



As we miss the collegiality and information flow of daily life – and great events including CIASF’s – we have decided to launch several question and answer sessions with key real estate executives and thought leaders. See below for insight on how **Janis Cheezem - Real Estate Partner at Akerman LLP and as of April 1st the incoming president of CIASF** - is managing the COVID-19 pandemic.

**How are you adapting to your new norm? What does that look like?**

The new norm professionally and the new norm personally have seemingly merged together. Real estate is a team sport and I love that. I love brainstorming and starting conversations with ideas and ending them with better ideas. Now we’re learning how to play a team sport sitting in our private spaces. Technology is all of our best friend right now. We are emailing, speaking on the phone. Also, we are often facetimeing with each other when we would typically just call. In terms of daily routine, I’ve adapted. Commute time has turned into walks or runs. I’ve met more neighbors in the last few weeks than I have in the last few years – although our conversations are from opposite sides of the street to maintain the required “distance”.

**Talk to us about how the conversations with your clients inevitably changed overnight.**

Things have changed in a couple of ways. Some of our clients like to brainstorm strategies and strategic positions. Some are looking at their contracts and considering asking for deferrals of obligations and some are on the opposite side and are receiving those requests. We are having discussions about what is fair, what is appropriate, and what is permitted under contracts, leases and other agreements under these circumstances. Also, this crisis has made a lot of these conversations more personal. Everyone is expressing concerns for each other’s health and wellbeing. We all know that we are working at home, and dogs and children now participate in many of our calls.

**Have you had clients or colleagues that have been personally affected?**

Until yesterday, not that I know of. But yesterday the general counsel of a client asked us to proceed with a call without him. He had just been released from the hospital, including time in intensive care, suffering from the COVID 19 virus. He simply said he wasn’t up to the call. This crisis, whether family demands, school cancellations, or personal health issues, has affected everyone personally in one way or another. We are being asked to step up. Thankfully we have the technology and the resources to do our best. My colleagues have been great – we share developing best practices and, as situations evolve, form project and crisis specific teams.

**As a real estate attorney, what are your opportunities right now? Are you making any pivots/paradigm shifts?**

No one wants to be opportunistic in a crisis. We have long and close relationships with clients. At the same time, having lived through many real estate cycles, we learn to manage and provide assistance through business as usual, through up cycles and through down cycles. This particular cycle is historically different – not a function of typical economic indicators. We had an economic up and running that screeched on its brakes. This is new and different to all of us. At the same time, many of the lessons from other down cycles are useful.

**Do you think this will change the real estate workplace?**

I think the workplace has been changing for some time. For a while, we have been talking about having more collaborative spaces. Our firm has focused on proving a workplace that provides private spaces for concentrated work and on providing places that encourage brainstorming and teamwork. After this period of working from home, we are going to value in-person collaboration even more. But we also will be thinking about personal safety and the increased value of remote technology. Developers and designers in the future may consider workspace distance. People will be looking at hygiene standards in the workplace in a new and more personal way. We are going to look at the value of working together - but having sufficient distance so we are not within sneezing range of each other.

**What advice would you give to a landlord under these circumstances? A tenant?**

I’m in the business of providing advice, so this is a tough question. We usually have specific agreements, parties, circumstances and business interests to consider. So any advice is general – not really legal advice. But I would suggest that people do their best to be reasonable even under enormous pressure and to listen carefully. Certainly, there will be losers and hopefully some winners. I tend to think that reputations are made in times of crisis. If needed we can be tough, but certainly not demeaning. We can make good faith asks without threats.

**Today is your first official day as President of CIASF. What are you looking forward to most and has any of that changed as a result of COVID-19?**

It is counterintuitive to be president of a networking organization when we are forced to be stuck at home. But at the same time, given that we’re all isolated, our connections are becoming much more important. So, our challenge has to be how to provide networking and maintain our connections when CIASF can’t have its normal events. We, fortunately, have CIASF members who have a lot to say about the crisis. If there is a way to highlight their expertise in the midst of the pandemic it helps us to overcome the fact that we are not physically together. This new Q&A series provides an opportunity to maintain our connections. Organizations will always continue to provide this for people. But looking forward, I expect that the next time we have an in-person event, we will be euphoric!