

Top Innovators: Michele DeStefano Blossoms in Pandemic After 10 Years in Virtual World

The legal profession's future way of working will most definitely be blended (part virtual/part in-person) at the very least, says LawWithoutWalls think tank founder and law professor Michele DeStefano.

By **Michele DeStefano** | September 28, 2020 at 06:00 AM

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University of Miami law professor Michele DeStefano. Courtesy photo

MICHELE DESTEFANO

LawWithoutWalls

DeStefano is the founder of LawWithoutWalls, a think tank focused on the intersection of law, business and technology; a law professor at the University of Miami; and on the guest faculty at Harvard Law School's Executive Education Program.

Explain what innovative steps you've taken to stay productive during the coronavirus pandemic? I have been working in a virtual world for over 10 years. During the pandemic the rest of legal world joined mine! And I wholeheartedly believe that the forced move online is foreshadowing the future of working in global virtual teams in law. Further, I know from experience that although teaming virtually gets easier with practice, it remains exceedingly hard. It's hard enough to get the time zones right let alone the technology, not to mention the even bigger hurdle of managing cultural differences. Harder still is the reality that most legal professionals

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But I came across FeedbackFruits, a company that offers a suite of tools that enable interaction, peer learning and real engagement with the material. FeedbackFruits enables documents and videos to be interactive so, for example, as students read a case they will actually be stopped and prompted with a question (open answer or multiple choice). Same with a video. It also has a document-highlighting tool that is ideal for case briefing. And it enables what is normally a 100-person class to interact online in small groups so that students can see other students' answers (anonymized or not, whichever the teacher chooses, but not all 100 students, which would be exhausting). I was determined! So I met with the founders of the company, and I met with our IT/AV group and vice dean and convinced everyone that this was necessary and that we should add this functionality to our online tools. And we did! And it's been amazing. I have recorded and led a few training videos for other professors who are beginning to use the tools. And the students are loving the engagement. Essentially, having FeedbackFruits has enabled a true flipped-classroom approach wherein students are exposed to new content asynchronously through online interactive readings, videos and assessments. Our in-person class time (25 students 6 feet apart with masks) can focus on applying the concepts the students learned asynchronously and on activities that require application and analysis of the materials.

The other new hardware/software/workarounds I have used is Photo Booth and iMovie. Check out my rendition of "The Wizard of Oz" that is designed as an issue spotter for personal jurisdiction (specific and general) and subject matter jurisdiction (diversity/domicile).

Do you have any insights on what the legal profession still needs to do to effectively move forward? Living in a virtual world during the pandemic presents opportunity and risk. Just as there is a right and wrong way to team in the physical, in-person world, there is a right way and a wrong way to team virtually (regardless of our age, culture or experience). The right way includes both individual and collective accountability for connection, new energy, community, culture and commitment. The risk is that we won't start the right way (and we may have many valid excuses for not doing so), but bad habits are learned fast. The legal profession's future way of working will most definitely be blended (part virtual/part in-person) at the very least. Therefore, taking the time to set expectations and train ourselves and our teams how to work virtually the right way — right away — is worth the time and effort it takes. By pivoting and putting in the effort (input) now, we will deliver a new output: we will be legal levers (and legal leaders) doing different things differently.

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are not teaming virtually by choice. Instead they have been forced online by COVID-19 without preparation. Therefore, my focus during the pandemic has been on sharing my innovative online teaming and collaboration techniques with others. I am the founder of LawWithoutWalls, now over 10 years old, it was the first global law-innovation program that was virtual.

Through LawWithoutWalls, I have worked virtually with more than 230 global teams of legal and business professionals and students on creating an innovative solution to a real business-of-law problem. So I have more experience and learnings than anyone would want to know about best and worst practices online. So I decided to share, and share everywhere.

First, I immediately started hosting free, open webinar virtual work trainings each week on how to best work online and team/collaborate on line. These trainings not only talked big picture about culture and norm creation online but also went down to the nitty gritty providing specific recommendations for what, when and how to use different types of technology.

Secondly, I wrote an article published by the International Bar Association titled "Legal Levers in a Virtual World: Teaming Online to Do Different Things Differently." Although a silver lining to the pandemic is that the legal profession from now on will embrace and use and technology differently, I want more than that for our profession. I want more than lawyers simply doing differently the things they have always done. I want lawyers to do different things differently. Those legal professionals will be legal levers in our virtual world.

Third, I've been saying yes to everything so that I can share my learnings. I've been a featured speaker on six webinars from June to August. I helped the Association of Corporate Counsel lead their very first virtual workshop with a breakout ideation session for their general counsel, who are now collaborating and meeting online when they used to do so in person. And I most recently led an interactive session on collaboration and community building online for the University of Miami's entire first-year law school class of almost 400 students (twice in one day with 16 breakout sessions each and a prior training session with the 32 student community leaders). So the innovative steps I have taken have been all about paying it forward, trying my best to help others joint the virtual world I have lived in for 10 years.

Have you introduced any new hardware, software or workarounds to get things done? As is true for many, fear is a big motivator, and I was fearful when our law school went virtual! I was already all-virtual in LWOW in the spring, but that was not true for my colleagues. And I was scared our educational content was going to be subpar. How in the world can you teach law school with PDFs of PowerPoint decks or real-time live Zoom sessions with 100 students in a course? Who would want to watch a recorded lecture from a law prof? There are tons of fancy digital learning platforms and companies (like the one that other schools with budgets are using), but our law school didn't have the budget. So I searched for a solution. I tried oodles of different tools and products to find something that our faculty could use that was easy to use and that would help make make online learning more engaging. Most of the products were complicated or too limited or not right for the way law is taught or too expensive.

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