Working Together update – the digital progress

General Features

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The Digital Progress

Since my last article ‘Working Together – the digital future’ (*Tax Adviser*, August 2015), progress has been made and the first digital Working Together meeting was held on 24 September 2015.

To remind everyone the reasons for where we are now:

- the government strategy of digital by default;
- HMRC have closed all local offices, focusing their presence in a few regional offices around the UK; and
- HMRC cannot afford the cost and resources in running the old 49 local Working Together groups.

In February and March some face-to-face Working Together workshops were held across the country to gauge the thoughts of agents, with feedback analysed by HMRC.

The initial conclusions among agentshave been mixed. They range from those who mourn the demise of face-to-face contact with HMRC to those who are willing to embrace the changes the digital world has to offer.

I make no judgments on either view, and see merits in both.

The new world of Working Together is still evolving but, to put some ‘meat on the bones’, it is envisaged that the new Working Together will, primarily, concentrate on digital meetings.

There are 10 regional groups around the country; each will take it in turn to host a digital meeting open to all agents across the UK. The idea is a rolling programme of monthly meetings led by the eight HMRC specialist agent managers. They will be assisted by professional body leads for the 10 regions.

It is hoped an agent digest will be set up to record issues raised by members and these will be updated and circulated to participants before and after each meeting.

The issues overview group will monitor this agent digest to establish the issues that will need to be logged on to the current issues register quarterly. Reports will be sent to the joint information steering group (JISG).

For all you lovers of shared workspace, which is the HMRC area where the current issues register is recorded, updated and monitored, don’t despair – it is still with us.

For those of us who crave a much simpler system, we will have to wait longer, however. But I am optimistic that something such as the above-mentioned agent digest will become a part of Working Together lives and will be much simpler and widely available to many more agents. Watch this space!

It is also hoped that issues raised will be acknowledged within set guidelines and formal responses will be made to address the issues raised – again formal guidelines and periodic updates will be given when issues cannot be resolved immediately.

It has been recognised that face-to-face meetings will be necessary from time to time when there is a need to discuss in more detail some of the issues arising. The CIOT and ATT will continue to request that members volunteer if they have some expertise in these areas.

The first digital Working Together meeting was held in the South East region and hosted by Rob McCulloch of the ICAEW as the professional bodies lead in this region. I was present on behalf of the CIOT/ATT.

The intended format was a split between a half-hour discussion from an HMRC expert within the agent online self-serve programme, followed by a half-hour Working Together meeting centred on issues raised by the South East region. Unfortunately, we only had about 15 minutes to discuss issues! However, it is hoped that agents who logged into the meeting to put questions had some of these answered live. We are awaiting the details of all the questions posed and answered

to evaluate further.

I have received mixed feedback from this meeting: it is clear that it needs to be more interactive and slicker in its presentation if we are to engage our members sufficiently. At the time of writing, we are awaiting HMRC de-briefing notes, which are expected in mid-October.

HMRC have also set up a series of talking point meetings – again digital, led currently by HMRC subject matter experts (some of you may have logged on to these already and your feedback would be gratefully received).

We are now working on a strategy of identifying Working Together representatives for both CIOT and ATT who are happy to act as our professional bodies leads in each of the 10 regions. It is hoped that we have one CIOT and one ATT lead in each region.
I also understand the other professional bodies are carrying out a similar exercise.

It is also hoped to use all our other hard-working – and not forgotten local voluntary – representatives who have acted over the years as Working Together representatives within their old groups. The idea is to use these volunteers to feed issues raised by the members in their areas to the CIOT and ATT leads.

Remember, this is still very much a ‘work in progress’ and I am sure formats and methods will change as we experience more of the digital regional meetings.

Continue to forward your issues on the Working Together email or forum.