



**Briefing**  
SMARTER LEGAL BUSINESS MANAGEMENT  
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▲ BRIEFING TIGER TEAM

# Paws for people thought

The second Briefing Tiger Team session with Pinnacle took on challenges from remote people development and resource management to sustainable leadership and maintaining appetite for change. Richard Brent summarises what he heard

In the second of our **Briefing** Tiger Teams, our assembled leaders considered the top management challenges they were now seeing in their roles across the entire firm after several months of lockdown, regardless of specific business function.

It should come as little surprise that people were top of the pile this time – fundamentally, supporting and somehow developing them when the future of so much is still so unclear.

Brian Dunlop, director of strategic pricing at White & Case, recommends: “Schedule enough non-work-related communication to help people feel more connected and included in all things. Obviously, we are losing so much of the face-to-

face dynamic of offices – at desks, in the kitchen, on the way to lunch.”

Karen Jacks, chief technology officer of Bird & Bird, echoes this: “We’ve been very careful to ensure we meet much more regularly to try to replace the use and feeling of some of the ad hoc meetings around office spaces.” At the same time, more formal occasions such as performance reviews have needed some extra thought from her as well. “First, being on video simply isn’t the same as being in a room with somebody. But I think there can also be a tendency for the conversations to drift, particularly toward responses to the crisis and the strangeness of the situation.” There was, of course, significant performance put in by people before mid-March 2020.

It's perhaps an illustration that technology can't fix everything – and Sid Welham, chief operating officer of HFW, also begins with a remote people-development challenge. For him, it's the fact that one new tranche of the most junior employees were walking into offices for the first time only weeks before they were closed.

“When you're new to an office environment, you're picking up information all the time just through being there,” he says; teams have worked on virtually recreating some of those dynamics and experiences. And then there's the challenge of officially supervising someone remotely when you've only just met.

Welham adds that while it's true a solid remote-working platform, plus adequate trust, can make for increased personal productivity, it's important to keep an eye on any significant creep in the number of hours worked.

“You need sustainable leadership – an example needs setting to help others to be quite disciplined with their own working days and routines,” he says. International firms, managing projects across multiple timezones, might be particularly susceptible. “You don't want the expectation to develop that everybody is at the end of a laptop absolutely all of the time to reply to emails from the other side of the world.”

“Considerations around the reopening of offices adds quite a weight to business-as-usual work for leaders, and I think as a leader you also need to have your EQ antennae turned up to an even higher level of listening than normal.” But he agrees this is significantly harder to manage from home – that only adds to its importance.

Jacks adds: “You wouldn't be continually available in the office, and I try to encourage my own team to structure their days into working hours as works best for them personally. On the other hand, some locations in the network are already back in the office more regularly than others, and that makes for another management challenge.”

### Greater future focus

Welham continues: “We've also had to think hard about how we conduct pipeline forecasting – understanding how busy we are, and in which parts of the business, and how much that is likely to change month after month.” It's quite fortunate, he explains, that at the point of lockdown the firm had just started to roll out a new resource-

management framework, “part of which is about getting lawyers to forecast forward more than they have in the past.” It's one example of how law firms could take a leaf out of books run by businesses such as the Big Four, he adds: “You really need to know exactly where you're going, especially when trading conditions are so challenging, so that you can potentially flex resource.”

“The framework has enabled us to flex geographically, cross-sector, and even within offices. I think it also promotes stronger collaboration, and a richer experience for employees, as people are working with colleagues with whom they otherwise might not. That's good for their progression through the organisation.”

Jacks agrees that this area is a likely contender for current project books – it taps into effective team management and development as well as forecasting, she says. “There can be a perception in law firms that you need to be visible to get the good work and, of course, at the moment you can't be. The anecdotal partner casting their eye about for the best person to work on a matter isn't an option anymore.”

“Another important area is the development of both partners and associates when it comes to their own business development. We have some technology in place so they can input into that and manage their practice group objectives in quite a collaborative way.”

Dunlop adds: “We've sharpened up our focus on closing time quicker, as that also helps to accelerate understanding of how busy our teams are. Time recording has generally not been good in legal, but this was a real success – we halved the time it took in around one week.” In fact, that produces another challenge, he says, as performance on any given day suddenly looks surprisingly good compared to last year!

He also says White & Case has seen the same higher demand in some areas more than others. “We're moving some people to help in practices like our top-tier restructuring practice, which is much more busy than last year, as well as exploring allowing some more strategic pricing proposals where practices aren't as busy.”

### Certainty principles

Tony Pullman, head of business transformation and chief operations officer at Pinnacle, says cash is just as much the king at his business, as it

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*Karen Jacks, chief technology officer, Bird & Bird*



appears to be at law firms needing to project their future activity and revenues more accurately. “We have many of the same challenges – we record time, chase people on their time recording, and need to ensure forecasting is as tight as possible. Our law firm clients are also asking us for greater visibility into project budgets and delivery updates, so we’ve needed to get smarter at getting that information ourselves.”

Transparency with clients has been highlighted as a driver of change for some time, so what of demand for the information our Tiger firms can potentially open up to clients in a crisis?

Welham says: “Clients are looking for greater certainty in what are clearly going to be challenging times around spend, and you need to manage a balanced view of where you can take out cost. For that you need good historical data about the spend, and the firm is indeed working more closely with clients to deliver greater granularity of that information and use it to propose measures that can provide more certainty.”

Dunlop agrees that this trend had been coming down the track long before Covid-19, however, and the firm is just now rolling out some new technology to enable partners to keep clients updated on actual work done against estimates or caps. He adds: “Where partners have to be really careful is in ensuring an estimate doesn’t become a cap in the mind of the client – that’s where communication is so key.”

While reliable information is always vital for good decision-making, Pullman at Pinnacle says a lesson from lockdown at his business has been to “move a bit faster” than perhaps feels naturally comfortable at times, rather than “planning absolutely everything out to the nth degree.

“We had to adapt our approach very quickly in terms of things such as support and training on projects, and develop a new toolkit for the times – and I think law firms will also need to be

thinking about training or developing their people toward a similar mindset to keep the momentum behind change this situation has brought.”

Jacks says: “You certainly can’t afford just to stand still for however many months when there’s no international travel – we’ve really had to rethink some aspects of remote project delivery.”

Innovation work also continues, she says: “People have had to change fast to face something they haven’t faced before, and it has made them more willing to give things a go. We’ve just started two proof-of-concepts quicker than we would have in the past, and I think this is the time to start introducing other new things.”

Welham agrees: “You can still have an active innovation process of failing fast in the current climate – not being afraid to fail, being creative – as long as governance around projects is tight enough that costs can’t run away.”

And Dunlop believes there’ll be a significant amount of remote working to manage the various impacts for the foreseeable future: “The devil is in the detail. We’ve done a lot of thinking about the new office space, and the number of desks that can be occupied together could effectively split teams up, which may result in less cohesion than currently.” He’s not convinced it would be valuable to have half the team in an office and half at home for no good reason.

Then factor in the calculation that in one New York building it could take an individual up to an hour to get from the ground to their desk in the first place. “I don’t think the situation is binary, but it would certainly be entirely inefficient to have my team spending hours trying to board trains that are crowded and don’t allow social distancing,” he says.

It sounds as though that new, more nimble legal business mindset – adapting, accepting, questioning and evolving – will be needed for some time yet. ▲

Introducing

# Briefing<sup>^</sup> Tiger Team<sup>^</sup>

**Tiger Team** is a problem-solving approach used to investigate, and hopefully solve, highly critical and complex issues. Experts in a range of areas are brought together from different centres as required by a specific work project or programme.

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**Briefing** and partner **Pinnacle** decided to try the concept out on law firm strategy. Could the perspectives of multiple functions operating in different firms perhaps make greater sense of a given business management challenge?

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