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# Practices to the four

We continue our interviews with practices on managing in a coronavirus world – now four months since lockdown

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# Building momentum

AdvanceTrack makes its third visit to speak to accounting practices about managing their clients and team in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. While lockdown has eased, it certainly isn't business as usual – with our practitioners formulating plans for the immediate future, and longer-term



## Bruce Burrowes, founder, Kingston Burrowes

**Q** It has been four months since lockdown, and a lot has changed since then. How has your firm been since we spoke a few weeks ago?

**A** There has been lots of communication, particularly where clients have needed funding. For ourselves, we moved from four offices into three – which involved consolidating two of them. It's been a really busy time.

The main focus of the last few weeks is getting compliance work undertaken that might have been put off during the first few weeks of lockdown, alongside bedding the new office in. Clearly that has meant encouraging people back 'into' the office – one they've not been in before.

Thankfully, the new office space is more than big enough to accommodate six staff and practice safe social distancing. A team member has managed the day-to-day issues.

The main problem we have had is typical teething problems of being in a new office – we had to wait for new monitors to arrive.

A key part of our ongoing dialogue with team members has been: 'It's OK to tell colleagues if they're too close or make you uncomfortable.' Where an office had to hot-desk to allow for social distancing, little things such as assigning everyone their own wireless keyboard has helped make a difference.

Clients have been grateful for us keeping up communication lines with them – even if it's been to say 'we're really busy and we'll speak tomorrow'.

One person moved during this time, which has meant reallocating work, but that's opened my eyes to some of the existing team members' efforts and technical ability.





Bruce Burrowes, Kingston Burrowes

### Q What about the agenda going forward?

A We know that some people want to come in and physically see us to discuss their personal tax return. But as a management accountant by qualification I think I can lead my team to demonstrate support – and communicate – online if need be. We can't discount online communications because we can't have a trail of people coming into our offices. So we need to make that work.

### Q And what about the medium to longer term?

A Well, I'm not going to go crazy with pushing remote working, that's for sure. Our trainees require – and will continue to require – close contact with more experienced team members to learn and grow. That learning osmosis won't happen with remote working. For example, I saw one small issue that took four hours to deal with over email.

My firm didn't charge clients for furloughing support, up until June. We've then had conversations that begin with: 'Well, we've helped you out for quite a while...' Clients have realised what a proper relationship is with an accountant.

We're seeing the split now between businesses that are getting back on their feet and looking to push on, and those that are still pushed back and furloughing. There's still plenty of support required for them over the coming months.

## Nikki Adams, CEO, Ad Valorem



### Q It has been four months since lockdown when we last spoke, and a lot has changed since then. How has your firm and its clients been?

A The biggest operational challenge for us was furloughing coming into play – the speed that everything was changing. It was a case of getting to grips with things... The team are used to being the ones that know everything and confident in what they say – but we had no time, so it was stressful. Thankfully we have a big enough team to provide support where required; in this instance, to support payroll.

We didn't furlough anyone. It was a conscious decision that we didn't want to and we didn't need to do that. We were in a good position before it happened so there was no compelling financial need to do so.

It really paid off for us, because we used people for different things as it progressed. Our admin team helped with client comms. We charged for furloughing support where they wanted us to do it on their behalf. For us it was beyond basic payroll support.

We're now back in the office with half the team rotating with the other. There's also a skeleton staff in all the time and a few people not in at all. We've actually recruited six people during lockdown – they were primarily very good accountants and technicians who had found themselves furloughed and weren't happy about it. They're experts in tax, R&D and digital.

### Q What about the agenda going forward?

A There's been no noticeable dip in enquiries; in fact, we've won some big accounts – where their accountant doesn't have a digital focus. Some accountants have been hard to get hold of or have even shut

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Nikki Adams, CEO, Ad Valorem

down – it is difficult for the smallest practitioners without resource.

Our workplace has become almost like a clubhouse where you come specifically to collaborate or train. Most people want 50/50 between working from home and the office. We're outcomes-focused so that helps provide flexibility.

### Q And what about the medium to longer term?

A We'd taken on extra office space. There's an argument about needing it, but we feel it will be our flagship – a central focus that has energy and buzz and where we can exchange ideas.

The medium term is not so great though, without face-to-face. It makes training really difficult.

We've also placed 130 clients from a previous acquisition onto our systems, so that's exciting.

We've certainly noticed that the value piece has come back. Clients understanding what we can do for them. Some wanted to ease back because things were tough, and they've realised how important we are in getting them back on their feet so have changed their mind.

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## Brendon Howlett, operations director, Wood and Disney



### Q It has been four months since lockdown, and we've previously caught up twice. How has your firm been since we spoke a few weeks ago?

A It's been much more settled. Businesses are releasing people from furlough, and for others the shutters have been coming down. We're also seeing business trying to do different things to diversify. We've had tax and furloughing – the waters have been a bit muddied there with July payments in terms of how and who we bill, but we expect clients to pay if they can afford it.

From our perspective we still have everyone in at full capacity – and we're still using the team at AdvanceTrack to undertake tasks for us. We are behind compared to the budget at the start of the year but our heads are above water.

Communication has started to change. We're moving away from the shock of what happened four months ago and people are going back to work. There had been so much info and assistance – it has been really good for new business and new clients, so we decided to continue a high level of communication as much as possible. We're still using Zoom, but have to balance that out with getting on with general workload as we had fallen behind.

I personally thought that a lot of our routine work would fall off, but our team have been able to hammer home self-assessment returns. I think that the typical late filers have had time on their

hands and got this off their back. It's also enabled us to have conversation about their general finances.

### Q What about the agenda going forward?

A Discussions about understanding cashflow and accounts are leading to financing conversations. And then there's improving ongoing financial reporting. Where there's uncertainty then we have to help clients plan – it's on us as advisers to make that happen.

### Q And what about the medium to longer term?

A Most of our A-list clients like the regular dialogue... even if they say we're fine let's speak soon, checking in on them helps. So... linked to this communication piece, we're thinking about how we present this pro-active support – supporting the client journey is fine but how we market that is a big thing going forward.

Part of that will be reinforcing to clients that we can communicate with them quickly so they can act quickly. We've also got to keep showing our human side in that process to maintain and build trust.



# Making yourself invaluable

It was ‘accountants galore’ on AdvanceTrack’s latest webinar, ‘Scaling for Growth? Building an Advisory Mindset and Firm’, which discussed the cultural and strategic approach towards making a practice invaluable to its clients.

AdvanceTrack MD Vipul Sheth started the conversation by highlighting the key challenges of changing how a practice – or any organisation – operates. These include altering mindsets, successfully adopting new technology and embedding change into the new normal.

“People are fearful of change, and will look

to maintain the status quo,” said Sheth. “So leadership is required to change doubters to believers, and champions are needed to keep it all on track.”

Joe David from accountancy firm Nephos said that his background as an accountant in industry gave him a mindset that creating and analysing good data was key in supporting the making of decisions. This led him down the path of creating an advisory- and technology-led practice.

Clarity’s Aynsley Damery said that established firms have to go that bit further when it comes

to driving change, particularly if ingrained in providing services based purely on clients’ historical information. “It’s about looking forward as a firm, and looking forward on behalf of your clients,” said Damery. He said that ‘champions’ within the firm, who will help instil that mindset while managing change projects, were vital. “They’re so important in terms of connectivity between management and the team – interpreting the vision and how it will work.”

Practice Ignition’s Trent McLaren said: “You must set out from the top, across the entire firm, the direction and why you’re changing. You also have to let them know about progression, or you’ll inevitably end up with silos of knowledge.”

[Click here to access the webinar.](#)

## +++STOP PRESS+++

We’ve decided to find out how fast accountants are adopting technology, across the world... but

we need you to help us by filling in a quick survey form using the link below.

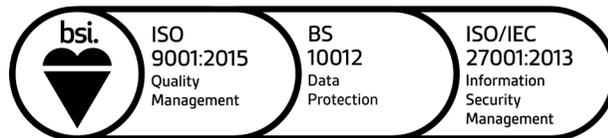
By taking part, you will be helping to build a picture of how far you and others are on your

digital journey. And we’re really looking forward to sharing insight and analysis from the results. The survey is open until the end of August.

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