

# 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 might COVID-19 mean for the future of work? How exactly are employees and management responding to these changes? And what can we learn from this in order to actively harness positive aspects of this experience for future work approaches?

The COVID-19 lockdown has forced all of us to change our way of working, including our physical working environment and our attitudes to the work–life balance. But what could this mean for the future of work? How exactly are employees and management responding to these changes? And what can we learn from this in order to actively harness positive aspects of this experience for future work approaches?

Such issues surrounding the future of work were discussed with executives from several organisations in a session led by Dr Naeema Pasha. Drawing on these conversations and recent Henley research, the following brings together the resulting feedback, insight and recommendations.

# 1

## Work environment: In-person vs virtual office

Session participants highlighted that they could see that offices and workplaces are important and even desirable, as they offered places to network with other workers, and how important that is to a job; they did not mention the office was a place to work!

Although there are key benefits to flexible working, back-to-back videocalls can be soul-draining or just tiring, and the lack of in-person contact can inhibit collaborative working, which in turn can sap productivity, creativity and innovation.

### Participant group feedback

- There is a need to explore how to create the informality of 'bumping into people' and having a chat versus the formality of online meetings.

- There needs to be a re-think about what the office is for. Is it for creativity and collaboration? Is online/tech better for formal meetings and knowledge dissemination? We need to consider where and how the establishment of culture and values fits.
- Creativity can be more focused by using video conferencing and other technology because sessions are planned more closely.
- Remote working can bring out those who are less confident in face-to-face meetings; there has been increased engagement from people who previously did not join in or contribute to 'office' discussion much.
- There has been a loss of some creativity from missing out on face-to-face conversations.
- There are generational differences in opinions and outlooks, e.g. younger people want to build deep connections within business and find their feet in the workplace which requires face-to-face interaction with others.

## Takeaways

- Physical work environments offer a place to network and socialise which is important for effectiveness, creativity and innovation, as well as wellbeing.
- Remote working may benefit creativity as employees instinctively plan in greater detail for virtual meetings. However, we have lost the opportunity for spontaneous and informal 'coffee point' meetings/conversations.
- Organisations benefit from greater contributions from those who did not thrive in face-to-face

- meetings (whether they be introverts or those who lack of confidence); they will need to consider how to retain these capabilities in the long run.
- Overwhelmingly, participants reported key benefits to flexible working; however, there are also limits to our pandemic working lifestyle that need to be appreciated longer term.
- For workplaces dealing with COVID-19 issues, leadership needs to think about not just physical safety, but psychological safety – crucial in order to create trust and flexibility in teams.

## 2

### People power and relatedness

Feedback detailed many positives that people want to retain from the experience of lockdown working – and not just flexible working (which was expected).

Online work has made people more 'human' to others, in that their homes, families and pets are all on show. This was seen as good and increased relatedness between colleagues.

#### Participant group feedback

- Empathy – seeing into people's homes, including being introduced to their children and pets(!) has brought people closer together. There is a need to continue to build that emotional support and family/community feeling.
- Seeing a more human or 'rounded' side to colleagues – seeing them in their homes reminds us that our colleagues have their own life outside of work.

- Social collaboration – some people set aside a session time for this on a weekly/monthly basis.
- We know more about each-others' personal lives.

### Takeaways

- Online working has made people feel more connected, increasing compassion and empathy.
- It may be beneficial to utilise working time and technology to schedule 'social collaboration'
- Organisations need to retain and find new ways to show connectivity with colleagues, both online and as we go back to the workplace.

## 3

### Leaders and visibility

Another key finding was the realisation that organisations need to consider 'visibility'.

People once shut away in offices and meetings could now be seen and heard, at least via video conferencing technology. The feedback suggested that this new feeling of accessibility to management should be retained in the return to the workplace.

As they are now more 'visible', leaders also need to lead on positive behaviours much more than before.

#### Participant group feedback

- People are questioning how leaders can manage culture in a post-COVID-19 world.
- Senior people need to be 'visible' (e.g. online 'town halls' etc) and at regular intervals (e.g. fortnightly).
- The mindset of leaders is important. Behaviour breeds behaviour; leaders need to demonstrate positive behaviours for people to move towards.
- We are now seeing more of managers/CEOs as they engage with (a greater number of) their employees, over video calls
- Communication styles are changing. With online working, leaders have the capability to be much more visible and available; they can become more 'human'.
- Leaders need to (continue to) demonstrate and role model more 'friendly' and open behaviour.
- Leaders need to give a 'license to operate' for people to create a new way of working.

### Takeaways

- Senior Leaders/managers should create and maintain visibility with employees as we move to more offline activity.
- There is increased responsibility for leaders to demonstrate positive behaviours.
- The more 'human' leader was overwhelmingly welcomed.

# 4

## Sustained productivity at home – at least in the short term

The discussion sessions told us that the pandemic shift to remote working has been incredibly successful in terms of productivity. Many jobs have continued with the same or higher levels of productivity. This has mostly been through vastly improved video conferencing technology offered by the likes of Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

However, feedback also told us about the other side of this increased productivity: longer workdays and/or a feeling that home and work life has merged, with no clear boundaries. Feedback indicated that organisations may need to move to a stronger focus on compassion than pre-COVID-19, and indeed a stronger focus on compassion than productivity.

### Participant group feedback

- Wellbeing is (almost) more important than creativity, as people are now becoming fatigued with home working.
- Use tech well to communicate and share information, e.g. putting material into shared folders.
- Some need better technology to collaborate.
- One organisation had created 'innovation awards' to promote fresh thinking.
- The etiquette of video calls needs consideration
- Psychological safety is important in creating trust and flexibility.

## Takeaways

- Virtual working using video conferencing technology offers opportunity for increased productivity, but it requires the right (up-to-date) technology and processes to collaborate.
- Consider what can be done to promote opportunity and energy for creativity – e.g. innovation awards.
- Lockdown homeworking requires a focus on wellbeing and caring more so than on creativity and innovation.

# 5

## Going back to the office or creating a new normal

Participants questioned whether everyone would automatically want to return to the office. Overall, there was a desire to capture what is good about new ways of working and purposely take this forward to create something new.

### Participant group feedback

- There is the potential for disappointment; there is a fear among those looking forward to going back into the office that the physical environment will not be as it was before. Perhaps the socially distanced environment will not deliver on their hopes/needs.

- Small teams have grown closer through COVID-19 and created smaller sub-cultures. There is a need to bring those small teams together again into a symbiotically more positive whole.
- Participants desire to capture the positives and bring them into the new world.
- There is a need to avoid a two-tier situation when we go back – those mostly in the office could by default get the most 'airtime' with senior people.
- People are questioning whether everyone will want to return to the office.

## Takeaways

- There is an awareness that returning to old ways, including the office environment, may not be welcomed by all and may entail wellbeing challenges as employees realise the physical environment will not be as it was before.
- Sub-cultures and small teams created out of lockdown will need to be identified, considered and brought back into the 'whole'.
- There needs to be clear communication during any phased return to the office. It is likely that the workforce will be working virtually and in the office simultaneously; communication strategy must avoid confusing or conflicted messaging, must avoid giving more 'airtime' by default to those in the office.
- There is an enthusiasm from managers to understand and capture the positives of lockdown working and create new practices, processes and culture.

## Summary and conclusions

Feedback from the participant group shows that there have been clear changes in attitudes and approaches to work since the COVID-19 lockdown. Some specific changes were identified that people would like to retain as we 'go back'. There was an indication that some organisations will adopt these new ways of working. This, at least, is emphasised by employees who want their employers to be seen to offer 'good work'<sup>1</sup> (well paid, with decent work times, conditions and wellbeing support).

Discussions indicated that the pandemic shift to remote working has been successful, in that many jobs have continued with the same or higher levels of productivity. However, participants reported both key benefits to

flexible working and significant limits of our pandemic working lifestyle, elements that can ultimately sap effectiveness.

Sessions highlighted that people skills are what we need to focus on for both the return to work and the continuation of remote working. There is especially a shift towards the necessity of showing empathy; the more 'human' leader was overwhelmingly welcomed.

### According to Henley Business School research:

Nearly half (47%) of employees want a career that helps them make a positive impact on society – two thirds (66%) of Gen-Z says this is the case.

<sup>1</sup> CIPD (2019) *UK Working Lives, Job Quality Index: Executive Summary*. [Accessed 04/09/2020]  
[https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/uk-working-lives-summary-2019-v1\\_tcm18-58584.pdf](https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/uk-working-lives-summary-2019-v1_tcm18-58584.pdf)

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