

SETTING UP YOUR VIRTUAL OFFICE

GUIDANCE FOR PUBLIC PRACTITIONERS

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that moving to a Virtual Office has become a need rather than a want for many accounting businesses. In order to successfully transition to a virtual office there are two critical things that need to happen.

You need to be able to communicate

Communication has typically been undertaken in person, via telephone or email. Other channels must now be added, such as web meetings and instant communication.

You need to be able access your data

While accountants are traditionally well organised and have a centralised location for their data, this should now be cloud based.

IMMEDIATE THINGS TO CONSIDER AND ACTION

To successfully transition to a virtual office, there are critical steps you need to immediately consider.

1. Internet Connectivity and Stability

When a workforce goes mobile it is essential they have access to a reliable and stable connection to the internet. While this may seem like common sense, it is often overlooked when mobilising a workforce.

It is also important that you have contingency plans in place to ensure your virtual office can remain online at all times.

If you are unsure about your workforce's internet security, you should require them to access all data via a Virtual Private Network (VPN), which will ensure all data is encrypted.

TIP:

- When you select a VPN it is essential that the provider does not maintain a log of your online activities, which will exclude nearly every free provider. This is because they may sell that information to advertisers and other third parties.
- You should also consider where the head office of the provider is located, as some countries have stricter compliance and legal obligations regarding data flows to and from their servers.

2. Instant Messaging

Instant messaging provides a way for your staff to chat with each other quickly, privately and essentially helps to replicate the open-door policy that exists in a physical workplace. While it is not a replacement for email, it does enable informal, direct and real time communication.

Pick one that fits your firm's technology profile and solves your needs. Due to the informal nature of these, switching between different messaging services can be easier than replacing other technology solutions.

Applications such as Skype or Google Hangouts may be integrated into your existing IT infrastructure, while others may be standalone such as Slack or Whatsapp.

3. Web Meetings

Web or virtual meetings are critical to the success of running a virtual office. It is important that you consider your needs and invest in the right solution for both now and the future and ensure the user experience for both staff and clients remains consistent, with what would have otherwise been physical meetings in the office.

Unlike instant messaging, it is harder to swap between applications as you will need to educate your clients on how the application works.

A good strategy can be to task a team member to champion implementation, including developing a process to ensure clients have a seamless experience.

Some of the most common Web Meeting solutions are Zoom, WebEx, Skype and GoToMeeting.

TIP:

- When evaluating options, consider what information the provider will have access to, which should be detailed in their privacy policy, as well as security features and any audio or video lag. Often less expensive options may not adequately address these considerations.
- It is also important to evaluate the solution from the perspective of someone consuming the content, not just delivering it.

4. Data Storage and Access

As discussed earlier, it is critical that you can access your data at all times and a cloud-based solution delivers exactly that.

There are two options you can consider:

- employ a cloud storage solution, such as Dropbox, Sharepoint or Google Drive, or
- implement a custom solution built for the accounting profession, such as BusinessFitness, CCH and MYOB.

There are pros and cons for each option. For example, a cloud storage solution will allow quicker implementation with greater flexibility, while a custom solution may provide improved and dedicated document management systems with enhanced security.

5. Data Exchanges

A dedicated portal will enable easier data exchange between your business and your client, as well as reducing external exposure risks to your document storage system. It will also help you comply with regulatory requirements, such as privacy and ATO obligations.

While this is not critical when you are first transitioning, it will allow you to maintain efficiencies and your office virtual going forward if you wish.

TIP:

- Security should always be the key consideration when considering any solution, as you are sharing data. There are various website plugins that have exploitable codes that should never be considered.
- As a professional accountant, if you are looking at utilising a dedicated client portal you could consider starting with Business Fitness or CCH iFirm's solutions.

6. Digital Signatures

To complement your portal and online storage, you should consider a tool that allows clients to sign documents digitally.

While there are multiple solutions available, it must integrate with your existing infrastructure. Also ensure it provides the necessary security and certificates upon completion, to ensure you have a compliant solution.

Some examples that provide a secure connection for the use include:

- DocuSign
- AdobeSign
- Pandadoc

NEXT STEPS

Once you have established your virtual office, there are further considerations to ensure it continues to be a sustainable solution.

Policies and Procedures

With the decentralisation of the workforce, it becomes extremely important there are clearly documented policies and processes for all staff. Running internal training sessions will ensure that all staff understand these processes and the business' expectations regarding the use of technology.

They should also be documenting in your Quality Control Manual and any associated risks identified and addressed in your Risk Management Framework.

Desktop Software is Non-Starter

If you are reliant on any software that is 100% desktop or server based, it will prevent your business expanding with future technology advancements.

Practice Management is the Hub

Your practice management system forms the foundation for how your practice can operate and should be the driver of how your technology integration and virtual office operates. It should also be cloud based.

Hardware

Nowadays, hardware advances at the same pace as software. You therefore need to ensure your hardware can support your software so you can maximise its features and benefits.

Hardware rotation can be expensive, but when done right it will have a positive net delivery to your business.

Security

Data security is imperative. Your client's trust you always have the necessary safeguards in place to ensure the security and integrity of their data. The fact that a service may be provided by a third party does not remove your legal and financial obligations to protect your client's data.

Data and privacy breaches can incur civil penalties, but also have a significant impact on the reputation and integrity of a business.

There is no right or wrong way to establish your virtual office. It needs to fit you, your business and your clients. You should always consider any longer-term needs or goals, while always assessing potential data and security risks.

No matter your experience or how advanced you are on your technology journey within your business, technology will continue to evolve. How you accept and embrace this change will determine your virtual office now and in the future.

Additional Resource

[IT Checklist for Small Business](#)

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