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## Careers during COVID

27 October 2020

April French Furnell

**Office rules were upended during the pandemic, so April French-Furnell pondered the 'Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything', and she found herself wondering "can you still impress your boss over Zoom?"**



### Houseparty replaces office party

There were things we never thought we would miss from the pre Covid office: Commuting on a rainy day; sitting at the same desk; pointless meetings and late-night deadlines. Then, time showed us we did miss the office - those catchups at the water cooler; birthdays with friends and Thursday night drinks, perhaps with a night club or two. Even the odd argument is now remembered fondly.

Modern technology, took the opportunity to put itself in the middle of our relationships from Microsoft Teams to Zoom and even our friends on Houseparty to create a 'new normal.' However, as the months have creaked on, screen fatigue is sweeping the corporate world but despite this with no end to the pandemic, many companies have announced major home-working changes and reconfigured so that staff may never return to an office. So, in this new world of the office interface, questions are surfacing: how do you continue to impress your boss? Seven months into WFH, some glitches are beginning to emerge.

### Tearing up the rule book

Areas of concern include remuneration, training and progression, and how these interactions can be delivered without face-to-face meetings. The private client industry is founded on relationships, so how do you train your employees in these softer skills over Zoom, or Teams, which are turning out to be transactional in style and not so useful for spur of the moment, informal chats. April French Furnell, sent some emails and posted some tweets to bring some collective concerns into the open.

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## Concern 1: How to get a starring role (pounce first or consider why you are in attendance)

Adapting to the different dynamic of video calls with multiple participants is something a number of people have struggled with.

"Timing when you speak can be difficult, but don't be overly concerned if you end up speaking over someone as your input is what is most important. Going first is also an option and ensures your voice is heard.", advises *Shona Baijal*, *Managing Director, UBS Global Wealth Management UK*.



*Rosalyn Breeedy*,  
*Partner and Head*  
*of Financial*  
*Services, Wedlake*  
*Bell* agrees.

"Raise your hand on the app. Ask questions and add comments on chat. Try and do that within the first five minutes as it gets more difficult the longer you wait".

"Video calls are generally quite difficult at any level, especially if you are not the person who is hosting the call", concedes *Zia Robertson*, *Senior Manager, Fairway Group*. "One thing to perhaps

think about is if you actually have anything to say on a call. There may be instances where you are attending for information purposes."

***'I have a view, I think it could be helpful'...***

Preparation is key, according to *Joshua Matthews*, *Co-Founder and Managing Director of MASECO*. "I think the key to being noticed is preparing your answers and thoughts before you speak and choosing to focus on the quality of your input rather the quantity. Well-structured, cohesive, and logical answers will always impress listeners. Saying something simple such as 'I have a view I think it could be helpful' is an acceptable way to interject", adds Joshua.

### **Pre call, call and game strategy**

For those meetings where you have questions, specifically for clients or intermediaries, setting up a meeting internally ahead of a video call is helpful for all those in your office who will be on the call, said Zia. "A meeting invite, with a few bullet points outlining the purpose of the call will help set the tone and demonstrate to your managers or directors that you are taking a lead and ensuring the relevant questions or topics are being discussed. This is also an opportunity to raise other topics and agree ahead of the video call who will take the lead to speak."

If all else fails, "don't be afraid when the call is coming to an end to speak up. It is important that all points are discussed in order to avoid another call which ultimately will frustrate everyone." says Zia.

## Concern 2. Virtual training (non-existent or failing)

"Face to face training time has become increasingly difficult and a lot of organisations are opting for online options with Teams, Zoom or other similar platforms. Zia says, "There are a lot of online webinars which are available free online, these have become a popular source of training and can be tuned into live or downloaded to watch later. I am sure when restrictions are eased in the future more face to face training will be available, but there are some great alternatives to get involved with in the meantime."

### **Back to the drawing board**

Rosalyn agrees but underlines some real time difficulty. "It's a stressful time and managers are finding it difficult to supervise and train team members as they are required to attend incessant video meetings." Her advice is therefore to "try and make it easier for them



to do this. Schedule a time with a calendar app for a few of you to discuss a new approach with your manager. Have some suggestions as to what topics could be covered with the most important first. Break down the slots to 20 minutes as it is easier to fit in a 20-minute slot than an hour and with training little and often is usually more effective in any event".

### **Off screen prep' proves vital**

Furthermore, she advises team members to take on as much of the off-screen preparation as they can before going live. "For example, could one of the team members do the background reading and present the issue so that the team use the manager's time to answer questions and provide contextual understanding. Do this in rotation and everyone gets to boost their confidence and practice their presenting and analytical skills".

### **Be Zoom considerate**

Joshua shares a similar view: "With companies now working from home, it has become difficult for line managers to identify training areas, so speaking honestly with your manager about your concerns and areas of weakness will be crucial to identifying when more face-to-face training is required. I would recommend blocking out 15-30 minutes per week with your manager to specifically focus on questions and weaker areas. By placing the time in your diaries, you will ensure you are both available and maintain a regular training pattern". However, he warns it's important to stick to allotted times to avoid two-way fatigue. He recommends "DiSC Profiling", a personality assessment software tool, to get a better understanding about how to communicate with your manager and how to manage up.

### **The buck may stop with you**

Taking control of your own progress is important. "You need to be more proactive in your learning and skills acquisition at this time especially if client interactions lessen", explains Rosalyn. "We're all in this situation together though" adds Shona, "so managers should welcome the opportunity to work on solutions constructively to help where people need it."

## **Concern 3. Odd one out (Not invited to meetings now)**

The pandemic caused a pause but business life has resumed, however, not always with the same spirit of team inclusion. "It may be that due to government guidelines there is a restriction on the number of people who

can attend board meetings now. This will be happening across the board, so please don't feel like you will be the only person who is feeling left out", shares Zia.



#### **De-brief by Zoom**

Her advice is to "discuss with your line management how you feel. You could suggest dialing in via a conference call? Or you could set up a meeting internally after the client meeting to debrief and discuss any matters or action points that need to be followed up. In doing

either of the above it also demonstrates your willingness to adapt to the current circumstances and challenges. Being solution driven and taking control or ownership of situations that are sometimes out of your control will always be seen as growth in your career, at any level."

While Shona feels that it's also for the managers to consider: "your manager needs to give more careful thought beforehand to where they can help give you exposure and experience as these opportunities are less likely to naturally present themselves. Talking about them will make sure they are considered." A further way to be involved is to ask if you can assist by taking a note for the benefit of your manager and client, according to Rosalyn.

#### **Telepathy is over-rated**

"Remember, spending less time in direct contact with your manager also makes it more difficult for them to manage you, they aren't mind readers and will appreciate a nudge in the right direction if it's a benefit to you, them, the company and the client", concludes Joshua.

## **Concern 4. Business development (How to do it digitally)**

"I think we all have to accept that face-to-face interactions will be replaced at the margin by more phone calls, video calls, emails and other electronic communication. I would increase efforts to maintain and build networks – remembering that people actually have more time to interact with less social distraction so your audience is that much more captive", says Shona.

"Joining webinars and participating in corporate forums is a good way to stay in touch and connected. I have recently reached out to some of my contacts and suggested a so

cially distanced coffee. There are some service providers who are starting to do smaller events in line with government guidelines so watch out for an invite soon", adds Zia.

#### **Be more than a one trick pony**

When joining digital events, Rosalyn advises to both attend and then discuss thereafter. Other ideas might be "Maybe arrange an activity such as a cookery class for a grou

p where you can take and post pictures of what you cooked. Exchange music and book recommendations. Discuss and develop an ongoing



theme which requires more than superficial thought such as the conduct of US constitutional elections or whatever takes your fancy. Read round the subject become knowledgeable and invested”.

#### **Inter-company fantasy football league**

The trick is to find a particular talking point rather than a general bump into each other at an event, according to Joshua. “Follow up on referrals you’ve made to see how they’ve gone, forward them an interesting article or a blog you may have written. At my firm, we have tried to establish Fantasy Football Leagues with other firms to keep people in touch with each other and to provide a topic of conversation. We have also had Zoom wine tastings with wine delivered to your house and other interactive remote ideas. It’s worked well for us so could be something to pick up...”

## **Concern 5. Working from Home forever (for those who don’t want to go back)**

“A lot of employers I know are already thinking through what the new working environment post-COVID will look like and readily accept it will not be a return to the old way of working. Many accept more flexibility will be key to their employees. But at the same time, employees have to be willing to meet somewhere in the middle and recognize the type of work they do and business they are in. Some industries can function with people working remotely, but others only get the most out of their people when they interact personally in an office environment. Our CEO reminded us that culture and on the job training are important, and we must not lose sight of our fundamental goal to serve our clients with excellence”, explained Shona. “Having an open discussion about the positives of you working from home and the benefit that would bring to your business is definitely a conversation worth having though”, adds Zia.

#### **Short term v long term social distancing**

“It is important to take a longer-term view of the situation”, said Rosalyn. It may be initially more productive but if you don’t see your team and your network you may find that you start to miss out, as many opportunities are given to the people who are around. It is good for your mental health to connect with people in person and we learn more when we are able to pick up social cues in person.”

#### **Discuss don’t demand**

“When raising with your manager consider first how such a request might adversely affect their ability to supervise and think how you can mitigate

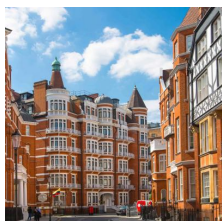
that. For example, by scheduling regular catch ups. Treat it more as a discussion and not a request. Listen to any concerns raised by your manager and agree to take those on board even if you think they are not valid or reasonable. It is important your manager sees you as someone with whom they can collaborate”, explains Rosalyn.

Joshua added, “We have to remember that it’s not easy managing staff well and good communication will help them manage you well. Provided working from home is not at a detriment to your company or clients, I would recommend initially communicating your WFH message via email with your manager and following it up with a phone or video call. Remember to come to any meeting prepared with the information and evidence to back up your stance but not to be insistent. If you’re able to make a reasoned case without there having any significant negative consequences, I think a reasonable manager can only hear you out and make a reasonable decision. They’ll also value your honesty and thought process which will help develop your relationship”.

## The Ultimate Answer

As to whether you can still impress your boss over Zoom, the jury is still out but lets hope unlike the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy, whose supernatural-computer, Deep-Thought took 7.5 million years to come up with The Ultimate Answer, that it doesn’t take the private wealth industry quite so long.

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