

# A REMOTE POSSIBILITY: TELECOMMUTING DURING COVID-19

By David Stuckey

The COVID-19 crisis that has afflicted Europe throughout this unusual year has necessitated significant changes to the way lawyers work and communicate with and serve their clients. To find out how these changes played out in Greece, we spoke with **Yanos Gramatidis**, Head of Government & Privatization, and **Betty Smyrniou**, Head of Labor and Social Benefits and Aviation at **Bahas, Gramatidis & Partners**.

**CEELM:** Across much of CEE, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced most commercial lawyers, like almost all employees in companies where it was possible, to work remotely. Did that happen in Greece as well? Can you give us a brief time-line of how the process played out in your firm?

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**Yanos:** Our firm, even during the first lockdown in March 2020, provided all the necessary equipment to support

teleworking, before it became mandatory. Accordingly, almost all of the lawyers began teleworking. In the period following the first lockdown it was a mixed situation. Since September 2020, in Greece, mandatory teleworking was introduced for 40% of public and private sector employees performing office work or tasks that can be performed remotely – which increased to 50% and to the maximum of work that can be provided remotely. Our law firm complied with the new measures for office employees, and the number of lawyers teleworking has increased. There are lawyers that in principle work at home. There are other lawyers that divide their time between working at home and working in the office, depending on the needs. However, they have reduced their overall time and presence in the office for health and safety reasons.

**CEELM:** Does that mean the office shut down completely?

**Betty:** No, we didn't shut down, even during the first lockdown. Our firm remained open during the first lockdown and continues to stay open.

The staff and administration telework in shifts so that the actual personnel

present in the office is reduced – but at the same time all needs which require a physical presence are satisfied. Accordingly, we always have a receptionist/ secretary in each shift and at the same time their colleagues work at home supporting them. The same thing applies, for example, in our accountancy department.

**CEELM:** What sort of tools were necessary to make working remotely practical for the firm's lawyers? Did the firm have those tools at the ready, or was it forced to obtain and install them?

**Yanos:** Our law firm was already aware of the importance of working remotely and was 100% ready as a result of having obtained the right equipment & software even before the pandemic. Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) were set up in collaboration with Cisco Infrastructure for all employees of the firm, so that everybody could stay connected with the office. Of course, supplementary equipment, such as VPN telephone devices, web cameras, and so on, had to be purchased, and lawyers quickly became more and more familiar with the most popular meeting applications, such as Zoom, GoToMeeting, Cisco Webex, Microsoft Teams, *etc.* This helped a lot



Yanos Gramatidis

that involve Public Law and Real Estate were significantly affected, as appointments have to be scheduled in advance, slowing down the whole procedure. For example, in the Real Estate practice, appointments were required to visit the Land Registry Office. For litigation, things were a bit more difficult as during the first lockdown the courts were closed, and then, after the courts opened, they were obliged to continue their practice in the frame of the extraordinary COVID-19 conditions.

**CEELM:** How effective was it all? Did clients respond positively?

**Yanos:** Clients, especially multinational companies responded positively, as they were already acquainted with remote work.

**Betty:** Most of our Greek clients responded positively as well. Our Greek clients managed quite quickly to detach themselves from their offices and become familiar with meeting applications.

**CEELM:** Are the firm's lawyers still working remotely, or have things gone back more or less to normal?

**Yanos:** Now, as we are in the phase of the second lockdown, teleworking has been increased again, or, as mentioned above, lawyers are again dividing their time, and visiting the office less.

**CEELM:** What would you say were the disadvantages of being forced to work remotely? What were the benefits?

**Yanos:** The basic disadvantage is the risk of isolation and lack of relationships/group work among colleagues. In my opinion, web-meetings and phone

calls between colleagues cannot always replace physical presence, which allows work group members to interact more efficiently. Of course, the same thing applies with clients, as after a certain period of time, communicating only through web-meetings becomes a disadvantage in handling the relationship with the client.

**Betty:** On the other hand, working remotely allows lawyers to be more effective and leads to positive management results. For my colleagues who live a distance from Athens, not having to deal with everyday traffic from home to work (and back) is a significant advantage.

**CEELM:** What lessons did you learn from this? How do you think the legal market, in particular, will change as a result of this experience?

**Yanos:** For a significant period of time the need to work remotely will continue, thus leading to flexible attorneys who can more easily determine their own work schedules and place of work. According to recent surveys, lawyers and law firm staff enjoy working remotely so much that 67% want to continue that arrangement once offices fully reopen following the coronavirus pandemic. Betty, do you think the same will happen with our lawyers?

**Betty:** When all measures are relaxed and/or lifted, and everyday life returns back to normal, the majority of the lawyers will increase their work from the office. However, as the experience has proved that teleworking is possible also for lawyers, they will divide their time with working from home to the extent and whenever possible. ■

to maintain our everyday communication with our colleagues and clients.

**CEELM:** Were all practices equally affected, or were some more able to adapt to this than others?

**Betty:** Not all practices were equally affected. For instance, it was much easier for our Contracts & Corporate Law practices to adapt to the new circumstances. On the other hand, practices