

RETURN TO THE WORLD OF WORK: Action Research Series

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



What have been the unintended consequences of change
and how can these create opportunities beyond
the return to business as usual?

The unintended consequences of change

The current crisis, around COVID-19 has placed us in an 'enforced experiment' in 2020, with individuals and organisations taking many different approaches to leadership. What have been the unintended consequences of these changes? And how can these consequences create opportunities beyond returning to 'business as usual'?

To look at these issues, we convened a participant group of executives from several organisations for a videocall discussion led by Henley's Professor Patricia Riddell. The results are presented here, along with research insights and direct feedback from the organisations.

1

Personal pandemic journeys

Professor Riddell began by asking the group for their individual experiences of 'lockdown working'.

What is better now that you would like to keep?

People appreciated:

- Greater flexibility and productivity at home (7 comments)
- Time with family, friends and pets (6 comments)
- Time (and money) saved on commuting (5 comments)
- Time saved on international travel (4 comments)
- Improved business practices (5 comments)
- Better work-life balance (4 comments)
- Improved health and welfare (2 comments)
- Better tech skills (2 comments)

What was better before that you would like back?

People missed:

- Face-to-face interactions (13 comments)
- More social opportunities (9 comments)
- Better working practices (4 comments)
- More travel (3 comments)
- Separation of work from home (3 comments)

2

What is reality and how does this affect shared experiences?

We believe in a shared reality. Yet we record this reality through our senses, an act which in itself depends on the capacity of the particular senses we have available to us as individuals. For example, some with colour blindness will see the same reality in a different way from someone without that condition.

Sensory information creates our perception of the world while being filtered through our personal experiences and context. We use our filtered perception to make meaning and to create a coherent narrative that allows us to predict the future. No two people share the exact same contexts or past experiences. Therefore, no two realities are the same.

Research learning points

- We each remember the same event differently
- Treat your reality humbly – it is neither right nor wrong
- Learn by comparing your reality with people who are most different to you

3

Individual differences in response to change

Individual differences in response to change are a result of both our genetics and of our experiences to date.

Therefore, within an organisation, individual experiences of and responses to the pandemic will differ depending on whether someone is already more inclined to:

- either **approach**, where change is seen as an opportunity and failure a feedback, or **avoid**, where change is viewed as threatening and failure as devastating
- **introversion**, which inhibits socialising, or **extraversion**, which promotes socialising
- **tolerance of ambiguity**, with the ability to make decisions with incomplete information, or **intolerance of ambiguity** when it is harder to make decisions with incomplete information

- be an **exploiter**, who like to make use of talents, is a completer-finisher, refines ideas and makes them work, or an **explorer**, who likes to innovate and create, looks for new approaches, creates new products and seeks new opportunities

Leaders and managers need to appreciate the many factors that affect how their people respond to change and align working practices, communication and processes (including those around wellbeing) appropriately.

Comparing experiences of reality: lockdown working

When asked to compare experiences, many groups noticed mostly similarities between their individual experiences. But where there were differences in experiences, participants noted differing circumstances between individuals, such as:

- responsibilities
- working patterns
- levels of experience

Participant group feedback and learning points

Having considered the above theory of 'our own reality', the group discussed what this may mean with regard to working through the pandemic as a shared experience.

Comments around understanding others included:

- The level of interaction needed for productivity (office versus remote working) will vary across different personalities.
- People's perception of change might differ between: change that we have a choice over and change that we have little choice over – like the present situation.
- This situation is forced as opposed to managed change, and there is additional ambiguity because it is open to additional individual interpretation.

- The sense of hierarchy is being reduced. For example, an executive with a child on their lap may not seem as threatening to some when compared with their former office persona; others may view this as unprofessional.

The group was then asked to consider what individuals might do to better understand the range of experiences of their colleagues.

They suggested:

- Check-in with others
- Be more willing to be an explorer
- Be compassionate about the differences in others

Detailed feedback on identified individual differences affecting experiences of the crisis:

- Different people naturally cope and manage in different ways.
- Some people feeling more engaged, but others feel like they are not being engaged with by the rest of the business.
- 'Personality' and preferences make a difference.
- The nature of the work or job role make a difference.
- The person's general circumstances (work and/or home) are relevant.
- Some perspectives on similar topics changed during the lockdown.
- People had different abilities and expectations when it came to using video conference technology

4

The psychological effects of returning to a new normal – Summary and conclusions

In order to plan new ways of working for when the pandemic is over, organisations will need to understand both that their people will not have experienced the same 'reality' while working through lockdown (no two realities are the same) and that each person will have had their own response to the changes as well as to whatever comes next. To create the best working environment for optimum wellbeing and productivity, leaders will need to be prepared to consider the many different response types as they create and move to a new normal – including new working practices, communication and management styles.

Provided on the following page is detailed feedback from the 'general' participant group, on aspects of work that were 'better before' (crisis/lockdown working) and things that are 'better now' (during lockdown working).

Better before

People missed:

Face-to-face interactions

- Collaborative interaction with people outside of meetings
- In-person contact with my team
- Ad hoc interaction/informal chats
- Human interaction and the creativity it creates
- The power of corridor conversations
- Human connectivity

More social opportunities

- Hugging
- Social interaction
- Human contact
- Variety in my day
- Social aspects of work and life outside of work
- Freedom to make plans outside of work

Better working practices

- Lots of change in addition to lockdown
- Work not getting lost in email chains
- Diversity of discussion
- confident people who aren't so timid

Travel

- European travel
- Freedom to travel
- Some travel

Separation of work and home

- Distance from home to work
- Work-life separation
- Downtime: home is work/work is home.

Better now

People appreciated:

Greater flexibility and productivity at home

- Working from home
- Time to think
- Better control over my time
- A focus on outcomes
- Flexibility and productivity

Time with family, friends and pets

- Support for my 16-year-old stepdaughter
- Spending more time on specific activities
- Time with family/quality relationships

Improved business practices

- Improved global collaboration
- Greater recognition that home working is possible
- Improved meeting time management
- Openness to new ways of working
- Opportunities for delivering learning virtually

Time (and money) saved on commute

- No or less commuting

Time saved on international travel

- No or less international travel

Better work-life balance

- Pace of life
- Better flexibility of work/home balance
- Chance to focus on home DIY

Improved health and welfare

- More energy
- Confidence in self has grown

Better tech skills

- Makes people learn to use the technology

For information, please contact:

Henley Business School

Greenlands

Henley-on-Thames

RG9 3AU

+44 (0) 1491 418 767



[henley.ac.uk](https://www.henley.ac.uk)