Learn to adapt; adapt to learn

General Features



01 July 2021

Phoebe Mak and Iffat Ahmad share their reflections on the impact that lockdown has had on junior tax associates and how we can all develop our working practices

It’s been over a year since we left our office desks for dining tables, swapped sushi bars for home cooked meals and adventures abroad for local walks. In the beginning, it seemed as though there were endless challenges and no silver linings, but with time we have adapted and thrived in different ways. Our article aims to highlight the key challenges faced by junior members of the team. We also set out our hopes for future working practices in light of the possible return to the office later this summer.

The workspace conundrum Unsurprisingly, the first major hurdle was adapting to the change in workstation. In the office, there was a clearly established place at which we could work. A large proportion of junior associates live in small or shared spaces and don’t have a home office or dedicated room in which to establish a permanent working station. Many began to work at the dining table but, whether you lived with flatmates or had returned to the family home, this was problematic when others wanted to eat or socialise. Several associates ended up working on their bedroom floors or coffee tables and it became a real point of stress. The uncertainty of the duration of the pandemic made us hesitant to seek more permanent arrangements.

Living and working at home also resulted in additional caring responsibilities for some junior associates, such as supporting vulnerable family members or assisting with childcare for nieces and nephews. It’s important to share these additional demands on your time with your team. There may be a general assumption that you are able to respond at any time, so they don’t understand when and why you may not be available.

Teambuilding and networking

Losing the camaraderie amongst colleagues in the office was also challenging. For junior associates, particularly new joiners and newly qualified associates, going for coffees and lunches is a key method in building relationships with people in your team. In many businesses, senior management, social committees and secretarial teams made a conscious effort to keep team morale high and integrate new joiners. But there is a personal element to face-to-face conversations that perhaps is not possible to replicate virtually.

However, there has arguably been more opportunity to connect with people in the wider firm. From the beginning, regular departmental and team calls have allowed us to catch up and kept us updated with the firm’s changing policies and government guidelines. Senior management have shared their thoughts and experiences in town hall meetings and company emails. These have made us feel more connected as we navigate the pandemic together. It also paved the way to open conversations with individuals you would not have ordinarily come across in the office, and many firms have made an effort to encourage people to take some time to chat and socialise with other employees, for example by introducing virtual coffee mornings.

Networking with junior associates at different firms has been more of a challenge, though. Industry events were cancelled early on, and although they have been replicated online they have not been structured in a way to allow collaboration. At a conference, you would normally mingle with other attendees during the breaks or during breakout sessions. Although breakout rooms could have offered some of these opportunities, several of the virtual conferences we attended included breaks but not an actual breakout room. This was probably a calculated decision to prevent screen fatigue but the networking opportunity was lost.

This has highlighted the need for online industry events to enable junior associates at different firms to connect and build relationships with others at similar stages. For example, Phoebe Mak and Iffat Ahmad (the authors of this piece) connected when they were both speaking at ‘Lockdown Stories: Conversations with women in tax’, an event organised by BDO and Women In Tax.

Knowledge and training

The lockdown has had a minimal impact on structured training due to the investments in technology that a lot of firms had already made. Weekly knowledge meetings have seamlessly transitioned to the online, home delivery format (though we have missed the lunches that often followed!). The same preparation continues to go into these meetings and with well-prepared slides shared on screen it is easy to follow from home.

External training courses, such as those for the CTA qualification, were delivered to the same quality online. Universities and professional courses providers already had online versions
of many of their courses and experience in delivering courses virtually. This has in fact saved us a lot of time and energy (removing the need to travel to and from the course carrying heavy tax legislation!). However, there hasn’t been an opportunity to collaborate with our classmates during tutorials (and again, breakout room functions could have helped with this).

One aspect of the office experience that arguably cannot be replicated is ‘learning by osmosis’ – the knowledge that juniors gain by being in the presence of more senior colleagues, learning from conversations about the commercial and legal issues affecting the firm’s clients.

In the office, senior associates and partners often invite junior associates at short notice to join conference calls or sit in on client meetings. These impromptu opportunities not only allow you to learn about unfamiliar matters, but help you to develop technical knowledge and soft skills – such as how to run through technical and legal issues with a range of clients.

A possible solution to this may be to run regular practical knowledge meetings, in addition to technical training. At BDO, Phoebe has been involved in a task simulation initiative where juniors and seniors discuss the task over a coffee to replicate learning by osmosis at home. Managers and partners are notably trying to engage with junior associates to check in on how we are feeling about working from home and allay any concerns.

Partners often have days filled with back to back meetings, so we're all accustomed to quickly discussing an issue with them between meetings as a way of seeking confirmation that we're on the right track. We appreciate that most people are busier than usual due to additional responsibilities at home, so we've been more hesitant to make unplanned calls to partners or struggled to find a slot when they're not 'on a call'. As a result, it's been really valuable for our confidence to have these scheduled virtual catch ups and benefit from informal mentorship.

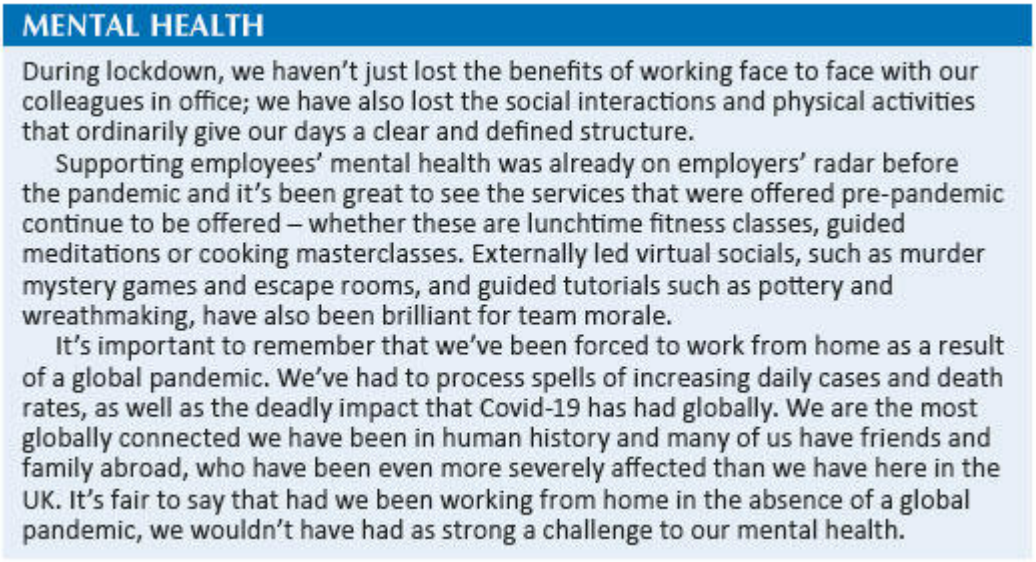
Future working patterns

There have been unique challenges with working from home but overall we have triumphed. We've learned to work more independently and efficiently, and to manage additional responsibilities at home alongside work. We've demonstrated that we can continue to be relied upon without physically being seen. Not only should the experience of the last 15 months completely stamp out any final remaining embers of presenteeism, we hope that it will also make employers more open minded towards employees who have greater demands on their time or who have access difficulties with travelling into the office.

This experience has proved that it is possible for us to work remotely successfully. It would be difficult for any law firm or accountancy business to say otherwise. This will not be the death of the office, as our work does benefit from physically being in the presence of our colleagues. But it is arguable that with creativity we can replicate learning by osmosis at home.

There is a desire amongst junior associates to return to the office but not on a full-time basis. As firms start to release their updated working policies, we hope to see a synergy between working from home and being in the office.

Image



MENTAL HEALTH

During lockdown, we haven't just lost the benefits of working face to face with our colleagues in office; we have also lost the social interactions and physical activities that ordinarily give our days a clear and defined structure.

Supporting employees' mental health was already on employers' radar before the pandemic and it's been great to see the services that were offered pre-pandemic continue to be offered – whether these are lunchtime fitness classes, guided meditations or cooking masterclasses. Externally led virtual socials, such as murder mystery games and escape rooms, and guided tutorials such as pottery and wreathmaking, have also been brilliant for team morale.

It's important to remember that we've been forced to work from home as a result of a global pandemic. We've had to process spells of increasing daily cases and death rates, as well as the deadly impact that Covid-19 has had globally. We are the most globally connected we have been in human history and many of us have friends and family abroad, who have been even more severely affected than we have here in the UK. It's fair to say that had we been working from home in the absence of a global pandemic, we wouldn't have had as strong a challenge to our mental health.