

EPISODE DETAILS	
Episode number	5
Episode title	Talia Andersen-Town on finding a silver lining in a crisis
Episode description	In this episode of the 'Making to the other side' podcast, Talia Andersen-Town CA, Partner at Silks Audit Whanganui, talks to Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand (CA ANZ) Regional Manager, Mike O'Leary. They discuss how her firm responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by fast-tracking a move to paperless operations.

## TRANSCRIPT

- Mike O'Leary: Welcome. I'm Mike O'Leary, host of 'Making it to the other side', a podcast about Chartered Accountants who are making a difference every day, working with businesses and clients to navigate times of crises and help plan for the future. Thanks for joining me.
- Mike O'Leary: Our guest today is Talia Andersen-Town, Director and Engagement Partner at Silks Audit in Whanganui, NZ. She's also a mother of 3, a member of the local Māori business network and is actively involved with the local community. When COVID hit and NZ went into full lockdown, Silks Audit fast-tracked their plans to create a more efficient and effective workplace and amazingly managed to move to a paperless operation in less than seven days. With 25 staff on her team and a really strong focus on ensuring they felt secure in their jobs, Talia and her partner took to the challenge with focus and determination. Throw three kids and home-schooling into the mix and you can imagine how demanding these past few months have been. Let's go to our chat with Talia to find out exactly how she's managed to come out the other side with a renewed sense of confidence and positivity for the future.
- Mike O'Leary: Tēnā Koutou Talia. Can you tell us a bit about yourself and your role as a partner at Silks Audit?
- Talia Andersen-Town: Tēnā koe Mike. So my role is director and engagement partner at Silks Audit Chartered Accountants, but I've head my entire career at Silks Audit. I joined in 2005 as an audit graduate, and I've worked my way throughout the entire firm, doing multiple jobs. At one stage being a supervisor, then a manager and now I find myself being a director and engagement partner. I'm responsible for 25 employees. So that's one of my roles is making sure that we support our employees so that they can support our clients. But the most important thing, I suppose, from an engagement partner's point of view is ensuring that we issue the right audit opinions.
- Mike O'Leary: Yes, we always have to get it right, don't we? 15 years at the same firm, but you have a lot longer association with Whanganui, don't you?

- Talia Andersen-Town: Yes, I do. I was born and bred here. I'm actually in a small Maori community just outside of Whanganui and did all my schooling locally and then decided to undertake accounting as a subject at secondary school. It was by chance that I fell into this kind of profession. I thought I'd give it a go, really enjoyed it and decided to take it on as a career at Massey University in Palmerston North.
- Mike O'Leary: Can you tell us what was happening in your practise before COVID hit and what you had planned for the year?
- Talia Andersen-Town: So February is usually when we commence our audit period. It's pretty quiet over December and January. So we all come back in February. We start preparing and planning for the rest of the year. So it was more about brainstorming about how we would approach this year. We had three audit teams and we were just on the verge of commencing our school audits. We have 165 school audits that are usually undertaken during March and we have a deadline date of the 31st of May. So we were just starting school audits and then the announcement came through that we would have a shutdown period. So we had minimal time to prepare, but we always had a contingency plan, which is, we always have the ability to work remotely. A lot of our work that we do is out at the client's premises.
- Talia Andersen-Town: So we have the ability to take our laptops and work on site. So the new site was going to be our homes, so we'd be working from home. So we were all working remotely. Once the decision came from the Prime Minister that we would be in lockdown, we spoke to our staff and we said, "This is what our new normal could look like, pick up your desk and get ready to work from home."
- Mike O'Leary: Sounds exciting. Now we're talking about the practise only, but you're part of a vibrant community and you've got a young family. What were some of the really difficult or the big questions you had to ask, you and your husband Cameron, had to face as you went into lockdown?
- Talia Andersen-Town: Yes. So one of the main things was making sure that we could work from home and continue with our work, but we also had three children as well. So there was five of us in our bubble and we then had to manage our children with our work.
- Talia Andersen-Town: To begin with, that was kind of a novelty and the children really enjoyed Cameron and I being at home with them for long periods, obviously throughout the day. But at the same time, we had to work and manage our staff that were also working from home. So it was a bit of a balancing act, but by the end, we managed to be able to accommodate both work and our family.
- Mike O'Leary: So that's really important for you and your staff I imagine that are also trying to balance work and life and children at home. How did they find it?

Talia Andersen-Town: Yeah. We have a variety of staff, some with families, some young couples and some they live alone as well. So we had to try and support them and their ways of trying to work through the lockdown period. They also said that working from home was either fantastic and they enjoyed it or some of the staff actually said it was quite difficult because they had children that they had some worry about as well. So we were mindful that our staff would all have different needs and requirements from working from home as well. So we had to be open minded about how much work could be done from home, what our expectations were of our staff that were working from home. It was all about making sure that they were comfortable in their environment.

Mike O'Leary: It sounds like you've got a couple of very strong principles about how you wanted the business to operate and a couple of very strong principles about what you wanted for your staff.

Talia Andersen-Town: Yeah. So our main principles here at Silks is all about people, our clients and our staff. And I think if you provide support to your staff, they have the ability to provide support to your clients and that was most important during that period. Is that, if we could provide that support, make them feel comfortable, give them confidence, then they could only be confident within themselves as well. It was unprecedented times and we had never planned for something like this. So everything was a learning curve. We would constantly check in with our staff, but we would make sure that we'd have weekly meetings and everyone would be available for those meetings. Was also a good opportunity for staff to learn how to use video conferencing. It was new for a lot of them, but we didn't know how long it would take for us to return to the office and we also had client contact that we had to do as well and staff had to do, so it was really important that we touched base with them, that they got used to using new technologies and also just feeling comfortable and confident with what they were doing as well.

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Mike O'Leary: Now, you had to be agile and nimble running into lockdown. What were the things you focused on to keep the business running?

Talia Andersen-Town: So our main focus was our staff first and foremost. Making sure that they could set themselves up comfortably within the new environment. Then the next thing was making sure our clients had regular

communication from us to ensure that they were getting the service that they still could get and that we were still operating. We had the slogan of virtual doors are open, which meant that we were working remotely, but we were still providing our service and giving assurance that we could continue with the work that we had started. So that was the most important thing is staff, clients and in planning on making things more efficient, making things easier for our staff, but also trying to counteract or preempt anything that could prevent us from delivering on our service.

Mike O'Leary: And Talia, you have deep connections with your local community and you're involved in broader conversations with local government and other businesses. How do you think the lockdown affected those communities?

Talia Andersen-Town: So I'm on Maori Business Network Incorporation, that's made up of a lot of Maori business owners. And so we were constantly engaging with them during the period about how COVID was affecting them, we would constantly work with small businesses to see what their needs were and direct them towards areas that they could find help. That also gave us a sense of what was happening within the community and we also had clients that were coming to us as well asking about not only if the deadlines were going to be affected, but also around the auditing requirements and auditing requirements on the wage subsidy. So there was a lot of questions that people wanted answered, so that just gave a sense of how they were feeling within the community and how we could help them through that time.

Talia Andersen-Town: I think a lot of clients just wanted some confidence of what was going on, any information that we could provide them with, any support that they could be provided with. Clients just needed some assurance that what they were doing was correct and anything that they could do better, what could they do better. So getting advice upfront in making sure that they could get through the situation themselves as effective and efficient as possible.

Mike O'Leary: You obviously had been looking at the future and implementing as you went along. Having Microsoft Teams and Zoom already in place, must've been a fantastic help. Did you have a forward plan in terms of technology?

Talia Andersen-Town: We always had a wishlist of things that we wanted to achieve with our business because our business is focused on making things more efficient, more effective, and more user friendly for our staff. So we've always wanted to be online and electronic and reduce paper, but we've never really had the, I suppose, time or opportunity to do so. It's always been put to the back of the list or of the queue of things to do. But during the lockdown period, we encountered a situation where only essential services were running and essential services didn't always include stationary and paper and printing consumables. So to avoid a situation we then had to start brainstorming about what could

we do to ensure our staff could continue to work from home. So that day we started brainstorming about how we could continue to carry out our audits, but not print things and be able to review remotely.

Talia Andersen-Town: So we started looking on the internet for available products and what came up was Adobe, which has a pretty simple software that fulfilled our needs. So we trialled it over a matter of a couple of days and it worked well, and then we designed a template of how to actually apply it. We then did a training session with our staff over Zoom and I think it was one of the best situations to be able to trial it with because we're all remote. Everyone was keen to learn something new because they knew that eventually we would run out of work if we couldn't print. So there was a lot of buy-in from the staff as to how we could implement this the best way and I think that buy-in allowed us to implement it within a week and have it up and running trialled, working.

Talia Andersen-Town: From then on, we've continued to be paperless and everything's electronic and now we see even further the benefits. We don't have to have all this paper in our office. So we now don't have to have as much storage. A lot of stationary we're not required to have anymore and we've seen a reduction in paper, a significant reduction and a reduction in cost. So it's all been beneficial, but I think the most important thing is that it just proves that you can work from anywhere and still be able to carry out the service. So it's the most important thing we've achieved.

Mike O'Leary: That's fantastic. It's sort of life affirming, isn't it? That if you've got a will, you can do it. Can I ask you, there must've been some difficult decisions. Did you have to say no to clients? Did you have to say no to staff? What were the difficult things you had to go through?

Talia Andersen-Town: It was quite a difficult situation and a lot of staff were uncertain about what was happening. I must admit for the first couple of days of lockdown and working remotely, staff found that quite difficult and we really needed to support them. It was all about how can we support you, how can we make things happen and that was the same with clients too. So, no wasn't really the answer. It was how can we work to make a better outcome for both of us?

Mike O'Leary: Tell me, I'm really interested. Have you made a particular effort to rebuild some of those connections?

Talia Andersen-Town: Yes. So something that we've tried to do with our clients now that we are in level one, is actually touch base with them and actually do a few more visits because it's probably time for us to be able to make some more connections with them, to make sure that they feel like they're supported as well. But also with our staff, it's all about having to reset ourselves for the rest of the year. With audit, audits are going to still get done. We can't delay them and say, "Let's not have an audit this year." There's a lot of work that still has to get done. So it's all about

resetting, reanalyzing and seeing how we can get through the rest of this year without having the impact of COVID affect the entire year.

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Mike here again! If you are looking for help to navigate the current climate for your business or your clients, be sure to visit our COVID tools and resources hub. Just Google “Chartered Accountants COVID hub” or find it on the Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand website.

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- Mike O'Leary: Now, have you had the chance to reflect on what shape Silks Audit was in going into lockdown and what shape it is coming out because I'm sure it's quite markedly different?
- Talia Andersen-Town: It is. We were taking stock even during level of three and two, assessing what Silks Audit looked like before COVID and obviously what it was going to look like once we got to level one and how the rest of our year was going to plan out. I think we've done quite well to get to where we are now. We're slowly getting back on track to where we wanted to be and what we had planned for the rest of the year. A lot of the goals that we see at the beginning of this year with our three teams, they're slowly tracking towards them again and making sure that they feel confident that we're going to get to the end of the year and have a nice big break at Christmas time. So that's the big goal for us is that by the end of the year we continue as, if not better, forward into the next year.
- Mike O'Leary: And some of the measures you had to put in place during lockdown, are they going to become permanently part of your operating model?
- Talia Andersen-Town: Yeah. We learned a lot from COVID and we learned a lot from the lockdown. We learned how to do things more efficiently. We learned to use technology more. We learned to open our minds to potential opportunities that could come our way. So that's probably something we learned and hopefully we can capitalise on.
- Mike O'Leary: That's a fantastic insight. Are there any other positive shifts in behaviour and attitude amongst particularly your staff?
- Talia Andersen-Town: Our staff learned to work remotely and they learned to become problem solvers for themselves, because sometimes it's quite easy when you're working in an open office environment to just ask how to do things or immediately say, "Can I get some help or I need some help." But when you're working a little bit more remotely, sometimes you need to be a little bit more independent and problem solve for yourself. So that's probably what's developed amongst our staff is

being able to take a moment to actually see if they can actually do it themselves before requesting support.

Mike O'Leary: Talia, what does making it to the other side look like for Silks Audit?

Talia Andersen-Town: For Silks Audit making it to the other side was surviving COVID and not having to make those tough decisions about whether we could continue to service our clients and continue with our staff. That's something that we're very proud of is that they haven't had to worry about their livelihoods and their jobs, that they know that they have a future. We've actually grown over COVID. We've picked up even more clients, which has strengthened our firm and we've actually hired an additional two staff moving into the next six months. So I think it just gives our staff confidence and it also gives our clients confidence that we're here for the long run as well and that we will continue to be able to provide services no matter what.

Mike O'Leary: What do you see in the near future for the New Zealand business landscape?

Talia Andersen-Town: I think the confidence for small business in particular is a lot higher. I see that a lot of businesses have put COVID behind them and seeing it as an opportunity to restart. Just even from a small regional perspective, a lot of the confidence around town is quite high.

Talia Andersen-Town: I think a lot of the smaller businesses as well have been more adaptable to the situation. Obviously with the larger companies having to reduce costs and reducing obviously wage costs or redundancy is the easiest way to do it. But when you're a sole trader and you're the main person within the business, you have to look at other avenues of trying to make your business successful, and that means looking outside of the box, doing things that you wouldn't normally do. So that's where we've seen a lot of confidence and positivity in our area especially.

Mike O'Leary: Thank you very much for your time today, Talia.

Talia Andersen-Town: Thank you.

Mike O'Leary: What a journey! What really stands out to me about Talia's story is the strong sense that connection to family, staff and clients is integral to who she is as a parent, employer and business partner. COVID-19 did not change that, in fact she saw it as an opportunity to really cement those values, and in turn - drive client and staff confidence in the business. I hope you enjoyed this episode of Making it to the Other Side. Thank you for joining me and until next time.