait for them to come to you.
- Speak up and offer your skills, knowledge, and tools.
- Find examples of previous successes to prove your idea, and share them with management.
- Embrace the idea that you can make a change at any level in your organization. You don’t have to be a director to share new ideas.
- Build a culture that embraces new opportunities.
- Identify champions in the library that will lead the team in new initiatives.
- Don’t wait for perfection or be afraid to fail; improvements can be made down the road.
- Ensure that your team gets recognition for their work.
- Promote your successes.

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Further helping to align the Task Force with the ever-evolving response to the pandemic and workplace compliance challenges, the KM team created a repository in the document management system (DMS) and applied our taxonomy for efficient findability. As new tracking reports, documents, memos, and guidance were created, librarians and KM attorneys worked closely with other attorneys to organize their content into marketable toolkits and other client deliverables. As the Knowledge Management department is the research front line for our 50-state surveys and legal trackers, additional COVID-19-related executive orders tracking was led by this team. Partnering with the attorney-authors of the new COVID-related guides and toolkits meant Littler’s taxonomy and cataloging system would be applied to centralize, organize, and streamline the creation and maintenance of the COVID-19 response materials.

Examples of trackers created and maintained by the KM team include all federal, state, and local employment laws, regulations, and ordinances; state and local business closures executive orders; state-mandated industry-specific guidance; court responses; and eventually, state reopening plans. As new tracking reports, documents, memos, and guidance were created, the Knowledge Desk involvement allowed attorneys to spend their time handling the more sophisticated nuances and concerns of clients while the library made materials and answers to the most commonly asked questions readily available.

The Aftermath
Littler’s Knowledge Desk response has been praised by firm management for its integral role in the success of the COVID-19 Task Force. Not every day was easy, however. The world—science, policy, work environments—was changing daily. At the same moment that the Task Force was ramping up responses to clients, the firm’s workforce began working remotely. When remote work initially began at Littler, each department was asked to identify critical staff, who were then given the ability to work from home. With the dramatic increase in demand and the excellent work from the Knowledge Desk, firm leadership quickly recognized the need to increase the library’s remote workforce. The library team was one of the first departments to receive additional laptops, bringing all available staff back online. Opportunities are rarely convenient, but the work ethic of the library team shined through the urgency of the first few weeks, even when the answer to some questions was “I don’t know,” or “We’ll find out tomorrow.” The skills of legal information professionals proved necessary for the success of such a large undertaking. Librarians help, respond, organize, and create. They observe, track, analyze, and report. Littler’s Knowledge Desk applied these fundamental skills to the Task Force response and continues to provide expertise as projects evolve, new litigation trends emerge, and firm leadership again looks to the library to evaluate critical decisions about the business of the firm.

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