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Cascade communication – June 2020

Hello again!

So, this communication cascade, the third one so far via video, comes just a few days after our support of Mental Health Awareness Week, which could not be more important this year as we continue to grapple with issues of furloughing and working from home, and we find ourselves dealing with all sorts of business and personal challenges. On behalf of the partnership I want to say a big thank you to all of you, once again for your ongoing resilience, positivity and contribution to helping the firm to adapt to our new business environment.

More about Mental Health Awareness Week later.

Firstly, I wanted to share some outcomes from our first remote management meeting earlier in May where we discussed the end of year financial results and project plans for the coming year.

On the finances, March was a good month, comparing favourably with March of the previous financial year, but overall FY20 was a weak year with high write-offs and billing performance generally falling short of targets. So, as we move into FY21, we are continuing to keep a close eye on business performance, our workloads and the impact of Coronavirus on our clients.

As one of many IP firms facing very similar challenges, it is important that as a business we become as agile and flexible as we can to enable us to move out of this period of uncertainty fitter and stronger than before. I have reported previously that we had worked on every possible opportunity to swiftly but proportionately reduce cash outflows. Following on from that, the management groups have been working through their project plans and prioritising investment and urgency of projects, and other activities in the light of the current change in business focus. For example, investment in the development of the Cezanne system recruitment module has been deferred whilst we freeze recruitment and focus on supporting staff.

On the other hand we are proceeding at pace with the Inpro Billing Project with a planned implementation later this month. The system will help us to streamline the billing process by eliminating delays in making charges available for billing, automatically adding timesheet narrative to invoices and paving the way for charges to be added automatically to the system when, say, a patent or trademark application is filed. It will also enable us to move to a more accurate way of reporting fee earner performance. A significant challenge though will be in the training of everyone whilst we are working remotely, and Claire and Alok are thinking about how to do this as effectively as possible.

I am sure you will all be aware of the government’s announcement to extend the Job Retention Scheme to the end of October.  We plan to continue utilising the Job Retention Scheme by furloughing staff where we can in response to the downturn in work and we will be considering the changes to the scheme announced by the Chancellor on Friday and how that may apply to our furloughing arrangements from July to October.  We will continue to be in regular contact with everyone who is currently furloughed and discuss the options and seek consent for ongoing furloughing or furlough rotations. We will do our very best to ensure you are supported and feel connected with your team and the firm.  As we all know, the furloughing of staff is not something we want to do, but please be assured that we appreciate the efforts everyone is making in supporting the firm at this time.

In the last communication cascade I talked about a number of temporary policy changes and resources that we have put in place to help us navigate the next few months. As we would normally be in the midst of appraisals at the moment, I wanted to let you know that we have agreed temporary arrangements for the end of year appraisals and objective setting for FY21. The temporary changes have been noted in the Temporary Policy Changes Document found in HR General, and take account of the fact that some of you are currently on furlough and others may not be in a position to complete a full end of year appraisal due to other pressing priorities or factors. However, we do believe that discussions with everyone around performance and career development should still take place since it is an important opportunity to take stock of achievements over the last year. So, as well as relaxing timescales, we are proposing a flexible approach generally so that the many different individual needs and circumstances can be accommodated. The temporary policy document explains the options in more detail.

We are also keen to support those who have been planning a promotion case by considering promotion cases where we can. So if a possible promotion was discussed during your interim appraisal, then People Group will work with you and your line manager to discuss the next steps. We want to ensure that the process is fair and that anyone who is currently furloughed is not disadvantaged. Therefore, there may be some variation in timescales for different promotion cases.

Objective setting discussions should also take place where possible and further communication about this will be emailed in the coming weeks.

Some of you may be wondering whether a review of salaries will take place in July. Well, due to the ongoing uncertainty and the need to manage our costs and cash flow very carefully at the moment, I need to let you know that regrettably there are no plans to conduct a firm wide review of salaries, although the salaries of anyone promoted will be considered to ensure salary levels are fair. But even then, the need for costs to be controlled may take precedence over the desire to award an increase. This decision is no reflection on the value that you all add to the business, and is not one that has not been taken lightly. We will keep this under review in line with all the other financial considerations whilst we work to ensure that the business remains stable over the coming months. We will also consider the viability of paying fee earner, and business services, performance related bonuses later in the year.

You may recall from previous communication cascades that we had hoped to stay at 10 Old Bailey and have been in discussions with the new landlord regarding a long term lease. By way of an update on this I wanted to let you know that the new landlord wishes to significantly increase our rent, this at a time when London commercial property rental prices are expected to drop. We are under no obligation to pay this increased rent to stay at 10 Old Bailey and the fact that the potential renewal of our lease coincides with the ongoing lockdown presents us with an opportunity to reflect on what we need from an office. Therefore, we would like to collect your thoughts on our existing office space and on working from home, because there now exists the possibility of implementing more agile working arrangements going forward, whilst retaining a central London office space that reflects our business need. So, you will shortly be invited to complete a SurveyMonkey, providing us with as much information as you can, so we can factor in your views into the decision making process. Of course, retaining a friendly and supportive working environment for everyone remains a top priority.

We have also been looking closely at how we plan to win new clients and new business within the current business context. There are of course huge challenges, but we also recognise that there may well be new opportunities emerging and we therefore need to think flexibly about ways to develop relationships remotely, develop contacts and expand our networks. For example, presentations which previously would have had a relatively small audience perhaps, might now be available to larger numbers via webinars, and Mike has some good examples of that coming up over the next couple of months which he will happily tell you more about.

We were very pleased to welcome Soizic back from a period of furlough, for a couple of weeks during May, to work closely with all partners individually to accelerate the implementation of an adapted Target Client Programme, which will help us to look for opportunities to make connections with potential clients in a tailored way relevant to the current situation. In addition to the Target Client Programme, all of you can help the firm to reach as many people as possible by sharing and liking any articles that are posted on LinkedIn and Twitter, and by thinking about and exploring your own networks and passing on any potential ideas and leads.

Finally before finishing I must mention Mental Health Awareness Week and the lockdown fundraiser for the Alzheimer’s Society, which having raised over £2k has broken all fundraising records for the firm. Thank you to everyone who has participated in a challenge, carried out an act of kindness, or donated or encouraged family and friends to donate. The event was a great way to keep everyone connected and create some memorable photo and video moments, and some balletic moments of genius that perhaps some of us would rather forget… I think it was very much in keeping with the culture of the firm, and comes at a very difficult time for many charities, so thank you again for your contributions to that effort.

So that is it again for another cascade… thank you for listening. We will continue to keep you all updated on how our plans are progressing… and we continue to appreciate everything you are doing meanwhile.

Stay safe and well, and see you again very soon.