

## TRAINING AND THE RETURN TO THE OFFICE



With COVID-19 restrictions now largely over, and employees rapidly returning to the office, we're only now being able to sit back and look at what our employees, particularly our trainees have missed out on during lockdown.

The audit and accounting profession is a creative and collaborative environment that requires teams to come together to perform at high levels. Whilst everyone interacted with their team members through online platforms, there's no doubt these constant online meetings took their toll, with screen fatigue, lack of focus creeping in and unavoidable distractions from home.

### **The benefits of in-office collaboration**

These are multi-fold, not only assisting with skills learnt at the coal face but allowing for much more teamwork, which is far more beneficial for employee mental health and wellbeing. Being 'in the office' provides a platform for employees to feel a part of a community. Individuals working, particularly at home can lead to increased feelings of isolation, risks of overworking and a disproportionate work-life balance.

Working from home for extended periods saw people tending to limit their social networks and only work with those in their immediate team silos which doesn't promote a feeling of inclusivity in a company or enable the ability to connect with people of diverse backgrounds which is so important, especially in South Africa.

While not true for everyone, ultimately the risk of being physically at work but mentally disengaged has increased without in-person interactions and learning (for at least part of their work).

### **Missing out**

For those readers who completed articles, accounting or other, you will know that there is an unspoken agreement between the first, second and third year trainees that they are there for each other, to collaborate, pick up slack and jump in when even the smallest of questions need answering. This bond and comradery is much harder to achieve online.

We do need to acknowledge that it's amazing how often new ideas, insights and learning take place around the coffee machine, not to mention company events which have an impact on how employees integrate with the company and its ethos. It's also difficult to assess people's emotions remotely and this again may lead to a feeling of lack of crucial workplace support.

### **The training environment**

Our highly complex and constantly changing audit industry requires continuous training to ensure staff are able to provide the highest quality service to our clients. Our in-house training and seminars have always proved to be highly effective, interactive and engaging – without the impact of screen fatigue.

Whilst technical learning lends itself to online, nothing can replace on the job training which hones both the learner and the teachers' skills. As a training office, we have the privilege of training aspiring accountants in their first corporate job. We've observed how those who haven't had the opportunity to begin their careers like their peers before COVID-19, lost out on the organic opportunity to learn valuable social and professional skills. There's no replacement for these skills other than being immersed in the physical work environment, with these competencies being essential for the careers of these young professionals.

The experience they receive whilst visiting clients to carry out audits is invaluable. When working on audits from home offices they amount to nothing more than going through pages of figures. It's hard to get the feel and ethos of a business without regularly visiting the client at their premises and becoming part of their story. In this instance, your client is physically available for information and questions, as well as the auditor being on hand to offer insights and engage with the clients.

### **Making up for lost time**

It hasn't been easy, especially for our trainees – now it is more a case of learning quickly on the job. At PKF, we have identified those who need more training / experience and are making sure this happens. We saw a definite difference between our pre and post COVID-19 employees, particularly the trainees, who progress faster when there is physical support at hand.

### **Helping your 'lost years' employees**

Going forward, I believe that firms, including PKF, have to look at different ways to build on the online training that did happen and fill the gaps of in-person knowledge transfer that was largely missed during COVID-19 lockdown. This commitment to learning and our staff will allow us to provide the highest level of service to our clients.

Since the onset of COVID-19, even though our constantly evolving world has become more digital, it's a refreshing change for us to return to an environment with more physical interactions

where we, and our young staff, can continue to improve on social skills and build on our interpersonal relationships. Enjoy your people, enjoy your work.

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