



NORMAL DAYS

Health and cost concerns along with technology advances may drive distanced work for accountants

BY MARTIN DAKS

During a recent NJBIZ virtual panel discussion on Positioning Your Company in a Post-COVID Environment, one takeaway was that companies should be prepared for significant, long-term workplace changes.

That observation was reinforced in conversations with executives from one high-touch industry — accounting — who confirmed that their traditional business model appears to be undergoing a shakeup. The old way of doing things — from physical inventory counts to client lunches and other periodic get-togethers — is likely to look a lot different in a post-Covid world.



Sacks

“Our long-term workplace model is still a work-in-progress, but during this pandemic we learned that we can operate quite effectively while remaining remote, thanks to Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other video and audio conferencing platforms,” said Steven D. Sacks, chief human resources officer at the accounting and advisory firm Marks Paneth LLP.

“Our primary concern is the safety and health of our employees, but along with that we’re finding that flexibility can lead to enhanced efficiencies.”

To keep people safe when they’re in the office, the accounting firm installed plexiglass panels in the reception area and adopted a “checkerboard pattern” to ensure that everyone maintains six-foot spacing. “We’re also encouraging, educating and enabling employees about vaccinations,” Sacks added.

Besides using Teams to maintain communications at a distance, “We’re maintaining our award-winning firm culture with virtual town halls and other events,” he noted.



Jania

Maintaining client contact has also meant adapting. “Initially, we made a lot of phone calls,” said Rich Jania, partner-in-charge of Marks Paneth’s New Jersey office. “Then we leveraged Teams and Zoom so we could see each other face to face. Our clients have everyone’s cell phone numbers and we’ve encouraged them to speak with us about everything

from business matters to COVID-safety tips. It’s actually helped us to forge even stronger client bonds.”

Working from home can require some compromises

Alloy Silverstein managing shareholder Ren Cicalese has not had to share an office for 30 years. But working from home during the pandemic means that Cicalese and his wife, Alloy Associate Partner Anne D’Amico, are now squeezed into a study that wasn’t designed to accommodate two people at the same time.

“Now that we’ve been sharing a home office for over a year, we see

that it was a design flaw,” he said with a chuckle. “So when I’m on a conference call, I walk out. And when my wife is on a conference call, I walk out. And my Zoom meetings take place at the kitchen table.”

At least the snacks are reasonably priced.

His firm has also made some changes in its audit and attestation procedures. “We’ve followed AICPA [American Institute of Certified Public Accountants] guidance for doing a physical count,” he said. “When appropriate, the client will walk through their warehouse or other location and, following our instructions, will open boxes and do other procedures while we watch in real time with Face Time or another application.”

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Even as businesses scrambled to find new ways of connecting, Marks Paneth was able to return to its roots as it scouted around for new clients. As in-person networking and other events got cancelled, “It was initially difficult to connect, especially since no one knew how long this would last,” Jania said. “But we’ve been making connections through our traditional contacts, like attorney and investment banker referrals, and we’ve been engaging in a lot of virtual introductions and follow-ups. Recently, I was even able to meet with a banker and a potential new client on a golf course.”



Cicalese

CPAs like Ren Cicalese are also charting new waters. “After more than year of working remotely most of the time, I see remote work here to stay,” according to Cicalese, managing shareholder of the accounting and advisory firm Alloy Silverstein. “The pandemic basically drove us to make six years’ worth of progress in six months,” he said. “I’ve been in the office two, maybe three times since this started. I may dash into the office to sign papers or for other tasks, and it’s sad because I notice the little things, like plants that were left on a person’s desk because they thought we’d come back soon, and now they’re drooping because they haven’t been watered. The good thing is that

if someone does go into our Hammonton or Cherry Hill office, they no longer have to worry about finding a parking spot.”

That’s not all. “Our Cherry Hill office lease is up at the end of 2022, and I expect we’ll only need half the space there,” he said. “We’ll either be 100% remote, or maybe people will rotate in one or two days a week in the office.”

WORKING 9-TO-5

Internally, the firm quickly adjusted to a remote-work environment, Cicalese added. “In 61 years, this marked the first time we advised our employees that they had to get their core 9-to-5 hours in, but that they didn’t have to do it from 9 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. strictly. Some people get up at 4:00 a.m. so they can help their kids during the day with their home schooling during the pandemic.”

Restrictions on in-person meetings haven’t crimped Alloy Silverstein’s ability to attract new clients. In addition to referrals, companies find out about the firm through initiatives like online alerts and Alloy Academy educational workshops featuring accounting and business tips, and best practices. The 60-minute workshops used to be hosted in the firm’s Cherry Hill or Hammonton offices, as well as online webinars — since the pandemic started they’ve been online only and interest has exploded, said Cicalese.

“We used to have maybe six to 12 people attend the in-person workshops, but now we’re getting up to 100 or more at our Zoom sessions,” he noted. “The other day I was on a Zoom call with clients in Colorado and California, and a potential client from Arizona. We’re helping even more people now across the country. With so many people working from home, everyone’s comfortable with having their [accounting] representative in a different state. They’re also realizing that the cheapest tax preparer may not be the best in a crisis.”