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FIRM MANAGEMENT

Team Collaboration Strategies for Remote Accounting Firms

Remote or hybrid work comes with major changes and perhaps, the most obvious one is in how teams collaborate.

Shahram Zarshenas • Nov. 18, 2022



With employees getting wooed by other firms offering remote positions, many accounting firms are now embracing remote, or at the least, hybrid work.

Jeremy Calhoun, Assistant Vice President of Accounting Recruiting at RobertHalf, recently said:

It's funny that in my first three years as a recruiter, the first question I got was always, 'How much does this job pay?' But recently, since the pandemic began, it's been, 'Is this remote or, if not remote, is it hybrid?'

But remote or hybrid work comes with major changes and perhaps, the most obvious one is in how teams collaborate.

Going from leaving sticky notes with client updates on a colleague's desk, sharing information across an open office, walking into each other's cubicles to share a new piece of information from a client, or just setting up a quick meeting in the boardroom to handle an emergency — to doing (almost) everything virtually is a big change especially for traditional firms.

But collaborating virtually isn't as hard as you might think. It's all about having the right systems in place and building a culture of transparency, respect, and trust. It is absolutely possible to build a highly collaborative and [thriving remote firm](#).

Below, we share 4 strategies for building a collaborative culture in your remote (or hybrid) accounting firm:

How to Build a Collaborative Remote Accounting Firm:

1. Establish a Culture of Trust

Building a culture of trust across your firm directly affects team productivity and engagement which ultimately impacts your firm's success.

According to [Harvard Business Review](#),

"Compared with people at low-trust companies, people at high-trust companies report: 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, 50%

higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76% more engagement, 29% more satisfaction with their lives, 40% less burnout."

Moving from running a fully in-person firm where managing and supporting your team was quite straightforward, trusting them to get work done when you can't see them will be one of the hardest things you'll have to adjust to. But how can you learn to trust your remote or hybrid team?

In addition to the above, there are a few other things you can adopt, company-wide to build a high-trust remote accounting firm:

- While [Financial Cents](#) is not an accounting firm, we're a fully remote company with employees in 5 countries, 4 continents, and 6 time zones. One of the things we do to help us better know each other and establish trust is our monthly virtual social activities. Sometimes, we use a team building game software, other times we have a member of the team come up with games we can all play and enjoy. These activities help us open up, see each other in a different light outside of work, and help us work together on fun games to emerge as "conquerors". Virtual team building activities improve team bonding, knowledge sharing, and relationships, which are key ingredients of team trust.
- [Team communication](#) is important for any firm that will succeed but more so in remote firms. Email, Discord, Slack, MS Teams, and other team chat apps are important for daily conversations and catch ups. But much more, quick and easy communication on client work should not be ignored. Financial Cents' comment feature helps teams leave comments within the software, mention/tag each other, and attach files related to a client's work so that everyone is up to date and able to collaborate seamlessly.

When there's team trust, everyone can focus on delivering their best work whether they're working from a beach house in Italy or from the corner of their home office.

2. Make Your Firm Goal-Oriented

When a team has a common goal they're all striving towards, there is a sense of togetherness that grows amidst them – irrespective of their geographical distribution. This togetherness makes collaboration easy.

Consider this alarming stats from [Phoenix Business Journal](#),

“Only 51% of companies even attempt to develop aligned goals, and among the companies surveyed, only 6% regularly revisit them.”

Developing a clear goal for your firm and making it front and center will aid collaboration. A clear goal and sense of direction will make every member of your remote accounting firm stay productive and efficient. Like a bond, it holds employees together so that no one is doing their own thing.

Create your goal(s), share it with your team, and get them to buy into it. Here's how:

- Think about why you started your firm and what you want to achieve short-term and long-term.
- In a recent chat with us, [Kellie Parks](#), talked about the 2 types of goals you should create for your accounting firm. They are:
 - **Business goals:** The overriding reason your firm exists. It's the reason you chose to start your firm rather than doing any other thing. And this is something you need to first of all decide within yourself as the firm owner.
 - **Client work goals:** These are really important to have because how will you get the work done if you don't know the outcome? How do you create consistency of work if everybody has their own outcomes?
- To get your team to buy into your firm's goal, Kellie Parks recommends [these steps](#):
 - **Have well documented systems that not only define the goals, but lead to achieving them:** For example, if the goal is that a task is done by the fifth of the month, clearly state it within the workflow application that we use.
 - **Don't just state goals, explain why they're necessary:** Telling somebody why a certain number of year-end journal entries is important is just as important as what the number is. And it's the same with the date. For example, “if I want my client books to be closed early in the month, it is so that we don't have a month-end chaotic situation and the work is more evenly spaced. Therefore, it's not enough to say that I want those books closed on a certain date, I also need to ensure that the reason I want that done is very clear.” – Kellie Parks
 - **Make the path to achieving your goals clear and attainable:** This is a key piece to aligning your team members around your stated goals

3. Have a Clear Workflow Process

Chances are your team is a mix of pro accountants, newbies, and sages.

The newbie is still learning the ropes and prone to making mistakes, the pro accountant knows what to do and may or may not be willing to learn new things, the sage accountant has probably been doing monthly bookkeeping the same way for the past 30 years and isn't too thrilled about learning a new way. All these may lead to having friction instead of collaboration among your staff and inconsistent levels of work quality.

Since your firm's survival depends on your ability to complete client work by collaborating effectively, you can't afford to have friction and inconsistency. Below are 5 ways to implement a clear workflow process to overcome this:

- **Use workflow checklists:** Creating and using workflow checklists across your firm should be non-negotiable. It helps you standardize your processes by showing the steps needed to complete work in an accurate and timely manner. With this, even your newest hires will complete accounting tasks as efficiently as your most senior team members. Financial Cents' [40+ free workflow checklist templates](#) are a great place to start.
- **Always assign work to a project owner in addition to other team mates:** With Financial Cents' workflow dashboard, you can assign employees to client work to better improve your process. You can also assign someone as the project owner or manager. The project owner ensures that work moves along well, all roadblocks are removed, and work is delivered on time. This is a big deal for remote accounting firms working from different locations.
- **Efficiently document client notes and updates:** Another important step in your workflow process is ensuring that client updates are well documented so every member of the team is kept in the loop. Financial Cents makes this process a breeze with the [client info dashboard](#) that houses everything about a client including notes and files. This way, when something comes up with a client and the assignee is unavailable, work is not disrupted as other team members just need to go into the client information dashboard to see all the latest updates and notes.
- **Make the work handoff and sign off process clear:** To ensure you're meeting your deadlines while working remotely, make the process for handing off and signing off work clear. Start by [automating your project handoff](#), you can use Financial Cents' [task dependency feature](#) to (I) hide tasks that are not due so assignees can focus on the tasks at hand. (II) automatically notify assignees when it's time to perform their task in a project.

You can also make it clear that work should not be signed off as completed until a certain member of the team reviews and approves it.

Creating a clear and efficient workflow process will make your team work like a well-oiled machine – with work moving forward, everyone being on standby to do their part of the job, and completing work in due time all while maintaining a high-quality work standard.

- **Set realistic expectations and timelines on projects:** To **reduce stress**, friction, and **missed deadlines** in your remote accounting firm, make sure to set realistic timelines and resources to get work done. To easily and equitably distribute work among your staff, make sure to know **what's on everyone's plate**. Also, **don't say yes** to every client request and timelines especially if it doesn't work for you. It's better to say no and have a connected and collaborative firm, meeting realistic goals than to say yes and have a discordant team that produces **low quality work**.

4. Meet Regularly

What is that thing they say again?

“Out of sight, is out of mind”

This is especially true in remote or hybrid firms where teammates don't get to physically see each other for weeks or even months. That's why meeting regularly – both virtually and in-person is super important.

You can have weekly standup meetings to discuss last week's work and the plan for the new week. It's also a great way to know what everyone was up to over the weekend so that conversations can be built from that.

Apart from weekly meetings, monthly and quarterly meetings can be a great way to spend lengthy periods of time (1-3 hours) to discuss client work, firm goals, challenges, solutions, and how to move forward. These meetings help foster togetherness and collaboration that a remote team can't survive without.

Many remote organizations strive to get together in-person at least once or twice a year for a retreat. It's essential in order to foster a sense of community and oneness in your firm.

Apart from all these, you and your team leads can also schedule one-on-one check-ins with individual members. These check-ins are a great way to discuss issues they may not be comfortable raising during team meetings. Make sure these calls are planned ahead so you don't disrupt employees in the middle of a deep working session.

Whatever you do in your regular meetings, do not waste people's time.

Wrapping it up

Becoming fully remote or hybrid can make or break a firm. The difference is in how prepared you are through establishing processes and systems that keep your firm as collaborative as possible. Hopefully, this article has shed some light on how to get it done.

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As CEO of [Financial Cents](#), Shahram Zarshenas spends his time helping accountants get visibility across their firm to prevent things from falling through the cracks. Financial Cents is the maker of an easy-to-use work management solution built to help firms manage their staff and client work.

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