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Small and medium-sized practitioners today face challenges on many fronts. In this series, brought to you by *Accounting and Business* magazine, we'll be talking to practitioners around the world about issues surrounding talent management during and post pandemic, wellbeing in the workplace, and how to differentiate your firm's brand. We hope you find their insights and tips useful in navigating the changing business environment.

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Small and medium-sized practices have suffered the ravages of the pandemic, much like so many other businesses. Managing the challenges that clients have been facing has put them under more pressure than ever. But what impact has it had on their staff? How have they been supporting their talent to survive and thrive? In the UK, Chris Biggs, partner of Theta Global Advisors, is hoping that, with lockdown easing, they can begin to address more effectively and directly the fears and concerns of the team.

[Chris Biggs 1:08]

Where we are in the UK right now is obviously people are starting to return to the offices, practices are starting to get their teams back in the office, and also firms are starting to go out back onto client sites. But in the UK, we're not really at the point yet where everybody's back in the office; we're very much in that middle ground now. I think the key challenge, first of all, is to find out what your teams actually want to do. Some people will want to continue working from home; some will be happy going back into your offices and then into client sites; some people may be – which could be quite rightly and understandably – fearful of going back into the office, particularly if that involves commuting in mass transport networks, as we do here in London. So the key thing is to find out what your team wants to do. And you can't do this by just having a single meeting and asking people who don't want to go back to work or who are afraid to raise their hand. That's not going to be a good way of doing it – you're going to start to isolate and point people out. So the best thing to do is to have a series of one-to-ones with your team where they are in a safe environment, and they can really express their concerns of what they want to do.

[Voiceover 2:22]

In India, where lockdown continues to keep staff away from the workplace, Ajay Sethi, managing partner of the firm ASA India, has introduced a number of measures to keep his team engaged.

[Ajay Sethi 2:35]

What one does is one does constant base of communication with the team members – letters weekly, monthly, quarterly. That's how we went about it. We had a spate of town halls to pass the information on to the team members because they were as much in the dark as we were with this very unique problem. We also came up with a Covid communiqué, which was a technical information bulletin of laws and changes which the government was bringing out for purpose of information to our clients as well as our team members. The second thing we did to address the sense of being disconnected was set up a very systematic base of remote meetings. One was what we call the Covid action team, which started with daily and shifted off to weekly. Then we had the all-India Covid action team – CAT as we used to call it – which means all the administrative team members from each location will discuss what is the new problem in their area and how they're tackling it. The third thing we did was we started a national leaders weekly meeting so the national leaders could compare notes. Similarly, we started a partner information exchange methodology, which was a monthly affair.

[Voiceover 3:50]

Keeping the team connected is also a preoccupation for Biggs. He's working with his staff to keep them engaged. But there are other issues that are harder to address.

[Chris Biggs 4:01]

Yes, you can do proactive things to make sure that you include them in every call. You do calls via Zoom, via Teams, so they have the ability to join things. But there's also a huge challenge there of – almost, sort of, it's the non-obvious things that people may start to miss out on. So maybe those quick chats around the water cooler or in the elevator, into the office, or just standing around talking to people, because you can't really replicate that in a virtual environment. You've got to be very aware that decisions, progress and things like that are not made in those stories and those forums where people may start to feel left out. So there's plenty of challenges. And in the UK, we're really just at that starting point, and people and firms are trying to feel their way through this. There won't be one single perfect way of doing it. But I think the key thing is if everybody keeps in mind the impact that this has on the business, on the culture, but also on the individual person that has to be managed going forwards.

[Voiceover 5:07]

Maintaining a sense of corporate culture as staff work remotely is a challenge across the board, Sethi says. The informal partner interaction sessions with the team have been really successful in addressing this. But he also sees a need for partners to change the way they interact with the staff.

[Ajay Sethi 5:28]

This whole lockdown position has taught us one very important thing: that owners need to be much more upfront, rather than the managers. And since you have skin in the game, you understand the culture the best, and you're able to pass on the culture the best. So I think that's the guiding principle.

[Voiceover 5:46]

Corporate culture is also a significant problem when taking on new staff. In fact, the remote hiring process is far from optimal all round. The already onerous battle for talent didn't get any easier during the pandemic, Biggs says.

[Chris Biggs 6:02]

The whole ability to recruit and attract the right calibre of people and the right talent into the firm became incredibly hard. And in some ways a lot of firms I know and talk to, they almost had a freeze for 12, 18 months – not because it was a headcount freeze to manage costs, just because they couldn't get the right people interested in the right roles. The additional hurdle we had to get over during the Covid lockdown and now is twofold. One is why would people want to move jobs now if they've got a reasonably secure job? Hopefully the environment is improving going forwards. But during the lockdown times, why would people want to move to a new employer that could be high risk? And they could suddenly find out the stability of that new employer would be not particularly strong, hence people would be losing their job. So I think there was that hurdle we had to overcome trying to encourage people to move for the right reasons and be able to present a long-term stability case as a firm.

[Voiceover 7:08]

Hopefully brighter times will soon be on the horizon. But for now firms are applying the lessons they've learned for longer-term benefits.

[Ajay Sethi 7:17]

My advice would be: be very sensitive to your team's mental health, and the sort of disconnection which is happening to them – it will creep up.

[Voiceover 7:30]

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