

Changing workspaces

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Saica asked two forward-thinking accountants, Peter Wagner and Willem Haarhoff, about the workspace changes that have been spurred on by remote offices



Peter Wagner



Willem Haarhoff

While for some organisations remote working is nothing new, the majority of us have been thrown headfirst into this radically altered way of working. As the weeks go by and we start to settle into our routines, big questions are beginning to arise around workplace issues. Peter Wagner, CA(SA) is Director of Iridium Business Solutions, a company that was started by Peter and his brother Simon, at their dining room table. Despite huge growth over the past few years, they have opted to continue working remotely. Willem Haarhoff is co-founder of DoughGetters Accounting, a digital business that has grown exponentially, in no small part thanks to technology and cloud accounting.

Magner and Haarhoff share valuable insight into the highs and lows of remote working.

Staying productive

Many team leaders who are not *au fait* with remote working are having a hard time trusting their teams to get the job done. For Haarhoff, this is not an issue at all. “One of the fundamentals of our business is attracting and retaining the best people, and if you have done that, you shouldn’t need to worry about them achieving their goals,” he says.

Both companies rely heavily on tech to manage productivity, with Iridium using Slack and Asana being the tool of choice for DoughGetters. “We’re not a time-based business, but an output-based business, so it’s actually kind of easy to monitor,” says Magner. “If you have five tasks, and you tick them off, your job is done.” He adds that people are incredibly motivated to retain their jobs in the current situation, so he’s finding his staff are going the extra mile, working hard and even promoting the business on their own social media channels. “They want the business to survive so they can keep their jobs,” he says.

Mental health

Keeping their teams motivated and mentally healthy is a challenge that has always been central to the ethos of both Iridium

and DoughGetters, and has become increasingly important to them now, during this stressful time. For both team leaders, it all comes down to communication.

Before lockdown, Magner had introduced a tech solution called Mygrow. “It sends each team member daily droplets, of only 5-10 minutes long, that teach you how to build your emotional intelligence,” he explains. Iridium also encourages their team to exercise every day, and they host daily huddles, where the team can touch base, check in, say how they are feeling and give a ‘high-five’ to other team members. “It doesn’t have to be about work,” says Magner. “You may want to congratulate Susan for looking after her kids, or Matt for baking banana bread,” he explains. “The important thing is to build community and stick together.”

Sick leave

Sick leave has become a hot topic since the world was forced to work from home. Is it still relevant, and if so, how do you track it? “We call it wellness leave,” says Magner. “Sick leave implies physical sickness, whereas mental wellness needs to come into play, too.”

Iridium has created a Slack channel called Staff Movement, and employees simply drop a message in the channel to say they won’t be coming in. “We trust our team implicitly,” says Magner. “We hire the best people and make sure to foster a positive culture within the team. If you have people sitting at home doing nothing while collecting their paycheck, you’ve hired the wrong person, and are monitoring them in the wrong way” he says. “I want my team to take wellbeing days, rest, and come back inspired.”

Hiring staff

As we all know, one of the most difficult aspects of any business is to not make any hiring mistakes. While many team leaders believe interviewing someone virtually takes away from the nuance, and makes recruiting more difficult, Haarhoff strongly disagrees. “I don’t think anything changes, whether you interview someone physically or virtually,” he says. For him it’s all about asking the right questions and looking out for specific attributes that will fit your business. “The last three people I hired were interviewed virtually, and in fact I only met them physically after seven or eight months of working together, and it’s going really well.”

Value-based billing

As we move into this new world of work, it’s becoming increasingly apparent that time-based billing no longer serves our needs. “When you embrace this concept, you’ll become less obsessed about tracking your staff’s time, and rather focus on tools such as Asana to track their achievements,” says Haarhoff.

“On the client side, people want efficiency,” he adds, explaining that clients already know more or less how much they are willing to pay for bookkeeping and accounting services, as these are highly commoditised services. “There are therefore two things that are important now. One is to be efficient, as we are part of the ‘microwave generation’ where people want results instantly, and the other is to make it easy for clients to work with you,” he explains. “Find out what your client wants and needs, and then engineer your processes in such a way that you can deliver your services within the price they are willing to pay,” he explains. “That’s not to say you are simply accepting their price, but rather that you are convincing them that you are the best person to buy from,” he adds.

Tech and new business

Both Iridium and DoughGetters have relied heavily on cloud technology and the myriad apps out there to start and grow their business. However, both concur that all the apps in the world won’t solve your business problems. “It’s important to get the essentials of your business right,” says Haarhoff. “Then you can decide what tech and apps to enable in order to automate as much as possible of your business strategy.”

Keeping your clients alive

Without clients, none of us have a business, so no matter how inventive and resilient we are, we need our clients to survive, too. Both Haarhoff and Magner have seen the need to support their clients as much as possible during lockdown.

“We are pulling out all the stops,” says Haarhoff. “Where possible, we are doing pro bono work, and negotiating fees, but also, we’ve found this is a great opportunity to talk to our clients about what they are doing differently, in terms of their fundamentals, and how they can improve their business.”

Magner agrees. “Accountants need to step up to the plate and provide great advice and insight to the businesses they serve,” he says. “We all need to use this time to stay relevant.”

For more information, visit <https://www.linkedin.com/in/willemhaarhoff/>; www.doughgetters.co.za; www.ximple.co.za; <https://www.linkedin.com/in/petermagner/>

To help address the challenges faced by many, Saica hosted a complimentary virtual leadership series called Leadership in a time of crisis. This series focused on various elements affecting individuals, businesses and the accounting profession as a whole during the Covid-19 pandemic. Sessions in this series have been recorded and can be viewed on [Saica's events page](#).

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