Resilience During Times of Uncertainty

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Clio published its first COVID-19 Impact Research Briefing this month, and the results have provided a clear-eyed look at both the challenges and opportunities the legal industry is facing.

Demand for legal services has dropped—at least in the short term. The number of new legal matters being opened each week fell by over 30% by early April. Of the consumers surveyed, 49% said they'll likely delay reaching out for help until after the coronavirus pandemic has subsided.

Amidst this sharp change in the legal market, lawyers and legal professionals are facing a challenging new reality, and it's taking a personal toll. The majority of law firms reported that their day-to-day operations have been significantly impacted (77%). Simultaneously, the majority of legal professionals surveyed said they're experiencing increased stress and anxiety (76%), with almost half of them reporting they were more concerned about their financial future than about their health (46%).

The law is a demanding profession, and industry-wide challenges with anxiety, burnout, and depression are well-documented. But during this global pandemic, it's imperative that lawyers do whatever they can to take care of themselves as best they can in their current situation. Your clients need you. Your family needs you. You've accepted the hard work of upholding the laws that hold our society together, but you still deserve to hold yourself together.

If you're struggling with mental health or wellness, there are plenty of skilled professionals who've made it their mission to help lawyers through these challenges. Jeena Cho, co-author of The Anxious Lawyer and a practicing bankruptcy attorney who also writes about and teaches mindfulness, meditation, and stress management to lawyers, recently spoke with me on our Daily Matters podcast about the power of resilience and how lawyers can manage this crisis from a wellness perspective. Paula Davis-Laack, former lawyer and Founder and CEO of the Stress & Resilience Institute, also shared some insightful strategies to help lawyers through this time. I'd encourage you to listen to both conversations.

And, take heart that while demand for legal services has fallen in the short term, there's more to the story. Our research also found that 60% of consumers said they'd still seek legal services from a lawyer rather than deal with an issue in some other way. People still see lawyers as an essential service for society, and want to use them—they're simply facing barriers to getting legal help right now.

52% of consumers surveyed said that if they had to deal with a legal issue in the next few months, they would not be able to afford the associated legal costs and fees. This matches what we're seeing on the ground. National and state bars are trying to bridge this gap by increasing access to pro-bono legal services. Meanwhile, 58% of consumers say they'd prefer to meet a lawyer via videoconference or over the phone rather than in-person.

Clients still have legal needs—in fact, they have more legal needs than ever. But they are in search of law firms that are designing new ways of addressing those needs in a client-centered way, designing a totally new *experience* calibrated to the new realities and needs. That experience is an integral part of the whole package your law firm offers, right alongside actual legal services. Firms who can successfully match their offering to what clients are looking for will not only survive, but thrive in today's legal market.

To find out what your clients want, reach out to past and existing clients. Ask how they are. Ask if there's anything they need, and what you can do for them. Find out what would make working with your firm easier, and be open to the possibility that a new way of working could be effective for your firm too.

For example, try offering options like payment plans, flat-fee legal services, or subscription legal services. These payment options may better meet their needs, while at the same time ensuring consistent cash flow for your firm.

In the near term, the simple act of reaching out and connecting with your clients will be beneficial for your mental health, and for theirs. Social connection matters. Your clients are likely facing challenges of their own, and your ability to be resilient and open with them will strengthen your client relationships for years to come.

The impact of COVID-19 on the legal industry has been extensive and trying for many law firms. But there remains an opportunity for firms to adapt and stay resilient. Connect with your clients. Take care of yourself, and be open to adjusting the way you work if need be. This is a marathon, not a sprint, and the future of the legal industry depends on our ability to keep an eye on the long term.

About Clio

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