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Paul McDonald • Jun. 09, 2021



To keep costs low and productivity high, businesses must be agile and innovative — particularly during times of systemic disruption, such as a global pandemic. As the COVID-19 crisis has forced accounting firms and departments to refocus their services and realign resources, many CFOs and companies have turned to consultants

— interim workers, often project-based — to help navigate the new economic

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1. **Shifting from fixed to variable costs** — When cash flow is tight, many firms implement a hiring freeze to consolidate their fixed costs. Yet maintaining high levels of output is essential for business growth. Working with contractors is a way to boost internal activities and keep core projects moving forward — all while mitigating the overhead associated with hiring full-time personnel, such as salaries, training and benefits. Taking on temporary staff means you pay only for the talent you need, only when you need it.
2. **Headcount versatility** — Being able to build or reduce headcount in response to changing economic conditions allows businesses to quickly adjust output, while keeping tight control of balance sheets. Without the right staff in place, accounting firms risk falling behind during busy periods. Supplementing core staff with project-based consultants means firms can scale the team as needed to keep initiatives on track.
3. **Time saved on recruitment** — Advertising, interviewing, negotiating and onboarding can take weeks, if not months — especially for senior positions. In contrast, skilled contract workers are often available at short notice and can make immediate contributions. Using a specialized staffing agency means that project professionals will have been pre-evaluated, including a preliminary interview, to make sure they can do the job, making it a low-risk and cost-effective way to bring in new talent.
4. **Access to specialized skills** — As audit regulations, financial reporting and tax laws become ever-more domain specific, accountants with expert knowledge of a sector are in increasingly high demand. Where this talent isn't available in-house, consulting professionals with advanced degrees can be brought in to fill the gap. Companies looking to automate their processes, centralize their accounting departments and upgrade their ERP systems may require [technical consultants](#)

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6. **Continuity of key services** — When an employee takes extended time off — such as parental leave or long-term sickness — the rest of the team can become overwhelmed trying to absorb the extra workload. Transaction backlogs, uncollected bills and other slip-ups can be easily avoided by enlisting temporary help from an experienced interim ledger or accounts payable accountant.
7. **Try before you buy** — Many firms remain cautious about hiring in the current climate — and don't want to run afoul of employment law should they need to lay off staff down the line. Employing accounting professionals on a contract basis gives managers time to evaluate their skills and make sure they work well with the team before offering them a full-time role, avoiding the costly consequences of making a bad hire.
8. **Generate extra momentum** — Peak periods such as month-end, year-end, tax season and budget season can leave accountancy teams feeling exhausted. Boosting your team's capacity by bringing in interim staff helps **prevent burnout**, which can lead to reduced productivity and other problems, even including staff falling ill. Consultants can also provide valuable support for special projects where there is a gap in resources.
9. **Improve staff retention** — Savvy managers know that investing in your workforce leads to better morale and more motivated employees. When you hire a consultant or contract professional to support your team, it shows that you recognize how hard they're working and the mountain they have to climb. When top performers feel valued and appreciated, they're more likely to stick around, resulting in a motivated, dedicated and highly skilled workforce.

Working with a recruitment specialist

Even without a global pandemic, the world of accounting is always changing.

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High-performing employees will always be the backbone of your organization. They know your clients inside and out and can run your finance systems with relative ease. But as the pandemic has proved, businesses must be prepared for disruption and focus on building resilience. Cultivating a lean, flexible workforce supported by contract-based talent can help you operate smoothly year-round and overcome any challenges.

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Paul McDonald is senior executive director at talent solutions and recruiting firm Robert Half. He writes and speaks frequently on hiring, workplace, leadership and career-management topics. Over the course of more than 35 years in the staffing industry, McDonald has advised thousands of company leaders and job seekers on how to hire and get hired.

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