

The future is now – the 'new world of work' and how CPA Ireland is supporting accounting talent

by Chantal Haynes-Curley

In January 2021 CPA Ireland launched 'Trainee Remote' an online program supported by Skillnet Ireland, which is aimed at assisting CPA students and members to adapt to the 'new world of work', a world expedited by Covid-19 and continued remote working.

Trainee Remote is a beneficial tool to support employers and employees in proactively preparing for the implementation of the Irish Government's National Remote Work Strategy, seeking to support participants in understanding and using the tools required for collaborative working in a remote setting, together with training on fundamental practical skills for trainee accountants.

'Making Remote Work' The National Remote Work Strategy

On 15 January 2021, Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Leo Varadkar, launched the 'Making Remote Work' National Remote Work Strategy, which aims to ensure that remote working "is a permanent feature in the Irish workplace". Five million euro has been earmarked within Budget 2021, for the development of remote hubs and a review of the treatment of remote working for tax and expenditure purposes is expected within Budget 2022.

This strategy will strengthen the legal rights of employees to request remote work and will be supported by legislation expected to come into force during Q3 2021. To comply with impending legislation and to adapt to the changes this strategy presents to work practice, employers must act.

The National Remote Work Strategy stems from the Irish Government's 2019 'Future Jobs Ireland' report which found that 'If remote work is embraced as part of innovation and technological change, it has the potential to increase

participation in the labour force, improve productivity, widen the talent pool across Ireland, stimulate regional growth, lessen accommodation pressures and support a greener economy.' Just a few months after the report was published a significant segment of the labour force took up homeworking across Ireland due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Increased home working during the pandemic cultivated a reform in attitudes toward remote work and acted as a test run, for the reorganization of work away from the traditional office environment. As stated by Leo Varadkar, "The pandemic has been an accelerator... [it] has been such a disruptor that in many ways it has already done the work for us". However, while Covid-19 has garnered support for reforming of work practice, the caveat outlined in the 2019 'Future Jobs Ireland' report, of remote work as 'part of innovation and technological change' needs some attention, something CPA Ireland has worked to support employers and employees with via the Trainee Remote program.

Remote work and the Workplace Relations Commission

Upcoming legislation will provide employees with the right to request remote work and recourse against their employer, via the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC), should their request for remote work be denied without a robust justification. In January 2021, the WRC ordered an employer to pay compensation to an employee whose request to work remotely was denied during the first Covid-19

lockdown. While the basis for this ruling was specific to the circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic and not a general right to work from home, there is no doubt that 2022 will see similar hearings once remote work legislation is implemented.

While the feasibility of implementing remote work has previously elicited dichotomised opinions and was rarely practiced across the accountancy profession, this strategy has quashed any prospect of a collective return to traditional, full time, office-based work. Any such assumptions should be approached with caution by employers, as opinion polls suggest most employees will wish to continue remote work once Covid-19 is over. The latest National Remote Working Employee Survey found that, post Covid-19, 94% of workers would like to work remotely some or all the time. As employees continue to work from home during lockdown restrictions, they are forming a strong argument for continuation. Employees will likely be able to evidence that they have continued to efficiently perform their roles from a remote location and in the face of this substantive evidence, and without a solid rationale for refusal, employers could find themselves on the losing end of a WRC hearing.

Preparing for the new world of work

Forward-thinking organisations such as US-based OUM & Co-CPA-Accounting Services, are ahead of the curve in adapting to the 'new world of work'. Like many businesses they had to rapidly adapt during the onset of Covid-19, but

rather than wait for the pandemic to pass they made proactive strides to embed remote work practice. Speaking to AccountingWeb.com the firm's managing partner Chris Millais said, "This required us to re-think how we operate...we concentrated on accelerating and enhancing our employees' software tools related to client service, collaboration, communication, organization, added technical and softs skills education".

Recognising that 'work-from-anywhere' is likely to become the norm post Covid-19, they are focusing on how to preserve continuity, promote collaboration, and maintain their organisational culture in a dispersed work environment.

The 'new world of work' is upon us and it is a direct outcome of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, ushered in through the emergence of technologies which continue to disrupt economies, businesses, industries, societies, and personal lives.

Technology has made it possible to conduct business across multiple continents without leaving home, widened the talent market, and has the potential to revitalise businesses and communities. However, obtaining the opportunities created by technologies requires a proactive effort to reorientate, those who do will be less impacted by the rapid onset of uninterrupted change prompted by this revolution.

The World Economic Forum Future of Jobs report (2020) shows that by 2025,44% of the skills that employees need to effectively perform their roles will change. The report estimates by 2025 15% of workforces are at risk of disruption and 6% are expected to be fully displaced.

Technology is augmenting work, which will disrupt employment and the availability of talent unless employers support employees to obtain the skills required to adapt. Working from home during emergency response measures does not constitute a considered and strategic implementation of remote working, which is what is necessary now that the remote work strategy has been announced.



As it stands, a vast majority of those working from home are still lacking the fundamental skills and practices required to work remotely. A recent poll of six thousand EU office-based workers conducted by Sharp found 51% were anxious about a lack of up-to-date skills training. In line with the pace of change, employers have a responsibility to ensure employees are being upskilled continually.

Providing access to remote work without providing training and resources to enable remote work is akin to giving a person the keys to a car without any lessons in how to drive it.

Can remote working disrupt future accountancy talent?

Employers should also be looking at the impact this remote work strategy will have over access to future talent, which is at risk unless employers adapt training methods to accommodate remote mentoring and supervision. Accountancy talent became a casualty of the last major economic disruption, the 2008 recession, a sharp decline in the number of trainee accountants and ensuing decrease in the number of qualified accountants resulted in accountancy becoming a critical skill within the Irish labour market.

In September 2020, the Institute of Student Employers (ISE) identified a 23% reduction in student and graduate recruitment for 2020, a forecasted 12% reduction in graduate recruitment for 2021 and 40% fewer internship placements. Unless employers adapt to remote recruitment, onboarding, and

training the risk of a further reduction of qualified accountants is a very real prospect, a catastrophic impact on a profession that cannot afford to lose any more graduates.

Employers cannot opt out of change, agility and a proactive approach are imperative to retain talent, protect access to future talent and remain active. There are major gains to be had by those who are agile and willing to adapt as Covid-19 is disrupting the brain drain owing to a lack of travel.

This has stopped the migration of talent to overseas economies, providing opportunities to attract talented graduates to the profession. Recruitment at global industry level has halted, according to a recent article in The Times at least three of the big four are delaying graduate start dates. In the UK, KPMG is reportedly offering to finance graduates' master's degrees if they defer their placements, while Deloitte scrapped its summer internship programme. Competition for high-quality graduates has hit a 10-year low with an average of 93 applications per graduate job according to careers website Bright Network.

For those brave enough to face the new world of work and train remotely they will reap the rewards. Graduates who would normally get snapped up are now finding themselves competing for placements providing an excellent opportunity for smaller and/or independent employers looking to add value to their workforce.

CPA Ireland Trainee Remote

CPA Ireland is committed to supporting its members, students, and the accounting profession. As such CPA Ireland has recently launched Trainee Remote - a fully funded online course supported by Skillnet Ireland, which is aimed at assisting CPA trainees to identify, develop, and apply the skills and competencies required to effectively operate as a CPA Trainee Accountant within a remote work environment. This is part of an ongoing strategy to support the smooth transition to the 'new world of work' for the accountancy profession.

If you would like to know more about this course, or how CPA Ireland is supporting remote work across the sector please contact Chantal Haynes-Curley at chaynescurley@cpaireland.ie or Caroline Moloney cmoloney@cpaireland.ie



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