

COVID-19

Amplifying the Importance of Human Interaction

By Tom Ganuchau, DRI National Director

In less than two weeks, I will celebrate the 28th anniversary of my joining my law firm. Twenty-eight years of going to the same office, having lunch in the same lunchroom, and visiting the same food court to pick up lunch. Twenty-eight years of walking the same halls, seeing the same faces, and interacting with the same people. It may seem rather routine, and even sort of humdrum, but over the past four months I had no idea how much I would miss it.

I, like you, began the COVID-19 quarantine by working from home. This seemed great at first, but I quickly came to realize how much I missed my routine, and more importantly missed the office and all in it. One positive outcome of working from home is that I actually embraced it and determined that I could truly work from home on a longer-term basis. My two twenty-something children surely considered me a dinosaur when it came to technology and my reluctance to work remotely. The COVID-19 quarantine forced me to step into the next century of technological advances and to embrace technology as a means of trying to replace even a small part of a “normal” work life, including the daily interactions with those who are a part of that life.

Our firm, like most law firms, immediately shut everything down and sent everyone home with directions for working from home. After a couple of months, we attempted to restart our office life through the use of a “Team A” and “Team B” alternating schedule, but that was quickly derailed by a spike in COVID-19 numbers, resulting in a continuation of the quarantine. Indeed, we have extended our work quarantine for at least another month. However, the attorneys in the office are welcome to work in the office under rigid guidelines. Mask wearing with any

possible interaction with others, closure of the lunchrooms (and coffee pots!) to prevent possible spread of the virus, no in-house support staff or receptionists (to keep them safe), and no visitors unless approved in advance with certain precautions. This is not the office that I have known for the past twenty-eight years: an office that I now realize has been such a large and important part of my life. An office and a work family that I took for granted.



In an effort to bring even a semblance of normalcy to my work life, I have been in the office every day for the last three weeks, but it is just the shell of its former self. What was once a vibrant, interactive, and bustling hub of activity now resembles a ghost town from the Old West, with things remaining just as they were left more than four months ago. But an office is not about walls, break rooms, conference rooms, and the like. Our office is our second home, made up of a cast of characters who all bring something special to our day, and who become like family. The crazy cousin down the hall, the uncle who is always good for a laugh, and a confidant always

available. No one to shoot the bull with, or to collaborate with, or to bounce ideas, thoughts, and issues off of. Normally there would be more than 40 people on my floor, but on a good day I may see two to three coworkers, and even then, likely only for a short period of time. Something I took for granted. If this is the “new normal,” it leaves a lot to be desired.

The COVID-19 quarantine has also affected our ability to get together with our extended family—our DRI family. Back in early March, I was able to see a number of my DRI friends at the DRI board meeting. Little did I know that would be the last opportunity I would have to be with them

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on a truly face-to-face basis for a long time, and with no end in sight. My wife and I had had a busy travel season with the holidays and having to attend various meetings and other obligations in early 2020. At the time, the thought of more travel was not exciting. Of course, once we saw our DRI family, the drudgery of travel was quickly forgotten. Little did we know that trip in early March might be our last for quite some time. No in-person board meetings, no fly-in committee meetings, and no in-person seminars. Little did we know how much we would miss the drudgery of travel and the opportunity to interact personally with our friends and colleagues from across the country. Again, something we took for granted.

But all is not lost. The technological advances that I may have been reluctant to embrace fully have provided an opportunity to capture at least a part of what has been taken from our “normal” everyday lives. Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, and other platforms have given us the opportunity to take back a little normalcy and to bring our office family and our DRI family back into our lives. Embrace it! Set up a Zoom happy hour. Schedule a Zoom lunch or Zoom coffee break. Or just go old school and simply pick up the phone. Kudos to Emily Coughlin, who early on realized the importance of interacting with our friends and family, for setting up her daily Zoom coffee.

If you have not participated, you surely have missed out. And kudos to DRI for stepping up to the plate and doing everything possible to replace our in-person interactions with virtual opportunities to connect. DRI’s offerings in this regard have been extensive. Virtual seminars, webinars, committee happy hours, our upcoming virtual Annual Meeting, and much appreciated town halls have brought DRI to its members. No longer do the members need to go to DRI events, but instead DRI is bringing the events to its members.

The COVID-19 quarantine has given DRI, our sister organizations, our SLDOs, and our state and local bar organizations an opportunity to engage members like never before. If you haven’t embraced this opportunity, you are surely missing out. This is something that I will look back on and be grateful that I embraced. Like every area of our lives, COVID-19 has changed us and amplified the importance of human interaction. A gift of COVID-19 is that many of us “dinosaurs” have learned that we can and sometimes must work remotely. However, when we do resume some semblance of our former professional lives, maybe we will remember another gift of COVID-19: do not take for granted the seemingly routine, and even humdrum offices, nor the people that comprise our work families.

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