



An opportunity for change

Rebecca Ellis reports on latest trends in recruitment, likely developments, and how business development and marketing functions are planning for the future.

Life has changed significantly for all of us in these weeks of Covid-19. Not least, we have all had to adapt to home working, requiring professional services firms to make the biggest workplace shift in living memory. The bustle of the office has gone as have the social gatherings that help bind a team.

But that doesn't mean things have been quiet behind the scenes. While recruitment activity has inevitably slowed, firms continue to make placements into marketing and business development (M&BD) teams, both in the UK and overseas. And we expect that firms that have been hanging fire on placements will resume activity as conditions hopefully improve. At the same time, we expect more of a focus on interim, contract and temporary roles as firms look to scale their requirements up and down to meet changing market conditions.

Feedback from the market

But beyond recruitment activity, we devote much of our time talking to firms and individuals across the market. When lockdown started, we were determined to continue in some way – like many others we discovered the advantages of apps like Zoom.

Over the weeks we have held numerous virtual networking meetings across business operations functions in professional services firms, including with M&BD managers and leaders at Director and CMO level. This has enabled us to get a view of the market, how teams are faring under current conditions and

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their thoughts on the future.

What is clear from these many client conversations is that business services leaders are busy doing what they do best: supporting their firms through challenging times to what is hoped will be more certain conditions ahead. Firms clearly want to live by their values and protect jobs, with many saying that they learnt a lot from the 2008/9 financial crisis, which is helping coordinate activity now.

Working through change

Homeworking has been the most obvious and major change brought about by Covid-19. Thanks to the many initiatives to develop flexible and homeworking processes/policies across the sector in recent years, firms have told us that there was a very smooth shift to working from home en masse, with partners and employees adapting well to new working conditions.

There is recognition, however, that working from home is harder for some than others. In particular, more junior members of staff may not have ideal 'home office' conditions and may not have had the time to build relationships across the team and broader business that more senior managers enjoy.

Many firms have therefore been keen to help supply employees with the additional equipment they might need to work from home effectively. And M&BD leaders have ensured they have regular 'check-in' conversations with their teams that prioritise health and wellbeing – encouraging staff to be honest if they have been struggling. This kind of communication is likely to continue, particularly as messaging around the broader situation (levels of social contact, travel restrictions, office arrangements, etc) inevitably become more complex as things begin to return to some level of normality.

Alongside this, M&BD leaders have been working hard to keep teams engaged and motivated. Virtual meetings that started as Friday drinks or quizzes at the beginning of lockdown have now shifted to more work-related meetings focused on career development or knowledge sharing. Some teams have been able to set up virtual workshops around issues like what clients will need post-Covid. Teams are also trying to support their firms to shift to more virtual pitching/selling activities with coaching and workshops to enable this.



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Focused activity

With the help of M&BD professionals, partners are learning how to improve their virtual collaboration with each other, as well as interact effectively with clients to improve their relationships. This is an area that M&BD functions have long worked on with partners, but the results are perhaps more evident now without the many distractions of busy office life.

With Covid-19 giving critical importance to digital channels of communication, the M&BD function has also taken significant responsibility for driving forward and implementing digital plans – the speed of which have often accelerated in recent weeks. We expect these efforts to translate into further recruitment in digital marketing and client relationship management in months to come.

Overall, it seems the mood has shifted: conversations that were initially centred on the immediate crisis have become focused on planning for the future and working in what will be the new norm. Many BD leaders have fed back to us that they have enjoyed increased exposure to partners since lockdown began, and they have particularly appreciated their ability to share knowledge and help bring together different parts of the business.

They are also using this time as an opportunity to expedite change in relation to areas such as investment in technology, to carry out really focussed client engagement, to demonstrate the merit of a sector approach, to showcase the importance of internal communications and shift to being more human in a firm's positioning. These are the kind of positive changes that may well outlive Covid.

These are unprecedented times for all of us, both in our roles in business and as individuals. But what has struck us in our many chats with the market is the willingness to share ideas and knowledge – combined with a determination to make things work no matter what the future holds. We may not have all the answers, but we are used to dealing with uncertainty. Whatever comes, we can and will adapt.



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