

RETURN TO THE WORLD OF WORK: Action Research Series

Learning and insights from sessions held with organisations
and businesses during May to July 2020



How will we balance workforce planning and capability building, while maintaining our culture (to propel the organisation into the future)?

Staffing, retention and organisational culture – what happens next?

As we navigate the uncertain times triggered by the coronavirus pandemic, it is difficult to predict the impact that the UK lockdown will have on staffing, retention and organisational culture. To look more closely at this, Henley's Executive Education brought together managers from several organisations at a facilitated discussion group. Drawing on these conversations and recent research, below are three considerations, together with insight and recommendations.

1

The impact of environmental jolts

Environmental jolts or 'boom' events, like lockdown, are moments in which personal values are considered, priorities are readjusted, and we take time to interrogate how closely our home and working lives match our newfound identity. Individuals may question how well their shifting values are supported by their employer and/or question their ongoing fit with changing work environments. Organisations face the risk of individuals leaving or changing focus.

Lessons and recommendations for organisations

- Assess values and priorities at an organisational level
- Communication, wellness and engagement are more important than ever before
- Listen to and engage more with employees in order to retain them

Environmental jolts

Example:
COVID-19

Who am I and do I (still) want to belong to this organisation?

Example: negative thoughts associated with resuming a long commute, focus on inputs outside work begun during lockdown, re-thinking priorities, emphasis on work-life balance

Identity threat = swift and decisive action!

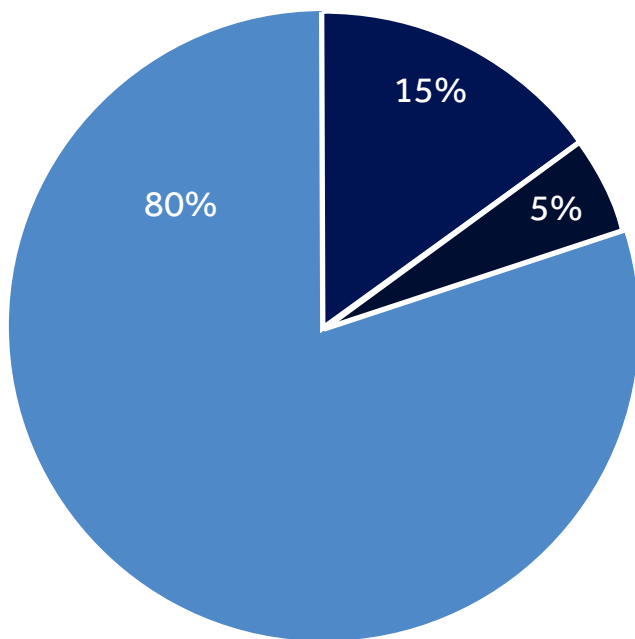
Example: Seek new role/vocation/organisation; push for part-time work, training, retain work-from-home capability




2

Individual's emphasis on past, present and future differs; current fit depends on past and anticipated future fit

People's perceptions of the past and the future influence their behaviour in two significant ways. Some people tend to focus more on the past and may prefer to go back to the way things were while others easily see the current situation as an opportunity to focus on new ways of doing things. Individuals' fit at work is similarly influenced by past or anticipated future fit

Several group participants described the 'once in a lifetime chance' and the unique 'window of opportunity' that the pandemic provides for innovation and change. Even more compelling, many organisations have found that engagement has increased during lockdown.



-  I cannot wait to get back to normal (emphasise the **past**)
-  I do not want the lockdown to end (emphasise the **present**)
-  I want to explore new approaches (emphasise the **future**)

Lessons and recommendations for organisations

- Understanding and leveraging the factors contributing to increased engagement can help sustain future fit and retain key employees.
- Taking the past and the future into account provides organisations with an opportunity to reflect on past practices and incorporate new ones
- COVID-19 provides a unique window of opportunity for innovation and change

3

The journey matters: fit is temporal and dynamic; individuals form a trajectory of fit

Both individuals and organisations are in the midst of new journeys, and it is important to keep realigning one with the other. For example, several organisations are experiencing a trajectory from the reactionary activities that characterised early lockdown to the current building of capacity and capability. Others are working to evolve their cultures to be more tolerant of mistakes and more willing to engage in experimentation.

Lessons and recommendations for organisations

- The journey matters: where we were, where we are and where we are heading.
- In our study, individuals who were currently experiencing mis-fit and who foresaw it worsening in the future were the most likely to leave the organisation.
- Sustaining fit while values are shifting is key and requires being aware of the trajectory of fit that individuals are experiencing.

Temporal focus:

The attention individuals devote to thinking about the past, present and future (Shipp et al, 2009).¹

It is important because it affects people's attitudes, thoughts and behaviour.

'Developing a temporal

mindset' is about creating and communicating journeys through time so that people can come with you on a new journey as you talk about a new future.

Some employees will naturally be backward-looking, and some will be forward-looking; to speak to all of them, you will need to match your communications about where the organisation is going to their 'temporal focus'.

So, who will stay and who will go? Some conclusions

- Everyone is on their own fit journey – environmental jolts cause us to consider and reassess our personal values and individual priorities.
- It's not just about asking 'Do I fit today?' – past and future fit matters too. An individual's fit at work is influenced by their existing perceptions of past or anticipated future fit.
- Fit trajectories predict behaviour – looking at trajectory can inform future behaviour at both the individual and organisational level.

¹ Jansen, K J & Shipp, A J (2019) Fitting as a temporal sensemaking process: Shifting trajectories and stable themes. *Human Relations*, 72 (7), 1154–86

Recommendations

- Overall, recognising that individual and organisational values may be shifting as a result of the pandemic, it is important to attend to evolving narratives and trajectories, to any resulting mis-fit this introduces and to the impact these different journeys are likely to have on hiring, retention and organisational culture in the future. Developing a temporal mindset that incorporates the past, present and future is an essential skill for navigating these dynamic moments.
- The temporal mindset involves seeing things less as a static point in time and more as an ever-flowing river. It requires measurement, target setting and the ability to see success in different ways.
- COVID-19 is an opportunity to run concurrent small trials and to innovate.
- Endeavour to create a new leadership approach for the new world of work, which admitted we do not yet understand. Managers don't want to simply 'go back' to what was happening before.
- There will be an effect on culture and an attendant need to be diligent and questioning in order to identify who is now thriving (introvert/extrovert), who has been left behind and how to integrate new people.
- Consider co-developing a way forward – consult and engage with a broad range of employees and stakeholders

Insights from the group: general market session

- Companies who have lots of scientists and engineers are happy to work from home – they tend to be introverts.
- The effects have been: a decrease in hierarchical focus; an increase in interactions and trust; a decrease in task focus and an increase in outcome focus; less micro-management; a requirement for leadership to work harder to establish culture.
- Agility and responsiveness are even more vital.
- In the public sector 'social value' is more important – they are doing new things to recruit new and young talent.
- For many, security of employment is more important than whether they 'fit'!
- What's the purpose of the office? In the future it will be about collaboration, innovation, social interaction and 'work crafting'. It might look different from the rows of desks we are used to.
- Let's plan the home/office balance rather than have it happen by default. Many companies are merely talking about 'getting back to the office', but it's about how to manage culture and mindset, rather than cost.
- There remains a big question about how to get remote teams to perform remotely, despite there being more global connectivity than ever!
- With longer-term remote working, where will leaders derive their power from? They will need to consider other ways of managing people, politics and relationships, and will need to know how to drive cultural change.

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