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The Pros and Cons of Using a Remote Accounting Firm for Audits

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For many organizations, the adoption of remote work represents a new normal. This shift has wide-ranging impacts on the way work happens, influencing everything from the technologies that organizations use to employee compensation models.

This transformation has been especially profound in the professional services industry, where the processes by which advisors and accountants partner with their clients have changed dramatically. Accounting firms may now offer both in-person and remote options. Performing some elements of an accounting engagement remotely has become increasingly popular. But it's not all smooth sailing, and there are some drawbacks to be aware of.

As a leading accounting firm for arts and culture organizations, [Smith and Howard](#) is committed to delivering an unmatched client experience, whether it happens in-person, remotely, or somewhere in between. To facilitate that, we've spent the last two years adapting, improving, and refining the way we work to better serve a national client base.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to working remotely with an accounting firm, especially for audits, which is my area of speciality. Read on for guidance that will help you maximize the benefits of your next remote, or partially remote, accounting engagement.

Why Work Remotely at All?

For many arts and culture organizations, a driver of working remotely with an accounting firm is gaining access to a wider selection of partners with a greater level of expertise.

[Accounting for nonprofit arts and culture organizations](#) is a very specialized field. Because few firms specialize in nonprofits, it's unusual to find the best qualified accountants for any given engagement across the street. Partnering remotely with an experienced nonprofit accounting firm gives you access to the best accountants, wherever they happen to be located.

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Flexibility in Working Relationships

When an accounting firm works with you in person and sets up in a conference room for a week, it can be difficult for your team to go about business as usual. It's sometimes disruptive, activating a hosting instinct or shifting the office dynamics.

In reality, much of an accountant's day-to-day activities consist of digesting information, not meeting with key stakeholders. It's common to give your accountants a batch of invoices or a series of Excel spreadsheets; documents they need time to review. Not much, if any, collaboration is required for these tasks.

Working remotely enables accountants to do their jobs without triggering the hosting instinct or other distractions. When you need to meet, it's easy to hop on a video call to catch up on progress and offer up additional information or clarifications. This dedicated focus almost always results in better outcomes, achieved in less time. That applies to urgent situations too: if you need immediate support with a pressing issue, everyone can get on a video conference call the very same day.

Technology is an Enabler, Not a Barrier

Integrating digital technology has been central to business growth over the past couple of years, and by now, many firms have mastered the technology required to enable seamless remote work.

At Smith and Howard, we're big fans of [Suralink](#), an accounting workflow management tool that wraps structure around all the documents required for a successful client engagement. It's easy for organizations to use, with checklists, visual workflows, and clear indications of required documentation. Suralink—and other tools like it—are a major efficiency driver in accounting environments.

Video conferencing platforms are also important. Be intentional about how you use these platforms. We rely on them heavily to build and maintain relationships in a time-efficient way for busy clients, as well as to check in with stakeholders regularly throughout an audit and throughout the year.

Better Use of Time

One resource that we all have finite quantities of is time. Fortunately, working remotely with an accounting firm enables everyone to use their time wisely. For CFOs, Controllers, and Executive Directors, partnering with a remote firm saves time. Accountants can work efficiently from home, rather than spending time traveling. Add to those benefits the workflow efficiencies from remote-first technology and it's easy to see how everyone's time can be better managed through a remote engagement.

There are intangible, psychological benefits to this too. When a remote accounting team logs off in the evening, they're spending time with their families and friends, taking part in hobbies, and relaxing. When they return the next morning, they're ready to go and will bring their full focus. Even better, clients save money on airfares, hotel rooms, and meal stipends. Triple win.

The Challenges of Working Remotely With an Accounting Firm

Working remotely with an accounting firm isn't the right move for every organization, and there are some challenges. While many accounting firms (including Smith and Howard) have developed an approach that addresses these, it's still important to note the potential drawbacks to a remote-first approach.

Secure Electronic File Keeping is a Necessity

A secure digitized accounting system is a prerequisite for the success of modern arts and culture organizations. That's especially true for those wishing to work remotely with an accounting firm.

If an organization still uses paper-based filing systems, it's incredibly difficult to conduct a comprehensive audit procedure remotely. Of course, you can mail all the documentation you have, but that's inefficient, and leaves a wide margin for error. Thankfully, few organizations still manage their accounting processes this way, and those that do are rapidly transitioning to secure, digital-first systems.

Dealing With Urgent Situations

Occasionally, urgent situations come up during an accounting engagement. Not having a team of accountants physically with you can make it feel more challenging to navigate potential issues, but that doesn't have to be the case. Frequent email or videoconference touchpoints will ensure you remain focused on what's important. That's true even outside of audit periods: it's easy to set up a quick video conference with your accountants to solicit expert advice on urgent matters.

Relationship Building Can be Harder

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Working remotely with an accounting firm doesn't have to be an "either/or" choice: it's a spectrum. When you work with Smith and Howard, you can choose to have us in your office for the entire project, a couple of days, or not at all. In fact, you can custom build your own engagement with exactly the required level of in-person interaction, no matter where you are.

Partner With a Remote Accounting Firm

If you're convinced that the pros of working remotely with an accounting firm outweigh the cons, you might be ready to reevaluate how your organization engages with accountants either for audit or for other, year-round accounting services. Not convinced quite yet? We'd love to start a dialogue and help you find a way to make the most of your relationship with your accounting firm.

At Smith and Howard, we have an outstanding track record, having worked for over 50 years with organizations of all types. Our team of nonprofit accounting specialists work with arts and culture institutions throughout the country.

We pride ourselves on our client relationships, our expertise in nonprofit accounting, and the strategic vision we bring to each engagement. Our team of CPAs and Advisors stands ready to support your needs: remotely, in-person, or both.

[Contact an advisor today](#) to learn more.

How can we help?

If you have any questions and would like to connect with a team member please call 404-874-6244 or contact an advisor below.

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