

# Leadership Insight

## Leading Through Change

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As recently as March 2020, writing in the CPA Ireland Annual Report 2019, the then President of CPA Ireland, Gearoid O'Driscoll, wrote as follows:

**"Adopting agility strategically has fostered a cultural change in CPA Ireland in which our speed of adaptation, fast decision-making, and our rate of capability development all contribute to a vibrant professional body delivering value to its customers."**

### A Rapidly Changing External Environment

Within days of writing that piece, Covid-19 compounded an already volatile environment bringing unprecedented levels of uncertainty around the globe.

Almost overnight there was a sweeping sense of shock, uncertainty and loss as businesses were forced to close, relocate or operate virtually if possible.

Immediate pressures emerged in terms of balancing home, health, life and work in an environment of understandable fear and uncertainty. The assumption was that this change would be short-lived, and the inequality of experience would be manageable as we moved towards the much spoken of "new normal".

As we approach the end of 2020, we can all reflect on the change that has occurred and how we have moved from fear to resourcefulness and perhaps, on occasion, back to fear again. We all appreciate how difficult it has been to create clarity through the fog of the unknown, the unplanned and the uncertain.

Governments around the world have struggled to find a balance between

protecting "lives" and "livelihoods" and history will judge and provide lessons for the future.

### The Value of CPAs

As a community of professionals operating in 50 countries and advising over 100,000 businesses in Ireland, CPAs played and continue to play a vital role in the "livelihoods" space providing strategic advice to the businesses they serve.

CPAs were, and continue to be, challenged to deliver insights to their businesses in a virtual environment which impacted on work practices, communication, secure transfer of information, increased regulatory burdens and a wave of government supports.

CPAs, correctly, looked to CPA Ireland for leadership, support, advice and engaged with their institute in unprecedented levels.

### CPA Ireland's Response – Lessons Learned

"Adopting agility strategically" as referenced in our Annual Report was certainly tested in CPA Ireland as we, as an organisation, pivoted overnight to virtual operations and "work" moved to "home" with all of the inequality of experience, fear and uncertainty felt by others.

The power of informal connections, in a canteen or at the water cooler, were quickly lost and creative solutions were required to replicate that sense of "team" and "community".

Time for execution became even more precious as communication seemed to simply soak up more of our available time.

Trust became ever more important as we focused on outputs and trusting

our people's ability and desire to simply get on with their job.

CPA Ireland, organisationally, was in a strong position to adapt to overnight change based on a number of factors:

- An investment in our people ranging from the recruitment of talented individuals to continuous investments in skills development with a particular focus on information technology and digital skills.
- An investment in technology which supported safe and secure working for CPA Ireland staff. Work was already something we did rather than a place we went to.
- A strategy which is high level, principled and agile and offers appropriate tactical agility to the leadership team to adapt to change.
- A culture which supports innovation, customer centricity, capability development and change. Very importantly, CPA Ireland has measured the dominant cultures within both Council and staff across a number of years and had confidence that the Council and staff cultures were appropriately aligned to deliver on our strategy.
- CPA Ireland has a strong and enduring sense of purpose, a mission and vision all of which play into our core values and provide us with our "North Star", delivering support to our members, students and other stakeholders. This guides our long-term strategic orientation and provides for decisive action, and speedy decision making within a robust governance framework.

- Volunteers – CPA Ireland has always benefitted from the excellent inputs of CPAs at Council, Committee and Regional CPA Society level. Despite facing their own pressures, our volunteer community really stepped up their activity and their expertise brought a multiplier effect to the efforts of staff.
- A reappraisal of the external environment by Council leading to a review of the CPA Ireland Strategy and the strategic priorities for 2020/2021.
- Engagement with our members,

financial management, and, upskilling.

investment in technology.

- Planning for delivery on our key roles in terms of regulation in the public interest, providing progression opportunities for students, delivering information support to members and advocacy. Decisive action was facilitated by having absolute clarity of purpose.
- Policy development around working from home to guide, reassure and help staff be productive, healthy and achieve balance.
- Risk assessments, expenditure reviews and reprioritisations to meet changed circumstances.
- Training for the CPA Ireland leadership team in all aspects of leading a remote workforce through an unprecedented change process.



### Immediate Actions in Support of Change

Working from a clarity and unity of purpose, together with a strong culture of mutual trust, Council and the executive team worked quickly together to lead CPA Ireland through this once in a lifetime global experience, with very few signposts, conflicting data and a changed world of work for all.

Among the initiatives undertaken were the following:

- The establishment of a Covid-19 crisis team composed of the CEO, Directors and Finance lead to deal with the immediate challenges of working from home, technology, health and safety, data protection, risk management, communication,
- students and stakeholders with a focus on what was both urgent and important in terms of giving certainty (examinations, for example), gaining regulatory approvals where required, delivering information services, continuing our regulatory obligations and supporting our advocacy.
- Council, Finance & Audit Committee, and key technical committees all committing to increased frequency of meeting to ensure good governance and appropriate oversight in a fast-moving environment.
- Switching service provision, marketing, communication to digital channels taking maximum advantage of our learning management system and

### Key Outputs – Delivering on Our Purpose

On reflection, 2020 has been akin to a race without a finish line, against a backdrop of changing circumstances as Government attempted to protect both lives and livelihoods. Against that backdrop, CPAs have performed remarkably well for the businesses they serve, working harder under the challenging circumstances, coping with businesses struggling to survive, navigating government supports, coping with regulatory burdens, counselling and advising distressed clients and leading their own staff through considerable change. Against this backdrop it was challenging to create business plans that balanced confidence, hope and reality and yet that is exactly what CPAs did. Through our engagement with members, the executive team were inspired by CPAs remaining optimistic, looking for opportunities and committing to their own learning to remain relevant and valuable.

A snapshot of achievements within CPA Ireland demonstrates how goals were stretched, how innovation flourished, how we listened to our customers and delivered on our purpose, as follows:

- The launch of a new syllabus "Ready to Face the Future of Accounting" which will shape the future of the profession and ensure that CPAs will be future fit with the skills required by business, employers and society.
- A pivot to online examinations, invigilated remotely, giving CPA students the opportunity to progress. Excellent resources were put in place to prepare CPA students for this change and the CPA students demonstrated adaptability and resilience in their examination performance.
- Dedicated Covid-19 microsite bringing together all Covid related support and advice into one hub.
- Dedicated online training for employers to ensure continuity of training and mentoring of remote trainees.
- Virtual career fairs, advisory sessions for trainees and employers all supporting strong student growth.
- Advocacy, supported by insights from members and volunteers, leading to valuable supports for business, deferral of certain regulatory deadlines, and engagement with regulators and policy makers.
- A comprehensive CPD programme designed to bring relevant knowledge and skills to members in every sector. Our virtual conferences were engaging, topical and delivered through our learning management system providing a great user experience.
- Contactless Quality Assurance inspections which, with the support of members, allowed CPA Ireland continue to meet its regulatory requirements.
- Digitising our engagement with prospective CPA Students, taking full advantage of new technologies and new channels to unlock growth and promote the CPA qualification.
- Innovating our post qualification specialisms and being the first professional body to deliver

"digital first" learning programmes created specifically in an online environment with proven strategies to engage online learners.

Developing new programmes to allow CPAs specialise and increase their service offerings.

- Transforming the manner in which we communicate internally, finding a balance in the virtual world, automating team check-ins and allowing team meetings focus on solutions, replicating informal communications and maintaining peer to peer contact. This has been facilitated by trust, transparency, and patience with one another, respect, fairness, coaching, kindness and consideration. The leadership team committed to remaining true to these core values whilst ensuring decisions are made in an ethical way that promotes transparency, clarity and honesty.
- Remaining committed to our global partners, our international obligations and to opportunities for collaboration, resource sharing and growth.
- Highly effective governance and stewardship from Council, communicating clearly, monitoring risk and resources, listening to members, re-imagining the future for CPAs and planning for that future.

### Lessons Learned

An organisation with a strong sense of purpose, a vision, mission, values and an agile strategy is certainly better positioned to adapt to change, focus on priorities now, and have unity of purpose.

An organisation that cares for its people, communicates, reassures, leads, engages and motivates will adapt better to new ways of work, will become productive and pragmatic with innovation shining through, delivering for the organisation and the team.

An organisation that invests in the future, in technology, in digital and in the upskilling of its people – particularly in leadership and communication skills – can adapt

better to the new world of work.

An organisation that places value on its members, engages with them, understands their needs, and concerns and responds in as innovative and resourceful a way as it can, will be remembered by those members.

### Conclusion

2020 has been a very unequal experience analogous to us all being in a storm but in different boats. On a personal level, I have found some days full of energy and purpose whilst others have been long and draining.

I have been inspired by the resourcefulness, innovation and "can do" attitude of the team at CPA Ireland. The initial shock of working from home, losing personal connections, anxiety for the future has given way to new ways of communicating, collaborating and learning new ways to work.

We have all taken inspiration from CPA members and students for the manner in which you have adapted, dealt with incredible levels of uncertainty whilst doing your best to support your colleagues, the businesses you serve, and yourselves through the fog of the unknown.

For none of us, has 2020 been the year that we imagined or wished for. Some have coped with illness and loss without the traditional supports from family and community.

Within CPA Ireland it was not the year we had planned either. However, it has been a year in which the value of CPAs to society has shone through. The CPA community from the Council, through the team at CPA Ireland, members and students have remained purposeful, productive and balanced, delivering for CPA Ireland and for the community.

Hopefully 2021 will bring a safer reality for us all and time to reflect on 2020, what we have learned about ourselves, what has changed in how we live and work, and what we will keep for the future.