

WORKING IN COVID - A YEAR ON



By Carla McKenzie
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After one of the most challenging years for the hospitality industry, MYA MD Carla McKenzie reflects on the challenges of running an SME amidst a global pandemic, celebrating the tenacity and dedication of the team!

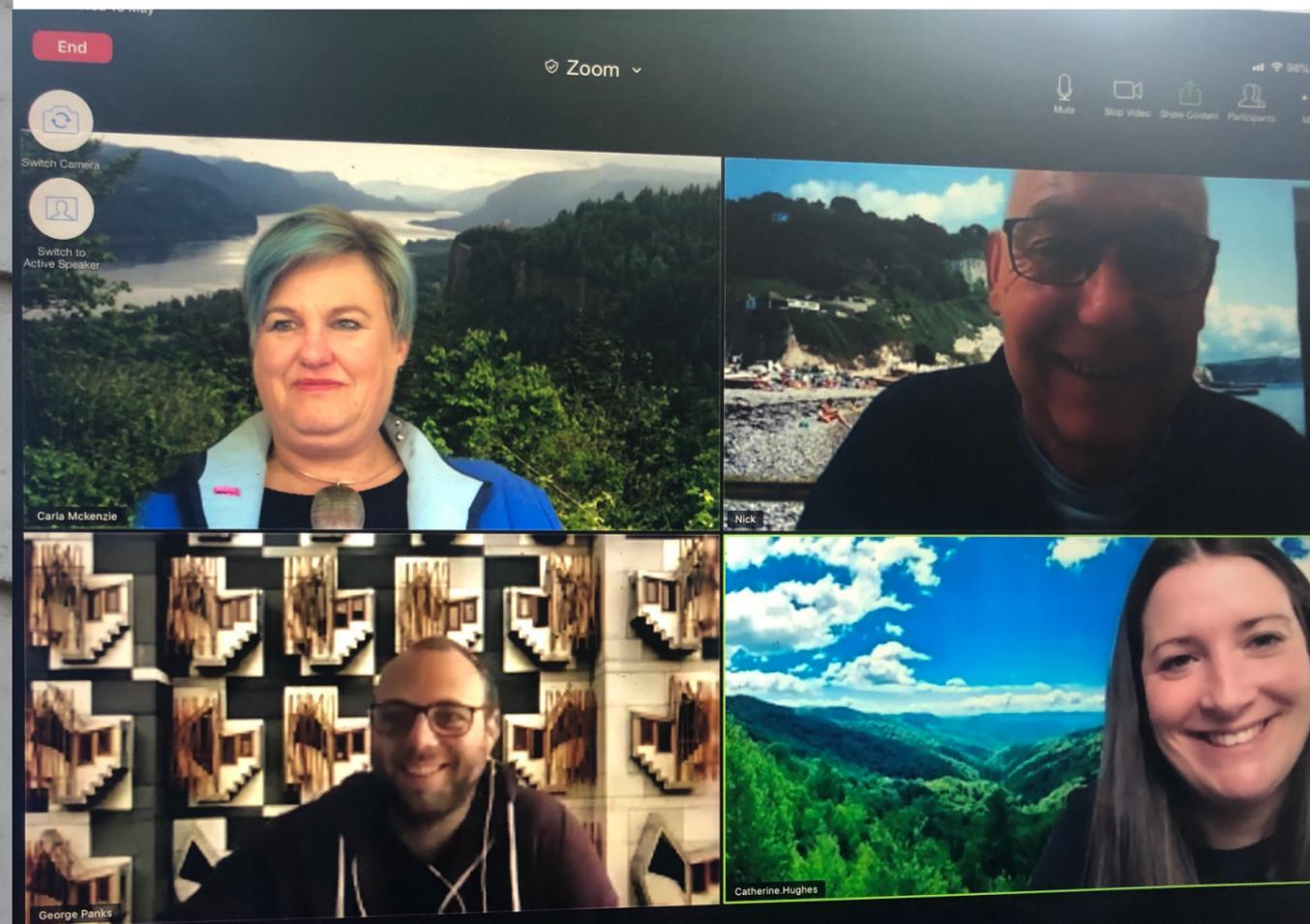
It's a year since the country went into that first lockdown and as the MD of an SME in the hospitality industry, I was glued to the Downing Street briefings when they started. With little or no idea of what was about to come, there were a number of clues that this was not going to be an easy ride, particularly when the chancellor gave every small business a £10K grant and introduced a furlough scheme. Who the hell had heard the word 'furlough' before COVID-19 arrived?!

By sheer good fortune, I had managed a company meeting in person the week before the first lockdown and had been able to share my views on where I thought things were heading and reassure the team of my strategy. Of course. I was discussing the inconceivable, so there were a few rye looks as I walked the team through the various scenarios.



Many companies had already made redundancies and pay cuts ahead of the chancellor's announcement, fearing the worst and looking to survive the unknown. I took a different view. I felt that if ever a team needed to feel valued and invested in, it was now. There was no doubt in my mind that to survive and thrive we needed to move quickly and decisively. The first thing we did was place all our teams onto Zoom and put in place a daily regime of calls every morning and every evening; close management was going to be key to keeping people on board and projects moving forward.

The second thing was to acknowledge the team; pay rises were granted and team members placed on a generous profit scheme. We were fortunate that due to some substantial diversification of our workstreams and sectors over the past three years, our pipeline of work appeared viable and would certainly sustain us for the immediate future. I remain deeply grateful to the clients who allowed us to continue working on some ground-breaking projects.



The MYA team getting familiar with the daily Zoom calls.

The first months were spent managing costs, reducing expenditure and above all, preserving cash flow. While trading had been buoyant, the future was completely uncertain as politicians and scientists tried to determine whether the R rate warranted a further lockdown etc. The MYA team were digging deep; commitment and dedication shone through as we began winning some fantastic contracts – testament to the creativity and determination of the team. Lockdown was also beginning to yield opportunities, as companies let people go we began to recruit and grow our team. I was delighted when Bev Lusty joined us as Director of Education.

As the first lockdown released, we deployed to North Devon to mobilise a newly-refurbished holiday complex. The ‘staycation’ market had well and truly taken off, not surprisingly, since the government had more or less grounded all aircraft.

The third quarter of the year saw more new clients for MYA as the schools returned. By this time I had been working solidly for six months. In any crisis, a persistent approach is essential and it’s no good burying one’s head in the sand. As I started to review our half-year performance, it was evident that not only had we grown but our margins had benefited significantly from video conferencing, reduced overhead costs and a team who were invested in driving the business forward.

In December we took a decision to expand the creative team and welcomed Olivia Imeson. It was a brave decision, given that we were now back in lockdown with all of the uncertainties that that would bring. We have a rule at MYA that we never play fast and loose with people or their careers. I need not have worried –within weeks Olivia was making a great contribution to the team.

Throughout the year I and the team have been questioned empathetically by colleagues and friends as to how we are surviving; most are surprised that we have not furloughed any team members and that the team have been and remain, flat out.

The lessons are simple:

- 1 Believe in and invest in your team.
- 2 Use money as a motivator not a de-motivator; we pay monthly bonuses.
- 3 Make sure you are diversified across sectors and workstreams.
- 4 Use technology to enhance your management and communication.
- 5 Encourage your team to train and develop new, relevant skills.
- 6 Do not play fast and loose with jobs and people.
- 7 Be consistent and persistent in your management approaches.
- 8 Look long and hard and realistically at your pipeline and cash flow forecasts.
- 9 Work with your clients, add value to their proposition, not costs.
- 10 Be led by knowledge of government actions but do not expect them to offer any silver bullets – you remain in charge of your people and business.



Bev Lusty
Director of Education



Olivia Imeson
Designer