

As we look for and leverage opportunities, we must remember our shared humanity

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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As part of our #LockdownLessons series, Bizcommunity is reaching out to South Africa's top industry players to share their experience of the current Covid-19 crisis, how their organisations are navigating these unusual times, where the challenges and opportunities lie, and their industry outlook for the near future.

We chatted to Paul Stevens, CEO of Just Property, to get his take.

■ **What was your initial response to the crisis/lockdown and has your experience of it been different to what you expected?**

Paul Stevens: Initially, my focus was on communicating the immediate operational impact of the unfolding crisis to our franchise network, which consists of nearly 100 offices across the country. In times of crisis, people need a source of credible information, a conduit that they can trust. Our head office team stepped into that role effortlessly, quickly verifying information and sharing it on a [built-for-Covid FAQ platform](#), which is available to the public, posting bite-sized updates across our social media accounts and drafting email campaigns to keep our extended client base informed.

We also launched a series of internal webinars, hosted by both internal and external experts to equip our agents and staff with real-time updates and advice. Most recently, as our staff are increasingly anxious about getting back to work, we have started using SMS messages to reach them quickly, dispelling fake news, providing guidance and issuing updates as we receive them from those lobbying government on our behalf. We have taken great care to communicate with our internal and external stakeholders comprehensively and accurately.



Paul Stevens, CEO of Just Property

About five years ago, we made a strategic decision to use cloud-based technologies, like G Suite, to invest in digital documentation capabilities, including electronic signing, and to deploy all our tools via a central staff dashboard. That decision to harness the power of technology early has stood us in good stead and our non-contact operations have been relatively unaffected by the lockdown. Our need to work remotely has meant that our agents cannot conduct physical viewings or on-site valuations but they are all still able to offer desktop valuations, and they have a suite of world-class marketing tools at their disposal to maintain their presence in the market. Our network of franchisees has rallied, together with head office to share best practices, to debate ways of working and to develop a collective approach to protecting our businesses through lockdown. This collaboration and the (almost) business-as-usual result has been beyond what I had ever imagined possible.



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■ **Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on your company or economy as a whole.**

Stevens: The impact of the lockdown and the measures taken by the government in response to the pandemic have been

both positive and negative. Personally, I have been under immense pressure to support many of our franchisees with both emotional and business support. Leaders need people to lean on too and I am grateful to our business coaches, to our network of attorneys and to all the service providers who have stepped up and contributed to clarity and solutions amid a time of confusion and chaos.

Our business model has property rentals at its foundation, so we have been fortunate to maintain some levels of cashflow, although this is increasingly under pressure as commercial and residential tenants struggle to meet their rental obligations. We have taken measures to manage our cashflow aggressively and are using very conservative income projections to prepare for the slump that we will have on our sales side. However, these measures can only protect our company, and the economy at large, for a limited period of time. We anticipate many tough months ahead of us.

▀ ***How is your company responding to the crisis?***

Stevens: One of our nine core values is “optimism” and we are holding onto that now. It’s what gives us the impetus to innovate, to market our services with integrity and to maintain a realistic outlook. As Just Property’s CEO, I am trying to lead by example, staying calm, being positive, discussing what can be done, rather than what can’t. Daily exercise and meditation helps!

As a company, we are responding to the crisis with action, with deliverables that will raise the game of real estate in South Africa and cement our value to buyers, sellers, tenants and landlords. We are promoting tools that we developed long before this pandemic, like our automated marketing proposal and comparative market analysis, our digital signing capabilities and our digital documentation. We are developing new tools to take to the market, based on opportunities that we are seeing right now.

Merriam-Webster defines “coming of age” as “the attainment of prominence, respectability, recognition or maturity”. The response to this crisis that I am most excited about is our “coming of age”. Our agents, even the most “technophobic” among them, are embracing digital marketing and other online ways of working that they may otherwise never have adopted. The result is that our brand is stronger than before, with a phenomenal online presence that will serve us well long into the future.



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▀ ***Comment on the challenges and opportunities.***

Stevens: Proceeding on an even keel is a challenge; sensationalism, conflicting reports and the emotions that lockdown stirs up all challenge us right now. There is fear of the unknown and uncertainty about our future. Maintaining a positive attitude and a constructive response is difficult. There will be business and other humanitarian casualties as a result of the world’s response to this pandemic and that is deeply painful.

As we look for and leverage opportunities, we must remember our shared humanity. We must seek to restore our businesses to their previous levels (at worst) and to new heights (at best) with compassion and integrity. I am looking forward to the opportunity to consolidate a fragmented industry; there are a number of independent real estate operators who may find sanctuary in a franchise network that is geared to outperform the pressures our industry is facing. I am looking forward to the opportunity to raise the standard of real estate in South Africa. Through better use of technology, streamlined business processes and greater collaboration between role players, we can deliver a better customer experience.

▀ ***How has the lockdown affected your staff? / What temporary HR policies have you put in place regarding remote working, health & safety, etc.?***

Stevens: We implemented screening protocols and social distancing measures before lockdown. These are updated as regulations and government directives change. All of our staff work from home now and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. We have had to implement temporary changes to support this, including the provision of additional data and/or airtime. The mental and physical wellbeing of our staff is a priority and our head office team is supporting the franchise network, as needed.



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How are you navigating 'physical distancing' while keeping your team close-knit and aligned and your clients happy?

Stevens: Virtual conversations via Google Meet and Hangouts, FaceTime and Zoom have kept us all connected. As a head office team, we operate effectively using a cloud-based project management tool. This facilitates collaboration and efficiency, especially as our working hours have shifted; we have a number of staff at home with small children so the traditional 9-5 is impossible.

Not all of our clients are happy and our customer service team is fully operational, helping to navigate fair outcomes to complaints or concerns. We have encouraged all of our staff to be proactive, to communicate often and openly with their clients so that potential problems can be addressed early. We are anticipating a tough few months ahead as our clients struggle with the economic fallout of lockdown. Open lines of communication will be critical.

How have you had to change the way you work?

Stevens: I have never been one to micro-manage and I have had to completely trust my team to get the job done independently. There have been some disappointments but, generally, we are delivering what our clients across the franchise network need. Their feedback validates that claim.

Has this global crisis changed your view of the future of the industry in any way?

Stevens: I have no doubt that there remains a place for best-in-class real estate agents; they provide a valuable role as intermediaries in property transactions, which are often complex and time consuming. This crisis has, I think, accelerated the changing tide in the real estate industry. Change is good and the industry will be better because of it.



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Any trends you've seen emerge as a result of the crisis?

Stevens: Businesses are challenging their own ideas regarding the space needed to house their staff. This applies to big organisations like our South African banks, as much as it does your local real estate company. This will have a profound impact on how commercial space is used.

Remote working has been field tested and many companies will see the benefits. This is good news for new developments that are geared towards living, working and playing in the same spaces. The collaborative consumption trend unpacked in one of our December [blog posts](#) will certainly accelerate as a result of this crisis.

I see great opportunity for buyers, be they first-time buyers or investors. If you have access to funding, there will be plenty

of good deals with many people selling their homes to downscale or, sadly, due to financial distress.

I think the rental market will take a few months to stabilise while tenants either find new jobs or return to work and start to earn the salaries they used to.



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■ **Your key message to those in the property sector?**

Stevens: More than ever, we need to foster trust. That means following the legislative and associated guidelines to the letter, that means choosing our words and our advice with care, that means focusing on how we can serve the needs of our clients with compassion and with fortitude.

■ **What do you predict the next six months will be like?**

Stevens: Tough. I am under no illusions that the road ahead will be tougher than we have experienced in recent years. Our government has an obligation to stimulate our economy and, with the involvement of powers like the IMF, I am hopeful that we will see fiscal discipline and sustainable economic growth measures.

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