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<https://www.accountingtoday.com/news/firms-go-remote-at-breakneck-speed-in-response-to-coronavirus-pandemic>

## Firms go remote at breakneck speed in response to coronavirus

By **Ranica Arrowsmith**

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Accounting firms across the nation are knee-deep in tax season, but now, they are also knee-deep in a crisis no one could have predicted: the coronavirus pandemic. As the severity of the disease and its spread became clearer over the past week, many national firms have quickly put together plans for their staff to telecommute, and are handling client meetings remotely as much as possible.

Fortunately, in 2020, many business clients are used to handling meetings and document transmission remotely. As early as March 3, a spokesperson for Piascik, a firm based in Glen Allen, Virginia, said, "Some of [the firm's] clients have been grounded for several weeks, but most information can be transmitted electronically so it's not slowing their side of things down."

As the month has progressed, so has the disease, and especially in areas hit hard by COVID-19, firms started to see the necessity for limiting in-person contact.

On March 10, BDO issued a statement to clients assuring them: "We've assembled a cross-disciplinary team, working with our crisis management and business continuity practice professionals, to monitor the COVID-19 public health emergency and to put measures in place that help ensure both safety for our people and business continuity for our clients."

The following day, Prager Metis announced its global offices would remain open. The firm added, "We have business continuity plans in place that will enable us to continue to provide a high level of service in the event that our team must work remotely. These plans include the use of various technologies, as we remain committed to delivering the service that you are accustomed to receiving."

Rob Dutkiewicz, president of Southfield, Michigan-based firm Clayton & McKervery, acknowledged the value of in-person meetings, while reassuring clients that the firm has technology in place that would help them not skip a beat: "If anyone from Clayton & McKervery is scheduled to work with you or your organization in a way that requires face-to-face time, we will be in touch to discuss options to safeguard both the health of your team and ours," he said. "I admit to preferring face-to-face meetings, but recognize that we have excellent technology which allows us to accomplish most of our work via phone, through electronic file sharing, or using our LifeSize technology. As a reminder,

LifeSize is a tool similar to Skype, which allows for security-protected face time from the comfort of a remote location.”

Most firm communications to clients hit the same notes: Their first concern is the health and well-being of staff and clients; they are following the guidelines of public health organizations like the World Health Organization and the Centers of Disease Control; and they will be using technology to accommodate any staff or client that needed to work with them remotely.

### **Going virtual on short notice**

Over the weekend of March 16, New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio announced that city schools would be closing; the city of Hoboken, New Jersey, instituted a curfew, with other cities likely following suit; the Centers for Disease Control issued a guideline strongly discouraging gatherings of more than 50 people in New York; and the death toll worldwide surpassed 6,000. In short, midsized and large firms nationwide are now being forced to seriously consider going totally remote, quickly.

Large, national firms tend to have robust technological capabilities in place that allow for secure remote document transmission and remote work.

On Monday, March 16, Marcum LLP announced it would be going completely remote starting Tuesday through Sunday March 22, with plans to extend if necessary.

“From an information technology perspective, we have processes to deploy immediately when necessary,” said Molly Crane, co-chief human resources officer for Marcum, a global firm which also has offices in New York City as well as New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Connecticut. “We’ve had that in place already for remote work. Our IT team is very progressive, and at times like this we’re ahead of the curve.”

Before going totally remote, Marcum allowed its employees to work from home if they wanted to, but it also allowed them other flexibilities, such as taking later trains to avoid rush hour crowds. The key, Crane said, is to be supportive of employees who want to go remote, and not penalize them in any way.

Smaller firms may find themselves scrambling to adjust to virtual work quickly, and as was made clear by the firms that have been proactive in their client communications, technology plays a major part in preparedness for such a need.

“Beyond just discussing a preparedness plan, documentation and training are important,” said Nicole Fluty, product manager of OfficeTools for AbacusNext, which provides cloud hosting and other collaboration tools for professional services firms. “It’s what schools do as well. They have a communications plan — if we make a sudden change in how a firm is structured, how do we communicate this to staff and clients for full transparency? And if a firm has a smooth transition to going remote, client communication may not even need to happen — they won’t even notice.”