RACONTEUR

REMOTE WORKING

Goodbye call centre! Businesses accelerate move to AI powered messaging.

Jerry Haywood,
SVP EMEA at LivePerson

The "new normal" was already well established when C-19 emerged. The rise of the digital economy was transforming whole industries and rendering old models obsolete.

The crisis didn't invent a new way of working, it accelerated the paradigm shift already underway in marketing, sales and service.

Take the call centre, a seemingly permanent fixture for businesses, now seemingly on an irreversible trajectory towards obsolescence.

NASDAQ-listed conversational AI pioneer LivePerson has been driving the move from traditional call centres to artificial intelligence-based messaging long before the sudden shift to home-working closed call centres around the world. The disruption resulted in businesses accelerating transformation — voice calls replaced with AI-powered messaging within weeks, even days.

LivePerson's expertise is built on 25 years experience in creating digital conversations — our clients benefit from happier customers, doubled efficiency vs traditional call centres, the capability to work from anywhere and to offer agents new career paths as bot managers and conversation designers.

The businesses that will come out stronger following the economic downturn are the ones who take this opportunity to transform permanently — are you prepared?

LIVEPERSON

Is your business prepared for a future without a contact centre?

Impact of conversational solutions— wherever you are!

A move to **messaging and automation** reduces the cost per interaction by 50%.

Personalised offers via messaging increase average order value by 20%.

Reducing inbound calls increases CSAT by 20%.

Reducing friction increases sales conversions by 4x.

Automation creates **new career opportunities** including bot builder and conversation designer.

39% of consumers would rather clean a toilet than call customer service!

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REMOTE WORKING

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TRUST

How to balance autonomy with care

As more companies are working remotely, perhaps permanently, trust in the workplace has never been so important

Hazel Davis

Ⓡ esearch shows that employees in high-trust organisations are better at collaborating, more productive and show greater loyalty than their peers in low-trust companies. There is also evidence to suggest they suffer less from stress and anxiety, which enables stronger performance at work.

But trust in the workplace can be harder to build and maintain during remote working. Positive leadership is more important than ever to ensure leaders remain credible and reliable when dealing with a remote workforce. If the coronavirus crisis has taught us anything, it's that with childcare or home help removed, we all have the same personal issues to juggle. Executive coach and founder of people development consultancy Hunter Roberts agrees this is a novel situation for most employers.

"This is a level of intimacy that isn't normally seen," she says. "We're normally told to leave our personal lives at home and focus on the job. Now the majority of us are actually at home, we need to establish new boundaries and those boundaries are the same for everyone."

The benefit of the increase of remote work is that it's possible this new way of working will result in a more trusting work environment when, and if, life returns to normal.

Checking in regularly with the workforce has never been more important. While line managers will want to hold regular one to ones in the current climate, "it's important the conversation isn't solely task focused," says Sir Cary Cooper, professor of organisational psychology at Alliance Manchester Business School.

There's a real danger of taking checking-in too far. "It's crucially not about micro-managing colleagues, but checking on how they're coping on a personal level," says Sir Cary. Recent Office for National Statistics data has shown that almost half of people surveyed were affected by high levels of anxiety in late-March when the UK entered lockdown and 40 per cent of working people feel the lockdown is adversely affecting their work.

"With these high levels of anxiety in the UK workforce, frequent face-to-face time, albeit virtual, is critical for managers to show they care, building trust as a result," he says.

While it's not possible entirely to reconstruct your business structure from scratch, now is a good time

to revisit legacy hierarchies and encourage flexible working.

David Amor, chief business development officer at MAG Interactive, a mobile gaming company, says his firm's management structure has always been flat, "aside from a brief period when we tried a more traditional structure and decided it didn't work for us".

This flat set-up, says Amor, "means we can empower teams to give them a greater sense of ownership and job satisfaction, which we found also resulted in them making higher-quality decisions."

He adds that a flat structure, which trusts teams to set their own goals, is particularly well suited to remote working. It allows for greater work-life balance and Amor notes that

teams have adapted very well to working from home as a result.

"It gives them a sense of ownership of the targets they work towards and it also means they know what the company defines as a success," he says.

Building a good level of trust when staff are working from home requires a collaborative approach and now is a good time for managers to confront their own lack of trust and any control issues.

"Through remote working, leaders are finding, contrary to their fears, teams are even more productive and performance is higher than when teams were office based," says Paul Russell, managing director of business training company Luxury Academy. "What most leaders are

not doing, however, is questioning their own part. Could it be we as managers are distracting our staff more than we realise and are we actually the cause of slower performance in the office?" he asks.

It's important, particularly now, to request staff input rather than rigidly steering direction. Because managers cannot walk over to a staff member to check progress informally, it's crucial to ensure their leadership style doesn't morph into a more autocratic approach than they would normally use.

However, Russell warns: "There will always be a staff member who sees working at home as a euphemism for relaxing at home and this is where trust could break down. In this case, strong boundaries, expectations and timelines should be implemented."

One to ones are incredibly important to maintain trust in the workplace and should be prioritised, however hard that might be. This means video-calling might be essential to maintain body language.

In an office, a manager would notice if a team member was becoming frustrated or stressed and take them to one side to find out why. "It's all too easy for a difficult situation to get out of control for an employee," says executive coach Roberts, "if their team leader doesn't take the time to sit down with them, face to face, and talk about their day or week."

Think about daily communication activities and updates and how they will take place. Create a plan, share it with the team and stick to it.

"Trust is hard earned and easily lost," says Colin Lange, executive director of culture and engagement at global brand and design consultancy Landor. "The gap between what leaders say and what they do must be as narrow as possible because once it widens you will immediately begin to erode any trust built."

The first step to stemming this tide is to identify where the breakdown occurred. It is then imperative not only to recognise the cause of the breakdown, but to acknowledge the role you played.

"At that point, you can swiftly correct the behaviour and make a conscious effort to close the gap. Great leaders allow themselves to be vulnerable and admit any missteps, but real leadership comes from the ability to rebuild trust through competence, reliability, honesty and empathy," Lange concludes. ●

10'000 Hours/Getty Images

MOST LOVED COMPANIES HAVE BEEN AHEAD OF THE CURVE

Percentage of UK companies ranked as the best places to work who have offered working from home and flexitime for their employees over the years

● Working from home ● Flexitime

100%
80%
60%
40%

2015　2016　2017　2018　2019　2020
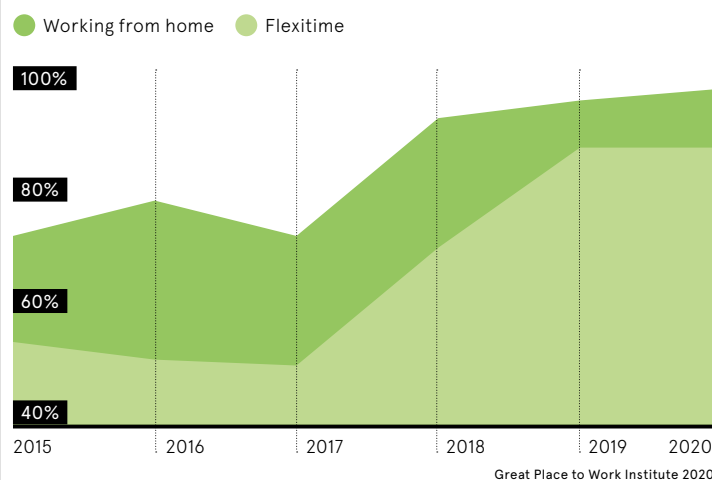
Great Place to Work Institute 2020

LEADERSHIP

Transforming into a new kind of leader

Leadership styles for "business as usual" are no longer fit for purpose. During the coronavirus crisis, those leaders who can encourage trust and embrace relatability are succeeding

Cath Everett

Thomas Barwick/Getty Images

For senior executives to steer their organisations effectively through the coronavirus pandemic and its aftermath, they will require a range of remote leadership skills that in some cases will have to be learnt as they go along.

According to Elizabeth Stewart, partner and head of executive assessment and development at executive search firm Odgers Berndtson, there are three key stages to consider, each of which necessitates its own set of leadership styles and behaviours.

The first involves leaders steadying the ship during the onset of the crisis and making decisions at speed as they set a new course for the company. Part of this process entails establishing the organisation's key principles and priorities to act as the basis of an action plan for managers to execute.
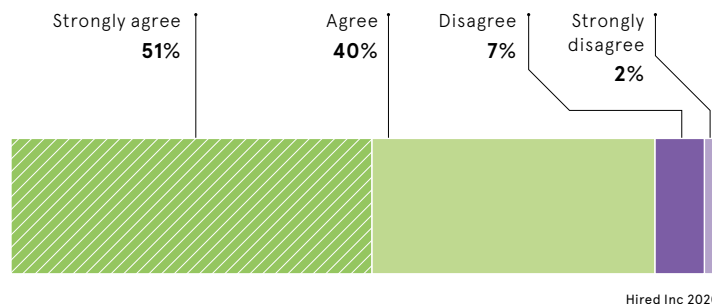
Important remote leadership skills include communicating openly and acting decisively. For example, in the first week of lockdown, Helen Calcraft, founder of UK-based advertising agency Lucky Generals, asked her managers to take pay cuts and her staff to either move to a four-and-a-half-day week or take furloughs for six months to cut costs, during which time she promised there would be no redundancies. The aim was to avoid "drip-feeding bad news".

"I felt from early on it was important to act with clarity and transparency, and to be decisive," Calcraft explains. "Because there are so many unknowns, transparency and authenticity are paramount and that means sharing the full picture, rather than pretending everything's going to be alright if it isn't."

Another vital consideration in a remote-leadership scenario is engaging with employees on a more human level than has perhaps traditionally been the case.

As Sarah Walker-Smith, chief executive of law firm Shakespeare Martineau, points out: "I used to call myself a 'responsible bus driver' as I saw my role as getting us from A to B without crashing. But that's shifted now to being a 'human flag bearer' or role model to whom people can relate as it's about bringing humanity into it; it's a new leadership model."

The key to such a leadership style is trust. "The more people trust and relate to me, the more likely they are to come on a journey with me," says Walker-Smith. "While I can win people's heads with facts and logic, if they know me I can win their hearts over too."

The second stage in ensuring effective remote leadership entails putting pertinent processes in place to monitor how well the action plan is working, being open to input and prepared to adjust activities as necessary. Also vital is assessing whether an organisational change of direction is required or not.

Stewart suggests thinking about it like this: "If you had a blank page and were starting the business again, what would you need to adjust and what would be the game for the future?"

The main skills required in this context include intellectual curiosity, about what is happening with technology or in your sector more generally, and problem-solving. But adaptability and responsiveness are also important in a world in which change is happening so rapidly.

Shakespeare Martineau, for example, has now introduced a so-called "two-week rule". Based on the significant changes to ways of working introduced in the fortnight after lockdown, the question has become is there a reason why future change should take longer or are we just over-engineering things?

EMPLOYEES WANT GUIDELINES ON REMOTE COMMUNICATION

How UK tech workers feel about the statement: "I would feel more comfortable working remotely if my employer set clear expectations for general guidelines around responsiveness and communication"

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
51%	**40%**	**7%**	**2%**

Hired Inc 2020

> "
>
> **I used to call myself a 'responsible bus driver', that's shifted now to being a 'human flag bearer'**

Doing the right thing for the right reason

Jack Dorsey, founder and chief executive of Twitter, hit the headlines in April when he pledged to donate $1 billion-worth of shares in Square, a payments company he co-founded, to a charitable fund called Start Small to fund global COVID-19 relief. The donation amounted to 28 per cent of his wealth.

A month later, the social media firm also announced that those employees who were able to work from home had the option to "continue to do so forever" if they chose to. So what lessons can be learnt from Dorsey's leadership style?

According to Lucky Generals' Helen Calcraft, it is all about doing the right thing for the right reason and ensuring that, as a leader, your words and actions reflect the organisation's core values.

"The key point is about the importance of having a strong culture and set of values in place that staff understand and ensuring whatever leaders do chimes with that," she says. "Where things go wrong is if they speak and act in ways that aren't true to those values, which makes employees feel as if they're lacking in authenticity."

"It's made me focus on what we actually need, so do I need a 40-page report or is one page enough? It's an opportunity to introduce more brevity and efficiency across the organisation," says Walker-Smith.

The third stage in ensuring effective remote leadership involves implementing "big, courageous decisions" to bring about whatever transformation is required for the business to flourish into the future, says Stewart.

Vital skills include strategic, visionary and lateral thinking, with a dash of entrepreneurship thrown in. While those at the top of large organisations rarely fall into the latter category, it is possible to complement their existing strengths by "listening to ideas that come from the frontline and be prepared to at least give them a chance", she says.

Another useful approach is to empower staff to make their own decisions. Lucky Generals found, for example, that flexibility was crucial to respond to major shifts in customers' requirements. As a result, says Calcraft, it was necessary to "collapse a lot of processes together while not being in the same room".

"Our management approach is now about trusting the frontline completely in making decisions and

acting with integrity," she explains. "Things are happening so fast there isn't time for meetings, so we've had to let go of control. It's quite a different management style and the process is messier, but it has worked."

Another remote leadership skill worth developing is resilience, which can take various forms, says Walker-Smith. On the one hand, it involves helping employees become more resilient to change. This entails treating people as individuals, understanding their needs and helping them through the shift, in whatever form that takes.

On the other, she says, it is about leaders looking after their own wellbeing, which "many of us haven't nailed yet, but will be seriously important going forward".

While many of the skills required to steer the ship effectively into the future may be the same as they ever were, the emphasis inevitably changes in a remote-leadership situation, with agility coming to the fore, says Stewart.

"It's about intellectual agility so IQ and the application of it, personal savvy, which is about emotional intelligence, resilience, and the ability to learn and relearn constantly. These are the core competencies high-performing leaders need to have," she concludes. ●

Virtual meeting tools come of age

If there's a defining technology of the coronavirus pandemic, it's the video conference – but simplicity and reliability are must-haves

Use of video conferencing has skyrocketed during the coronavirus lockdown. Virtual meetings have become the lynchpin of business communication and the staple of daily remote working for many enterprises.

"Many more of us have become familiar with this way of communicating. It's become democratised. But professionals now realise not all tools are created equal," says Rob Jardine, chief marketing officer at London Stock Exchange-listed LoopUp, a remote-meeting technology provider.

Recent research among 1,300 frequent users of conference calls at large enterprises in the UK, United States, Australia and Europe found that 80 per cent of users experience problems with video conferencing, including difficulty installing a download required to join a meeting or unreliable audio. Users waste 18 minutes on average getting the meeting started and dealing with distractions.

"Simplicity is essential; the interface must be intuitive. And nobody wants to download software that could contain malware. In fact, many IT teams prevent employees downloading applications altogether because of legitimate security concerns. It's one of the reasons our solution is browser-based. You cannot allow mission-critical virtual meetings to go wrong," says Jardine from UK-based LoopUp, which has been providing premium remote meetings since 2007, serving 7,000 organisations globally.

"Audio quality is another non-negotiable. If you can't hear someone properly in a virtual meeting it spoils it for everyone. Reliable audio isn't just a nice-to-have, it's essential if you're to collaborate successfully," says the chief marketing officer of LoopUp, which works with

Clifford Chance, Kia Motors and Travelex, as well as a quarter of the top 100 private equity firms globally.

Most web-conferencing platforms use voice over internet protocol (VoIP), sending audio compressed as packets of data over the internet. Any loss of packets leads to jitter, when words are jumbled or lost altogether. This is rarely an issue when all users are on a corporate network with a managed quality of service, but it becomes a problem when users join meetings from home using domestic broadband.

"That's why we don't use VoIP audio. We use regular phone lines for audio, with a web interface for screen-sharing, video and meeting controls. That way we get crystal clear conversations, which don't drop off, allowing up to 150 people from anywhere in the world to collaborate reliably. Businesses can't clinch

that crucial deal if there are poor lines of communication."

Even when the technology works as intended, employees who frequently use video conferences are reporting fatigue. Video requires more concentration than audio; users need to pay attention to non-verbal signals like body language and facial expressions. Workers are conscious of being watched on camera and it's hard not to look at your own face on screen. As well as being mentally draining, these issues can distract participants from the meeting content itself.

The same global survey showed more than two thirds of respondents felt video isn't useful in every remote meeting. "In virtual meetings with lots of participants, if people want to spend most of the time listening, it may be a better experience and more productive if they're not on video. Unlike many video-conferencing tools, LoopUp is audio first: users join the call in audio only and video is only added at the host's discretion," explains Jardine.

"Many buyers of video-conferencing tools think it's all about how many extra features a system has. From our experience over the last decade, users primarily want impeccable audio and a simple way to join a secure remote meeting. That's what we've been trying to perfect down the years."

80%
of users have experienced problems with a video conference

18 mins
The time users waste on each meeting getting started and dealing with distractions

67%
of users feel that video isn't always helpful in every remote meeting

Commercial feature

Securing the future of work

The coronavirus pandemic has caused a growing number of organisations to consider a permanent shift to remote working, but doing so will also require a cultural change

The business world was catapulted into turbulence and uncertainty in March when the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic and companies were forced almost immediately into remote work. Though it has been a highly testing time for many businesses, the crisis has also showcased the virtues of flexible working.

For organisations that had already embraced remote working to some degree, their perceptions of its value have been verified. For those that had resisted or been sceptical of remote working, their views have been challenged having now experienced it first-hand. They may have been forced into it, but they are now seeing positives outcomes.

One of the key inhibitors to companies embracing remote working in the past was a prevailing view that it might hinder employee productivity. However, a recent study of 2,250 office workers by LogMeIn and OnePoll revealed the contrary with 37 per cent in fact feeling more productive in their home environment. They're also happier. Two in three workers said they are financially better off without daily commuting and lunch bills, and 56 per cent said they are spending more time with their friends and family.

Where challenges have existed in the sudden shift to mass remote working, these are in the area of security. LogMeIn, which has kept businesses collaborating throughout the pandemic with its video conferencing, chat and webinar tools, builds end-to-end encryption into its VoIP (voice over internet protocol) platforms, prevents unauthorised use of its services or compromise of company assets, protects the privacy and integrity of confidential communications, and integrates seamlessly with other networks and security tools.

"Those key pillars are the foundations of how we build our products at LogMeIn across all our business units," says Joseph Walsh, senior manager for international product marketing, unified communications and collaboration, at LogMeIn.
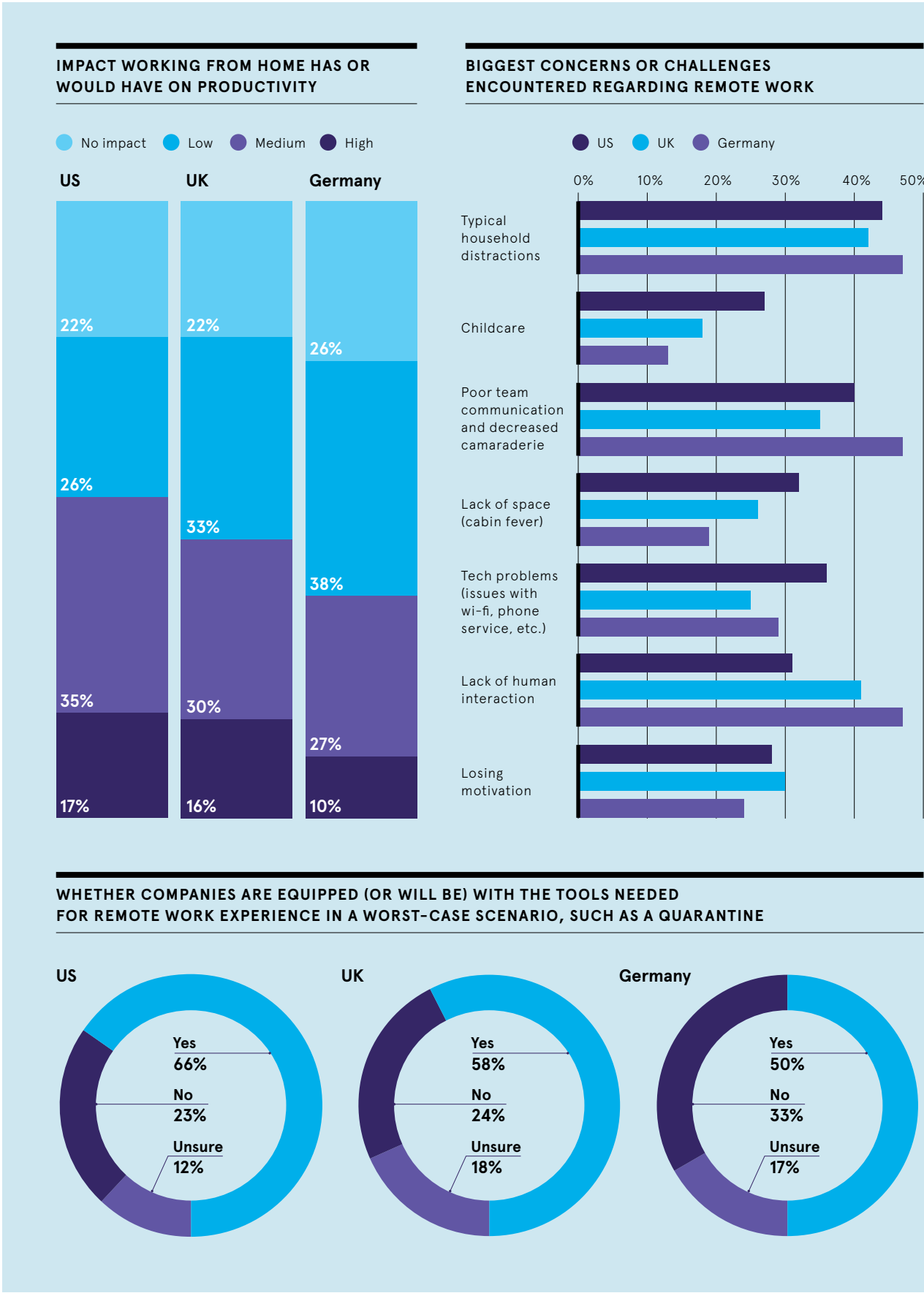
"We always strive to do what we can to make sure we're as secure as we possibly can be for our customers, but there are also a number of things our end-users can do. When hosting video-conferencing meetings, for example, they can use features like meeting lock for enhanced privacy and remove anybody who shouldn't be there. They can implement additional security levels like putting passwords in place for meetings and only give access to content to specific people."

Though the world was already moving towards a more flexible work environment before the pandemic, with research by Global Workplace Analytics reporting a 140 per cent increase since 2005, COVID-enforced lockdowns have accelerated the trend by several years.

Facebook has led the charge in announcing its plans for a permanent home workforce, with an "aggressive" remote hiring spree driving its objective for half its employees to be home based over the next five to ten years.

The social networking giant has said it is likely to adapt salaries to match local costs of living, but changes will also be required around culture and specific considerations given for each employee's lifestyle and home circumstances. Employers need to be especially empathetic and flexible to the different stages of life their employees are in while working for them. For example, a parent with school-age children has different needs than a young professional in a house share or somebody living alone in a small apartment.

This empathy plays into a wider strategy around corporate culture. Trust is a massive element of remote working and employees who feel trusted by management will be happier and more productive. Employees also need to trust their management that their output and performance will be measured in the most appropriate way. When LogMeIn's whole workforce began working from home, it published a content resource centre giving advice to first-time remote workers and those managing remote teams.

"A lot of it is just simple stuff around the importance of getting up like you normally would in the morning, having a shower, having a dedicated workspace and treating the day like you would if you were going into the office," says Walsh. "That all falls under that cultural umbrella, and trust, maturity and empathy are crucial. Culture will make or break companies as they continue to progress in this new normal we find ourselves in.
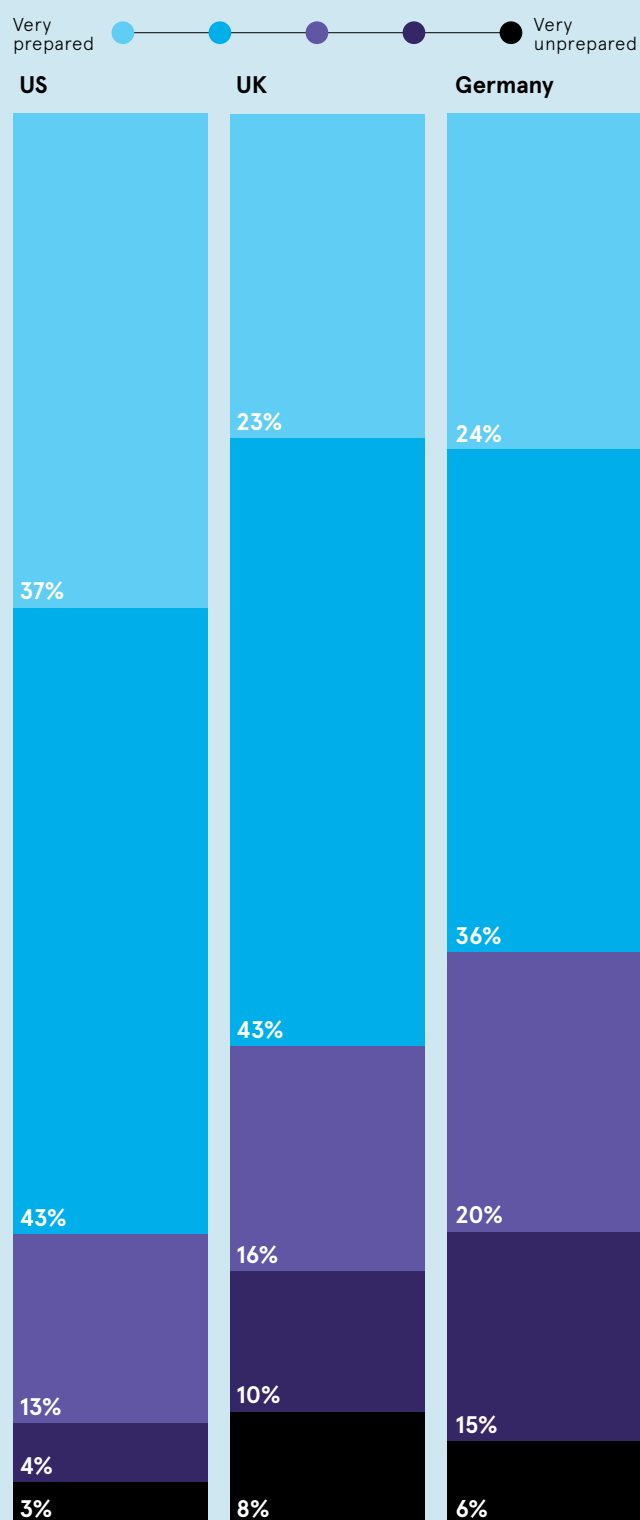
"The future work is going to be a more flexible work environment, something that is dynamic and can adapt to each employee. At different stages of our working career, we're in different stages of our personal life and we have different requirements. Work needs to be flexible and adapt to that because the benefits are universal. An organisation gets more productivity, employees are happier, and that creates a longer relationship between the employer and employee, reducing costs and staff turnover."

LogMeIn didn't only seek to provide additional support to its employees during the COVID-19 crisis, but to its customers too. The company made all its tools available for free to thousands of organisations, both existing customers that were consuming some but not all of its solutions and frontline organisations in healthcare and education, so they could stay productive and operating at full force with such a scattered workforce.

While other platforms have struggled with spikes in demand, LogMeIn has led the way in reliability. The constant

55%
of UK office workers believe working from home would have no or a low impact on their productivity

24%
believe their company is not equipped to deal with a remote work 'worst-case' scenario

> " The future work is going to be a more flexible work environment, something that is dynamic and can adapt to each employee

IMPACT WORKING FROM HOME HAS OR WOULD HAVE ON PRODUCTIVITY

Legend: ● No impact ● Low ● Medium ● High

	US	UK	Germany
No impact	22%	22%	26%
Low	26%	33%	38%
Medium	35%	30%	27%
High	17%	16%	10%

BIGGEST CONCERNS OR CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED REGARDING REMOTE WORK

Legend: ● US ● UK ● Germany

- Typical household distractions
- Childcare
- Poor team communication and decreased camaraderie
- Lack of space (cabin fever)
- Tech problems (issues with wi-fi, phone service, etc.)
- Lack of human interaction
- Losing motivation

WHETHER COMPANIES ARE EQUIPPED (OR WILL BE) WITH THE TOOLS NEEDED FOR REMOTE WORK EXPERIENCE IN A WORST-CASE SCENARIO, SUCH AS A QUARANTINE

US
Yes 66%
No 23%
Unsure 12%

UK
Yes 58%
No 24%
Unsure 18%

Germany
Yes 50%
No 33%
Unsure 17%

PREPAREDNESS FOR WORKING REMOTELY FULL TIME

Very prepared ●—●—●—●—● Very unprepared

	US	UK	Germany

US
- 37%
- 43%
- 13%
- 4%
- 3%

UK
- 23%
- 43%
- 16%
- 10%
- 8%

Germany
- 24%
- 36%
- 20%
- 15%
- 6%

GoTo by LogMeIn 2020 global survey of office workers – values rounded to nearest whole number

availability of unified communications tools is vital as companies continue to embrace remote working, and business continuity will remain crucial in the next year to 18 months as restrictions are eased, but a vaccine is yet to materialise. Any business continuity plan needs to place people at the forefront of its thinking, and how they can be supported in their surroundings and work environment.

"You need to empower the workforce with tools like ours that are easy to use and encourage maximum collaboration and productivity," says Walsh. "We facilitate anything from a large town hall broadcast, addressing 100,000 employees, to team sessions and one to ones. Once you have the empathetic element of corporate culture, you also have to 'put your arms around' the IT team.

"With thousands of employees in thousands of different locations, they need remote management and monitoring tools and as much self-service IT troubleshooting and chatbot functionality as possible. We're the work-from-anywhere company and are here to support anywhere workers in the flexible new normal we're entering."

For more information please visit goto.com

GoTo by LogMeIn

Sage boosts customer service with industry-first webinars

A ccounting software and payments firm Sage is trusted by millions of customers worldwide to help manage their finances, operations and people. Its cloud-based applications have proved invaluable during the coronavirus pandemic, allowing small companies, often dubbed the engine of the economy, to continue with business as usual.

When the UK government's Making Tax Digital scheme went live last year, it coincided with the busy payroll year-end period. Sage initiated an industry-first live Q&A webinar series to manage a tripling in demand for technical support. Via live daily two-hour sessions, the service provided timely demonstrations and answers to customers' questions.

"It was the first time anyone in our industry had attempted this type of one-to-many customer support and we were so encouraged by the response," says Jonny Wright, customer services team manager at Sage, which soon expanded the popular service to five all-day webinars each day, providing support for different software packages.

Due to the increased demand, however, problems emerged with the

software platform because it was not specifically designed for webinar hosting. It struggled to cope with the increased usage and attendees reported problems downloading the software.

After an initial trial, Sage switched to LogMeIn's GoToWebinar to host the daily sessions, taking advantage of numerous benefits that improved the experience for customers and Sage's technicians. Crucially, access via a web browser meant there was no need to download software, immediately eliminating any software-related problems for customers. Attendees simply provide a name and email to gain immediate access.

Sage has continued to use GoToWebinar through the various webinar series it now offers. Its technicians running the live sessions can more easily find unanswered queries and prioritise the most important questions. By using the 'camera-on' mode, they can improve engagement with attendees, while the built-in deep analytics means they can measure feedback, gather data on individual sessions and identify common questions.

For customers, privacy is improved since no names appear on screen, which also eliminates any reticence they might have about posting questions in a public forum.

"The transition to GoToWebinar was absolutely seamless," says Wright. "The platform is extremely easy to use, with minimal training, and we had excellent support from LogMeIn." Sage has also found it easy to ramp up provision in response to demand, as it has during the COVID-19 crisis, because technicians can quickly learn how to use it.

The Q&A Live service has significantly improved customer service productivity, with technicians fielding three

times as many queries as a phone-based frontline agent does in a day. It has also seen a dramatic increase in customer satisfaction, with net promoter scores for Q&A Live growing from around 40 to 60 before the switch to GoToWebinar, to between 70 and 80, and customer satisfaction scores average more than 95 per cent.

"Since switching to GoToWebinar, we've had lots of amazing feedback about how much people love this contact channel," says Wright. "It's interactive and creates a sense of community, there are no waiting times and questions are answered quickly, so we get a lot of repeat visitors. Sales colleagues also use it as an added benefit to support customers and our frontline call centre teams promote it as a faster way for customers to get their issues resolved.

"Q&A Live is an industry first and I'm confident that by using GoToWebinar we can make it the first-choice support channel for our customers."

When COVID-19 forced businesses into lockdown, the GoTo solution became an even more valuable tool for Sage, enabling the company to migrate all its physical events seamlessly into a virtual environment, something UK and Ireland managing director Sabby Gill believes will become a more frequent fixture even after the pandemic is over.

"We can do many of the things we would in a live event environment, such as live polls to gauge audience opinions, without impacting the quality of service for our customers and partners," says Gill. "As we move into a new normal, we believe virtual events are here to stay and that they actually enhance our offering, giving customers the opportunity to attend both in-person and virtual events depending on their needs." ●

> ❝ We believe virtual events are here to stay and that they actually enhance our offering

Is this the end of office life?

The sudden boom in remote working has raised a flurry of questions surrounding a return to "normal" working life and the purpose of the workplace as we know it

Bobby Palmer

The office of the future looked very different five months ago. In January, Facebook announced plans to hire 1,000 staff members to fill their new £1-billion London HQ. But by May, the company had said half their future workforce will be permanently remote.

This is just one example of how the coronavirus pandemic has blown apart companies' conceptions of "the office". Barclays boss Jes Staley has said "the notion of putting 7,000 people in a building may be a thing of the past", while Shopify founder and chief executive Tobi Lütke tweeted his company will become digital by default. "Office centricity is over," he proclaimed.

Flexible working is nothing new. A survey of 229 organisations by US research firm Gartner found 30 per cent of employees were already working from home at least some of the time before COVID-19 struck. Since the pandemic began, that number has jumped as high as 80 per cent.

"I think that somewhere between 15 to 20 per cent of the workforce that was previously in a workplace will not be coming back," says Rich McBee, chief executive of remote network performance specialists Riverbed. With this in mind, it's hard to disagree with Lütke's hypothesis, but if office centricity is over, what does that mean for the office?

"A lot of the trends that were on the way anyway have massively accelerated," says John Drummond, chairman of workplace strategy experts Corporate Culture. "We're going to see several short-term, pragmatic changes and one is that more people will work from home."

This could mean an end to the classic command-and-control method of working, especially as flexible working seems to improve employee productivity, specifically in Generation-Z staffers, 60 per cent of whom have become more productive during lockdown, according to a study by Milkround.

"I think you're going to see flexible hours and output-based work versus hourly work," says McBee. "What enables that is having at-office capability in your home office or from wherever you're working."

> **Somewhere between 15 to 20 per cent of the workforce that was previously in a workplace will not be coming back**

That means investment in connectivity and networks for those working flexible or compressed hours, as well as increased collaboration between employers and employees on the potential health pitfalls of remote working, such as burnout or back pain. Just last month, Google chief executive Sundar Pichai announced plans to provide workers with a $1,000 grant for at-home office equipment and furniture.

"The 'individual cube' of yesterday can be your home office," says McBee. "It's private, you're working, you're concentrated. Then, when it's time to collaborate, the human-to-human interface will be done in a pseudo-office environment."

Drummond says this presents a phenomenal opportunity for companies to reinvent the workplace in a work-from-home world. "The key question is what is the workplace for?" he says. "There's a massive new opportunity for interior designers and architects, not just for the design of office spaces, but for the design of entire communities, neighbourhoods and cities."

If the office of the future looked different five months ago, try ten years. From Google's sleep pods to Apple's on-site wellness centre, the old future office was designed for people spending all their time at work. Now organisations are having to rethink office design for employees who want to spend more time at home.

"Companies may choose spaces which are more about collaboration than focused work, so I think we might see a proportion of desk space decrease," says Guenaelle Watson, managing director of office consultants 360 Workplace. "These spaces could become more agile, collaborative work areas programmed for different teams to use."

With offices being reimagined as creative meeting spaces and most desk work being done remotely, technology such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams will be at the forefront of keeping the future workplace connected.
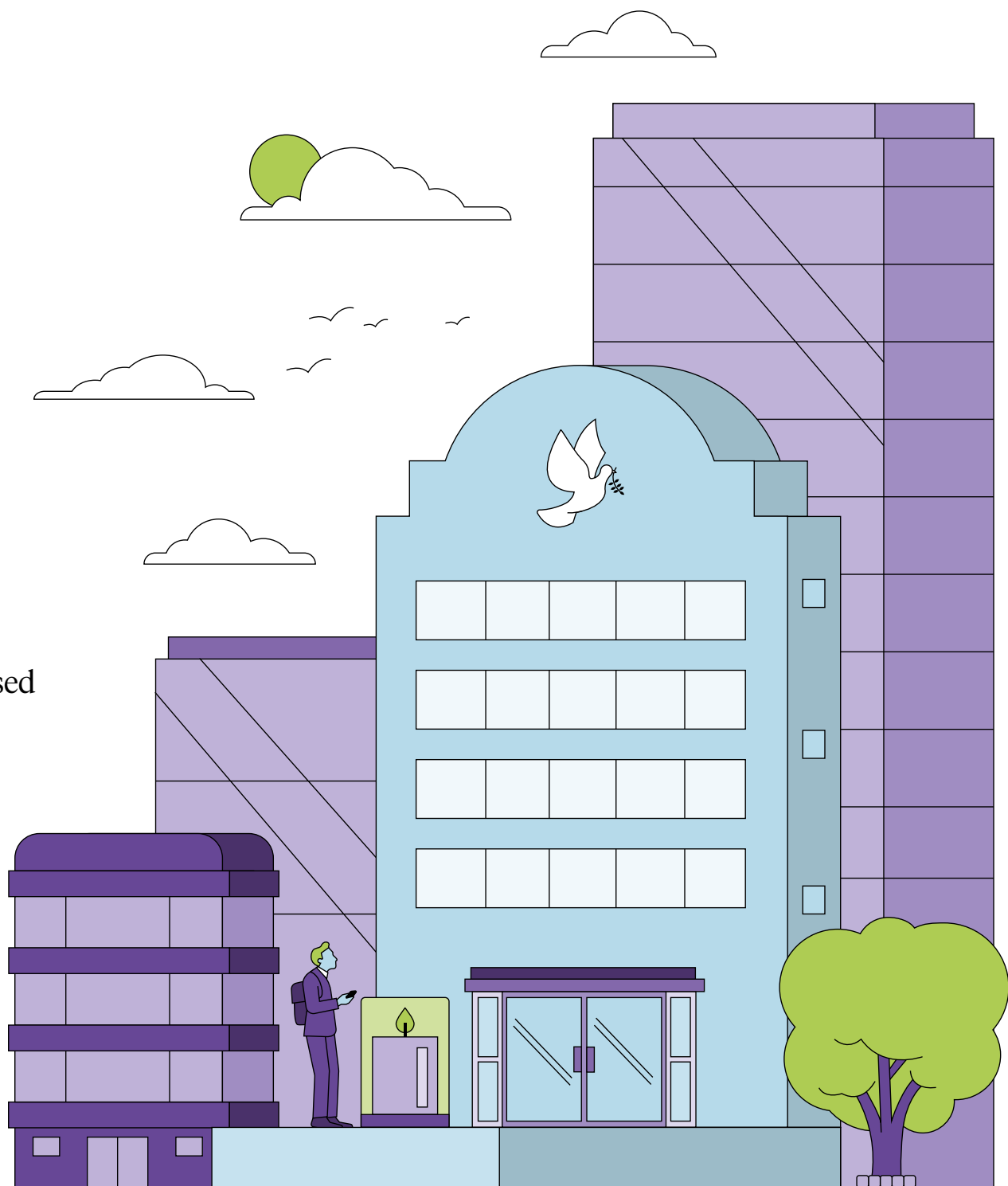
Microsoft chief executive Satya Nadella recently said his company has seen two years' worth of digital transformation in two months; that's because this digital change has been born out of adapt-or-die necessity, which will only continue to be the case in a post-COVID-19 world.

Thus, the need to return to hygienic workspaces will be one of the key drivers in digital workplace design. "We'll see people not wanting to touch things in offices," Watson explains. "That means the office, in time, may become contactless. You'll be using voice recognition to open doors or apps to get yourself a coffee."

In a world where the technology is improving every day, the physical space is becoming less and less important for forward-thinking and better-connected companies. Although meeting colleagues in a virtual reality office may still seem like a sci-fi concept, it's not as far off as once thought.

"I think technology will get us to a point where that notion of physical location becomes a real question mark," says Justin Westcott, European head of technology and chief operating officer for UK and Ireland at Edelman. "If you think

about where we're heading with 5G and latency, the doubling of performance in virtual reality in two years, while the costs half, that notion of the office increasingly becoming augmented is something I can see happening.

"In a business like ours, our assets are our people and the office is the biggest overhead."

That's why, when COVID-19 struck during early conversations about Edelman's new London office, it was an opportunity for the company to interrogate what the modern workplace is for.

"There is always going to be a requirement for people to come together," says Westcott. "Starbucks used to call themselves the 'third space' and I can see the office becoming the third space: you're going to have your home, your home office and then the office."

If the office does indeed become the third space, fixed desks could be done away with entirely, as could the traditional nine to five. "I think the notion of a 'day in the office' may be in question," says Westcott. "It might be you come into an office for a 'thing', a task, a meeting, then you head out to wherever you want to get your work done."

Leaders like Westcott and Watson see the office of the future as a place where employees meet, socialise and seek out the sort of spontaneous interactions video meetings don't allow for. Interestingly, both see the office of the future looking something like a hotel lobby.

Yet with temporary providers such as Zipcube and Spaces becoming evermore popular with startups of the WeWork generation, many will ask if these lobby-like office spaces are merely precursors to a world without offices at all.

Unlikely, Watson says. "Not having an office at all would be difficult and you'd struggle to create a strong company culture," she explains. "You can deliver the work from home, but it won't fulfil the human need for interaction."

Instead, Watson foresees two potential trends for those looking to reinvent their working environment in the flexible-working world. Organisations will either repurpose some of their desk space into collaboration or wellness areas, or they'll opt to trade in one larger central headquarters for a number of smaller, perhaps regional, hubs.

Which fulfils Lütke's prophecy, in its own way. Office centricity is indeed over, but the office itself isn't dead quite yet. ●
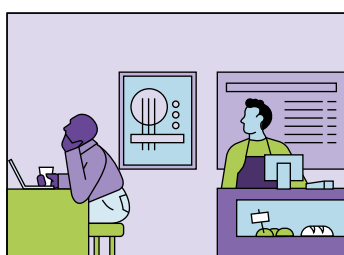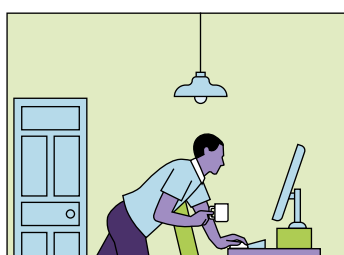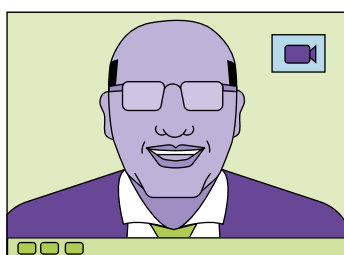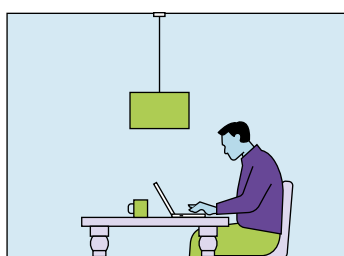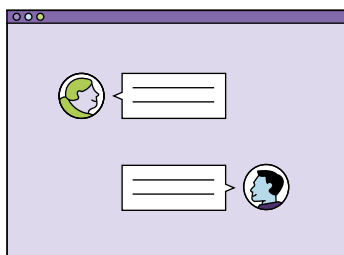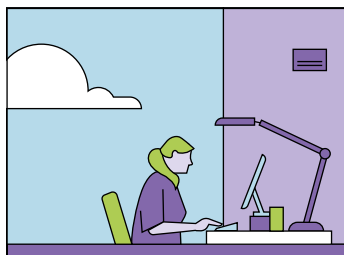
Working in the 'new normal': How to ensure visibility in an uncertain world

Making the right decisions, but being flexible enough to change direction quickly if required, is difficult enough at the best of times, but it is even more tricky when everyone is working from home, says **Qasim Kirmani**, chief executive of Wurqi

The coronavirus pandemic has pushed the world into uncharted territory, which has led to huge uncertainty, not least in the way we work within our organisations.

Now more than ever, it is vital that senior executives are able to demonstrate they have a clear picture of what is happening inside their business. Doing so involves not only maintaining clear communication, but also setting well-defined goals, putting realistic plans in place and ensuring the entire business is fully lined up behind them, as well as having the right tools to see whether their plans are being executed properly.

It requires leaders to be able to change direction swiftly if necessary, while ensuring they take the workforce with them.

Meeting such requirements can be difficult at the best of times, but the COVID-19 crisis has magnified these challenges many times over.

The new reality of how and where we work is creating a number of pressures. It is no surprise that working from home can lead to individuals feeling more isolated, which means strong communication is more important than ever. But the impact of this situation goes deeper.

Remote working can amplify the impact siloed ways of working has on the business as cross-functional communication often suffers due to a lack of incidental, ad hoc discussions around the water cooler.

This scenario can lead to a drop in creativity and innovation. It can also generate more practical challenges as many managers are, at best, only vaguely aware of the interdependencies between different teams within the business. As a result, projects are at risk of becoming disjointed and employees can feel disengaged, unclear how their activities fit into the bigger picture. In turn, this situation can lead to goals and objectives not being met. Promises are broken, problems go unfixed and opportunities are missed.

To overcome these challenges, particularly in a remote-working environment, it is important for managers

to ensure they have visibility, predictability and control in three interconnected areas that are all too often dealt with separately: work, people and communications.

In other words, leaders need to know who is doing what and to what end, at any given point in time. They require a high degree of confidence that all activity is contributing towards the organisation's key goals and objectives, particularly if change becomes necessary.

Also vital is an awareness of, and an ability to predict, any threats and opportunities, to take effective decisions from a position of controlled strength.

But to do so inevitably means clear goals and objectives must be set in the first place and implemented consistently across the business to ensure they are achieved successfully.

This approach ensures each employee has their own objectives to meet and is aware of both how they fit into the bigger picture and the impact of any given task on the wider portfolio of work. It also makes it easier to act on any bottlenecks and ensure other stakeholders can offer support should problems arise or additional input be required.

However, in the current world where remote working is part of the "new normal", it is almost impossible to do this without technology. For leaders to understand what is happening and take decisions effectively, they require a flexible, easy-to-use platform offering a single, consistent, real-time view of activities across the business.

And this is exactly what Wurqi's work management solution provides: an integrated, collaborative environment that offers a centralised view of everything relating to work, people and communications.

Being able to see who is doing what, where tasks are at and what progress has been made in what timescales provides leaders with the visibility, predictability and control they need to steady the ship and chart a successful course through today's choppy waters. In other words, it's about making work digital.

OLI SCARFF/AFP via Getty Images

A mobile phone mast in Fearnley Mill, Huddersfield, was set on fire in April amid a spate of arson attacks on 5G infrastructure linked to false conspiracy theories that the network helps spread the coronavirus

COMMUNICATIONS

Pandemics and politics cloud 5G outlook

Conspiracy theories, geopolitical tensions and the mass rollout of home working have thrust the future of 5G deployment into the spotlight

Heidi Vella

W hen telecoms providers said fifth-generation networking, or 5G infrastructure, would be game-changing, causing the spread of a deadly virus wasn't what they meant.

But still, on social media such crackpot conspiracy theories have spread like wildfire. While in the physical world, arson attacks have seen phone masts go up in flames.

As operators and the government sought to put out the blaze of misinformation, smouldering geopolitical tensions over which technology provider should or should not be involved in building UK 5G infrastructure have threatened to ignite.

Most certainly, the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the

development of fifth-generation networking in some unexpected ways. But politics and fake news aside, industry analysts and technology providers are busy considering how behaviour changes catalysed by COVID-19, such as increased remote working, will impact the future of the network upgrade.

Some have suggested a shift to home working could see UK telcos refocus investment plans away from 5G infrastructure to concentrate on fixed broadband such as fibre, the UK deadline for which is 2025.

While it makes sense intuitively to conclude that mobile networking use is less relevant when the majority of the population are at home, says Björn Odenhammar, network

chief technology officer for Ericsson UK and Ireland, the company's data analysis shows demand has remained stable during lockdown, but has changed location.

"Instead of heavily congested sites in and around central London or similar business hubs, demand has moved to suburban areas," says Odenhammar.

"In some places, voice calls have increased by 50 per cent and, with much more activity on wifi, it has experienced issues, resulting in people using the LTE [long-term evolution] network instead," he adds.

Dr Hamid Falaki, consultant to the Smart Internet Lab at the University of Bristol, says the momentum of the 5G rollout has actually increased network capacity behind the system, helping it deal with the extra residential demand. "If the UK had not prepared for 5G, we wouldn't have the capacity to deliver, for example, all the extra Zoom calls," says Falaki.

Going forward, a mix of the two solutions, fibre and mobile networking, will be needed, he says, especially as many people in mostly rural areas do not have adequate broadband coverage.

Fixed wireless access (FWA), the process of providing wireless broadband using radio links between a pair of fixed points, usually an in-house modem and the regular base station, using the 5G network could bring connectivity faster to those who need it, says Odenhammar.

"In the UK, Ofcom says there's around 600,000 households without 'decent' broadband which is defined as 10 megabits per second download and 1 megabit per second upload speed, FWA has the potential to provide connectivity very quickly because it requires less digging to install fibre,"

says Odenhammar. "This is a use-case I think will grow in importance and get more consumer demand."

FWA is usually considered sub-par to fibre broadband, but the high-frequency spectrum used by 5G will make it comparable or faster. According to testing conducted by OpenSignal, 5G speeds in the UK are significantly faster than the average wifi connection.

Technology research company Omdia is less optimistic about the immediate future of 5G. It says the network looks more like a luxury when set against the impact of the pandemic. It notes, with the exception of China, 5G infrastructure rollouts are likely to be slower than anticipated in 2020 due to commercial activity stalling and business plans being overturned.

In particular, the momentum created around standalone or private 5G networks for businesses and Industry 4.0 is likely to be disrupted.

Other forces are also threatening to delay 5G in the UK. In January the government announced it would allow Huawei technology in the non-core parts of 5G infrastructure, capped at a 35 per cent market share.

The controversial decision has received push back from Conservative backbenchers, who have demanded all the firm's equipment be stripped from the network. The United States, which views Huawei as a security threat, has also asked the UK government to reconsider. Huawei's technology is banned in America and sanctions have been put on the company using US electronic chips.

China's handling of COVID-19 and its attempts to strengthen its grip on Hong Kong have increased tensions between the one-party super-state, America and the UK in recent weeks. In early-May, the UK government said it will review its decision on Huawei.

Emily Taylor, chief executive of Oxford Information Labs and an associate fellow of Chatham House, the international affairs think tank, says the impetus for the new review was security related, possibly because the United States is threatening to limit intelligence-sharing with allies that use Huawei. But it could also be

> "A globalised supply chain might not look so attractive if borders are closed or if a country is affected by another sudden emergency"

because the pandemic has sharpened concerns about supply chain security.

"Suddenly, a globalised supply chain might not look so attractive if borders are closed or if a country is affected by the pandemic or another sudden emergency," says Taylor. Furthermore, if US chips are to be replaced, there is a question mark over what will take their place and whether it will have the same level of security, she adds.

At the end of May, there were reports that UK prime minister Boris Johnson is considering boosting state investment into domestic telecoms companies to help them compete in the 5G technology market.

However, Taylor says replacing Huawei hardware now would cost more and delay the entire rollout. Unlike in America and Australia, the company has been involved in UK mobile networks since 2003. "It's a question of how much it costs and how long it takes. Removing Huawei will involve digging up much of the existing 4G infrastructure," she says.

In May, Taylor told the Commons Defence Select Committee that it is "feasible and plausible" to keep a high-risk vendor such as Huawei out of the "brains" of the network as a means of managing risk.

Overall, it seems for the short term at least, the pandemic has thrown up several notable challenges for 5G in the UK, but controversies and challenges aside, there remains little doubt about the need for the network now and in the future. ●

MISLEADING INFORMATION ABOUT CORONAVIRUS

UK consumers were surveyed in May about whether they had come across any of the following misleading recommendations about avoiding the coronavirus in the past week

Theories linking the origins or causes of coronavirus to 5G tech — 33%

Increase the use of natural remedies such as colloidal silver or essential oils — 13%

Drink water more frequently — 10%

Gargle with salt water — 8%

Eat warm food/drink and avoid cold food/drink — 7%

Put clothes in the sun or another warm place to disinfect them — 6%

Drink more lemon juice — 6%

Inhale steam — 5%
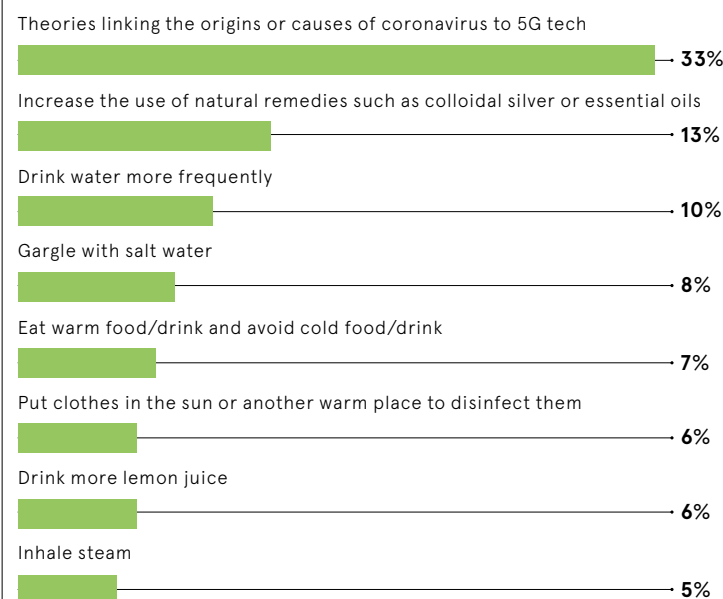
Populus/Ofcom 2020

01

INFRASTRUCTURE

Disrupting travel plans for the near future

COVID-19 has raised important questions around plans for the UK's transport network, with commuting patterns likely to change as the nation comes out of lockdown

Heidi Vella

A month into the coronavirus lockdown, National Rail and London Underground use had fallen by 99 per cent and 96 per cent respectively compared to early-February. Bus passenger numbers plummeted by 88 per cent and airport departures had declined significantly.

Now lockdown is starting to ease, mobility is tentatively rising. But with the government advising against using public transport if possible, and many educational institutions and office buildings remaining closed, the daily commute could be consigned to history.

A study by the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) has highlighted that preferences for working and socialising remotely post-lockdown will see a move away, at least in the short term, from the infrastructure demand patterns that existed prior to the pandemic.

Drawing on YouGov polling data, ICE found that 61 per cent of UK adults support increasing the frequency of remote working. Some 32 per cent think there should be a transition to a permanent at-home working environment where possible, while 44 per cent are likely to

avoid travelling on public transport networks.

Director of policy at ICE Chris Richards says in the immediate post-lockdown, pre-vaccine phase, public trust in existing transport infrastructure will need to be regained, possibly by modifying trains, tubes and buses for social distancing and increased ventilation.

This comes at a price when finances are already massively constrained, however. While transport companies are absorbing the costs and losses for now, in the future it could result in a realignment of services, says Richards.

"We might need to consider if the same frequency or intensity of use is needed if suddenly people are working three or four days a week from home," he says. "Then there's the wider question around other types of assets needed to support public mobility."

Dr Enrica Papa, reader in transport planning at the University of Westminster, who is running a research project in response to COVID-19, says people could start using cars more if they lack other options.

"Those who were using public transport are now using cars. We need to find a way to live with the virus and still travel sustainably, so in the short term there should be investment in local infrastructure to stop a car renaissance," she says.

Dr Susan Kenyon, principal lecturer in transport, politics and society at Canterbury Christ Church University, agrees. She adds that COVID-19 has disrupted people's travel behaviour, rather than changed it completely.

"Studies show even if the commute is taken away and substituted for 'virtual mobility', people still move about the same amount, they just redistribute their travel behaviour," says Kenyon.

"If the government wants to encourage people to work from home, it needs to understand who can and who can't do it and focus more on

02

01
Monday morning rush hour at Piccadilly train station in Manchester in March

02
Protesters hold a banner that reads 'NHS not HS2' by a gate to the HS2 site near Euston Station

local, rather than national, infrastructure. People will need to get to nearby shops, rather than from Manchester to London in record time."

On May 9, the UK government announced a £250-million emergency fund to help people travel without public transport. In England, the money will help establish "within weeks" pop-up bike lanes, wider pavements, safer junctions, and cycle and bus-only corridors. E-scooter trials will also be brought forward from next year to June this year. In London, mayor Sadiq Khan has also tried to curb car and underground use by increasing the congestion charge and creating large car-free zones.

Going further, to encourage remote working in the future, Kenyon says virtual mobility could be designed and orchestrated under transport planning authorities. There could be investments in better broadband and infrastructure such as "tele-cottages" built into new housing developments so people can work from home more comfortably. "Otherwise, people will return to normal when the pandemic is over," she says.

So if people are to travel less in the future, it raises questions about

whether transport infrastructure investments, such as the High Speed 2 rail project (HS2), are still appropriate.

The government green-lighted HS2, which will connect London, the Midlands and the North, serving eight of Britain's ten largest cities, in Febru-

75%

of global employers surveyed in 2019 said they were introducing flexible working policies to reduce commute times for employees

25%

of employees say they would prefer to live in another area but don't because it would increase their commute

Regus 2019

ary, suggesting it still believes the service will be needed in the future.

"There's no conversation around stopping this project because the long-term drivers are still there; we need to decarbonise rapidly and we expect urbanisation to continue," says Richards.

There are already anecdotal stories of people considering or actively moving further away from business centres because they feel they can work from home more and travel into work less. Could this help achieve the government's plan to level up and squash regional inequalities faster?

"If you take levelling up to mean all regions of the UK have the same amount of investment and infrastructure to support what they need, then potentially no," says Richards. "However, if people who used to work in London and commute can now live in Manchester and still earn the same wage, the amount of money flowing into the area will increase."

While there are few certainties, it is known that people travelling less has reduced overall carbon emissions. But Claire Haigh, chief executive of Greener Journeys, says there are fears these gains could be lost or made worse if the huge fall in public transport demand and revenues sees services go bust.

"Public transport has a critically important role to play in decarbonising the transport system, as rising demand for car and van travel is one of the main reasons why transport emissions remain stubbornly high," she says.

Looking forward, Richards says everyone is simply trying to understand "how much of the current changes will stick, versus it just being for the short term".

"But overall, there's an appreciation that if we do act we can address big things like air quality and carbon emissions in cities. It's doable. There's definitely a positive that can come out of this," he concludes. ●

Reimagining the workforce: How a powerful collaboration platform improves engagement

With an intelligent, reliable and secure collaboration platform, which spans physical and digital environments, enterprises can empower employees and reap the benefits of remote working, says **Vaughan Klein,** director of collaboration, EMEA and Russia, at Cisco

THERE IS LONG-TERM VALUE IN EMBRACING REMOTE WORK

Top 33 per cent of organisations who have adopted remote work best practices have realised greater business outcomes in comparison to others

Others   ▨ Top 33%

2.3× in productivity

2.2× in employee experience and satisfaction

2.9× in talent recruitment and retention

2.5× in real estate cost optimisation

2.6× in business agility and flexibility

Safe and Effective Remote Working Report 2020, Cisco Freeform Dynamics

When the coronavirus crisis began, people quickly looked for tools that would help them to continue collaborating with their colleagues. Most turned to video rather than voice for meetings and check-ins. In fact, we saw a 9,000 per cent increase in the amount of video utilisation on our Webex platform; and there's a very good reason for that.

Put simply, video meetings are far more engaging than voice-only ones. You can see exactly how the other participants are reacting to what's being said: whether they're excited, bored or even annoyed. These non-verbal cues are an integral part of how we communicate, so it's perhaps not surprising that we prefer

Vaughan Klein
Director of collaboration, Europe, Middle East, Africa and Russia, Cisco

tools that allow us to see them. We're also far less likely to try and multi-task, or tune out altogether, when we're face to face with our peers.

But while most of us are now happy to turn on our camera to collaborate, the equipment we use doesn't always deliver the best experience. An ageing laptop or webcam, for instance, is unlikely to provide you with the kind of rich, interactive, high-definition experiences that make working from home a pleasure rather than a chore. But thankfully there's a better option.

In a world where 54 per cent of the workforce want full-time remote work, our purpose-built personal devices, the Webex Desk Pro and the Webex Room Kit Mini solution, allow everyone to enjoy the same great collaborative experiences. And the cost of this equipment is typically offset by the savings it can generate. For instance, businesses that equip their workforce to work productively from anywhere no longer need a large real-estate footprint.

That's something we know only too well at Cisco. Over the past few years, we've re-engineered our workforce for home working, allowing us to dramatically reduce our real-estate investments. Our people are now more agile, innovative and productive, and we're no longer subject to the expensive overheads that stem from extensive amounts of office space.

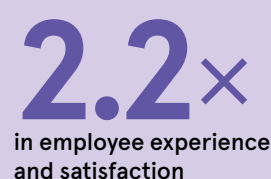Of course, the office is unlikely to disappear completely, but it will

❝
You may hear a colleague's children playing in the next room or see their dog pop up on the screen, and that's OK

undoubtedly change to suit the new world of work. People who want to minimise interruptions and maximise their productivity should be able to continue working from home once the current crisis ends.

But if they want to attend a meeting in person or physically see their colleagues, they will still have to head into the office. So while real-estate footprints will shrink in future, the number of meeting spaces may double to accommodate these new working patterns.

The technology inside these meeting rooms is likely to increase as well

and much of it will be invisible. If you step into a space equipped with the Webex collaboration video device, the equipment will recognise the paired user. It will know from your calendar that you're due to have a meeting and you'll be able to start it with a simple voice command.

Once you're back home, your phone will also pair with your personal video device for seamless collaboration across all the places you work from. And our Webex Assistant, powered by artificial intelligence, can even take meeting minutes and capture key points and action items, saving valuable time and increasing people's productivity.

We hope to introduce more of these invisible tools in future. But we also recognise that it's important to ensure the core video experience on our platform is reliable, secure and engaging. High-definition video experiences can vary depending on the bandwidth of the participants' broadband connections.

When someone looks pixelated or freezes mid-sentence, it reduces

engagement and increases frustration. But as a leader in networking for more than 30 years, we have designed our platform with a network-out approach, optimising the video quality regardless of the connection.

Overall, the shift towards home working will improve the work-life balance for many people and ultimately fuse both elements together. Indeed, managers and team leaders are already more tolerant of the more informal atmosphere that comes from the closer integration of our work and home lives.

You may hear a colleague's children playing in the next room or see their dog pop up on the screen and that's OK. These personal moments can create a wonderful sense of connection that more formal office environments sometimes lack. And connection is the key to greater engagement.

Webex's all-in-one design means team leaders can easily reach out to these home workers, and office-based ones, even if they're working across several different time zones. In fact, location is no longer a barrier

COVID-19 accelerated the shift from the office to the home

2 in 10 employees worked from home (average 2019)
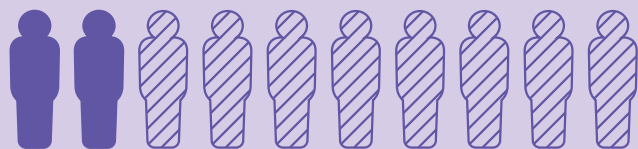
More than

9 in 10 employees worked from home (March 2020)

Post COVID-19: Remote work will continue

75%

want remote work occasionally

54%

want full-time remote work

IBM Institute for Business Value 2020 survey

to securing the best people for a project. With our single app and unified platform, teams can draw in talent from anywhere in the world, and collaborate seamlessly with our voice, video, messaging and virtual whiteboard tools.

Our single app and single platform approach means enterprises can easily extend communication and collaboration to their suppliers, customers and partners too. An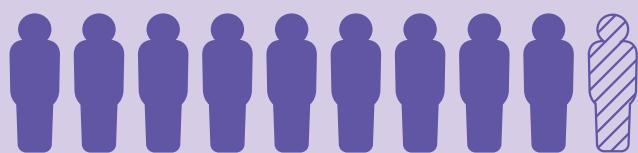d we employ rigorous security standards right across the board, so your data and intellectual property is safe no matter who you're communicating or collaborating with, which is something that can't be said of consumer-grade solutions.

Secure and reliable collaboration tools are the foundation of the workplace transformation efforts the coronavirus crisis has accelerated. The enterprises that thrive in future will be those that build their operations around platforms such as Webex, which allow everyone to enjoy digital experiences that rival, or even surpass, those found in traditional office environments.

We call this a "better than being there" virtual environment. To use a sports analogy, being in the stadium when someone scores a goal is a great experience. But you could argue that the experience you enjoy at home is superior in many ways. There's expert commentary, player statistics, instant replays and more.

Similarly, our intelligent tools can, for example, provide you with in-meeting information on the participants' titles, work histories and company news. So while there's a lot to be said for live in-person experiences, with Webex the digital kind can be just as productive, enjoyable and engaging.

For more information please visit www.cisco.com/webex

cisco Webex

Cutting-edge technologies driving effortless collaboration

Webex includes powerful cognitive collaboration features that make meetings more engaging and productive. **Dr Keith Griffin**, distinguished engineer at Cisco Collaboration Group, guides us through them

Noise detection and suppression
Cognitive collaboration is a term we use to collectively describe artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML), and how these technologies can be used in specific, practical ways to make our work lives more engaging and productive.

Noise detection and suppression is one example of how this approach works in practice. We've all had a video meeting where the background noise becomes distracting, be it a keyboard clicking, a dog barking, paper rustling or an emergency vehicle siren. It turns out that background noise can affect your concentration, so we began to wonder if there was any way of solving the issue.

We ended up training a ML model to detect background noise during a Webex meeting and prompt the user to mute their microphone if they have called into the meeting room from their computer. In fact, Webex can even suppress some common noises automatically. It's a small feature but an extremely useful one – especially now more of us are working from home.

Relationship intelligence
Do you research the people you're meeting before the meeting takes place? Perhaps you have pre-meeting discussions with colleagues on the participants' work backgrounds and project roles?

Although it's useful to know a bit more about the people you're interacting with, this kind of research takes up valuable time. Lengthy roundtable introductions at the start of the meeting itself can also undermine people's engagement. And holding all the information on the participants in your mind, while trying to concentrate on what's being said, can prove challenging too.

Our People Insights tool solves these problems. During a Webex meeting you can quickly view participant profiles populated with information gathered from publicly available sources.

This means you can head into every meeting with confidence, knowing that everything from someone's work history to the latest news on their company is at your fingertips.

Automated meeting transcription
Automated meeting transcription is another highly useful tool that's included in the Webex platform. Once enabled, you can view a transcript of everything that's been discussed in a meeting while playing back the recording of it. And our voice-activated Webex Assistant can even take notes, make highlights and create action items for follow up.

It's a particularly useful feature for distributed workforces, allowing team members across different time zones to quickly see the highlights and outcomes of a meeting that occurred overnight. But even when you're in the same time zone as your colleagues, the ability to quickly review the key points of a meeting is a big productivity booster.

We've also just rolled out a live transcription service to make meetings even more efficient. And we're working on a translation service too, which will add further support for globally distributed teams and make it easier for enterprises to employ the best talent from around the world.

Computer vision
Webex includes computer vision technology that allows it to recognise meeting participants and even track the active speaker. This means you can move around your environment just as if all the participants were in an office meeting room, making for more engaging experiences that effortlessly blend the physical and the digital.

Face detection technology also allows us to provide every Webex device user with an accurate count of all the meeting participants. In future, this technology could provide information on the distance between participants in a physical meeting room,

> **We're transparent about our data usage policies and we focused on data privacy right from the beginning of the development phase**

thereby ensuring they remain a safe distance apart if and when social distancing is required.

Despite these benefits, we know terms like facial recognition often spark privacy concerns and that's something we take extremely seriously. We're transparent about our data usage policies and we focused on data privacy right from the beginning of the development phase. It's therefore an integral part of our platform rather than an afterthought.

Intelligent assistants
If you ask our Webex Assistant to call someone, it will use natural language processing to figure out exactly who you mean, even if they're one of several contacts with the same name.

Webex's Proactive Join feature also allows Webex Room devices to identify people via their smartphone when they walk into a meeting room. Our intelligent assistant will then say: "Hey, your meeting is coming up. Would you like me to start it?" The user simply has to say "yes" and the assistant will take care of the rest, thereby ensuring everyone is ready to start on time.

And while we initially designed our conversational AI with productivity in mind, it also means no one has to pick up a device or touch a screen during the current crisis to start their meeting. All they need to do is speak. ●

THE REMOTE EXPERIENCE

The world of work may be forever changed by the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, not least when it comes to working from home. As businesses and employees continue to operate remotely, we surveyed over 500 of our readers, employees, journalists and social followers in an effort to understand what they do and don't like about working remotely and what will need to change in the future for this to become a functioning part of everyday life

WHO WE ASKED

Region
London – 39%
Non-London UK – 37%
Non-UK Europe – 11%
North America – 7%
Asia – 3%
Africa – 1%
South America – 1%
Oceania – 1%

Sector
Arts, entertainment and recreation – 5%
Consulting – 13%
Education – 8%
Finance – 14%
Not for profit – 5%
PR, marketing and communications – 24%
Science and technology – 15%
Other – 14%

Londoners worked from home (WFH) the least frequently before lockdown but have greatest appetite going forward...

WORKING FROM HOME PRE AND POST-LOCKDOWN

○ WFH more than one day per week before lockdown
● Desire to WFH more in future

London: 11% / 91%
UK ex. London: 38% / 79%
Global average: 24% / 86%
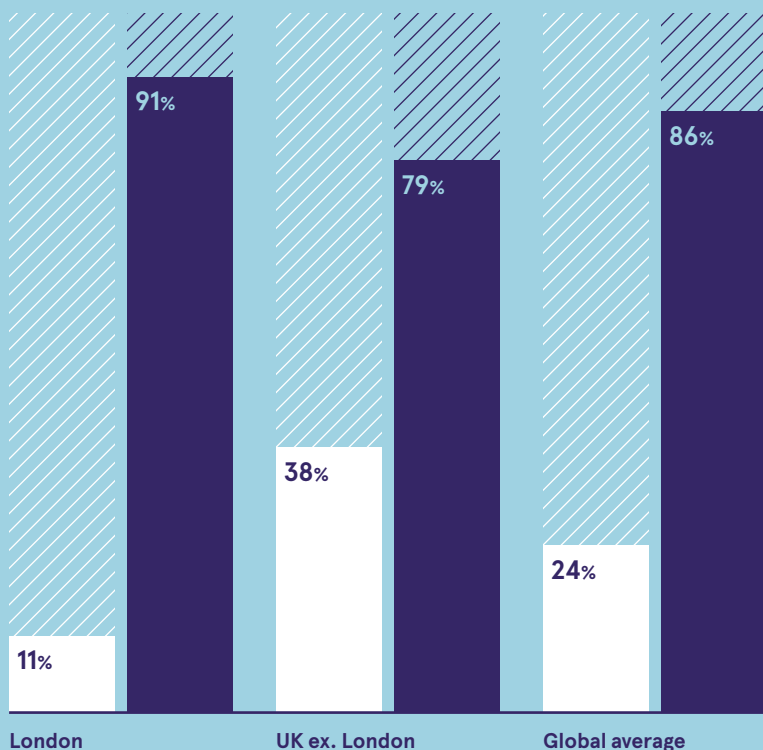
53%
would like to WFH for two to three days per week following lockdown

3%
37%
42%
1%
36%
4%
29%
4%

26%

11
13
10
9

1 i

TOP BENEFIT OF WORKING F

● Being more productive

● Better work-life balance overall

⊖ Other

GLOBAL AVERAGE

UK – LONDON

UK – EXCLUDING LONDON

OTHER

7%

12%

12%

7%

8%

10%

27%

5%

3 work to a higher standard when WFH

FROM HOME

- ○ Better for my mental health and wellbeing
- ○ Not having to commute
- ● Spending less money

27%

30%

28%

⊞ • **1** in **5**
say WFH impacts their mental health and/or increases loneliness

HOURS WORKED WHILE WFH

● More hours   ● The same hours   ● The same hours, but different times   ○ Fewer hours

More hours	The same hours	The same hours, but different times	Fewer hours
26%	26%	35%	13%

Arts, entertainment and recreation

40%	25%	18%	16%

Consulting

11%	11%	11%	30%

Education

27%	32%	35%	6%

Finance

13%	22%	48%	17%

Not for profit

45%	25%	26%	4%

PR, marketing and communications

48%	19%	27%	6%

Science and technology

33%	31%	23%	13%

Other

53% identify a need to set up strict parameters around working hours

Despite this, there is belief that WFH can be made to work...

VIABILITY OF BUSINESS MODEL IF EVERYONE WORKED FROM HOME

● Not viable   ● Viable with adaptation   ○ Viable

Not viable	Viable with adaptation	Viable
39%	30%	30%

Arts, entertainment and recreation

11%	53%	36%

Consulting

54%	30%	16%

Education

8%	58%	35%

Finance

17%	35%	48%

Not for profit

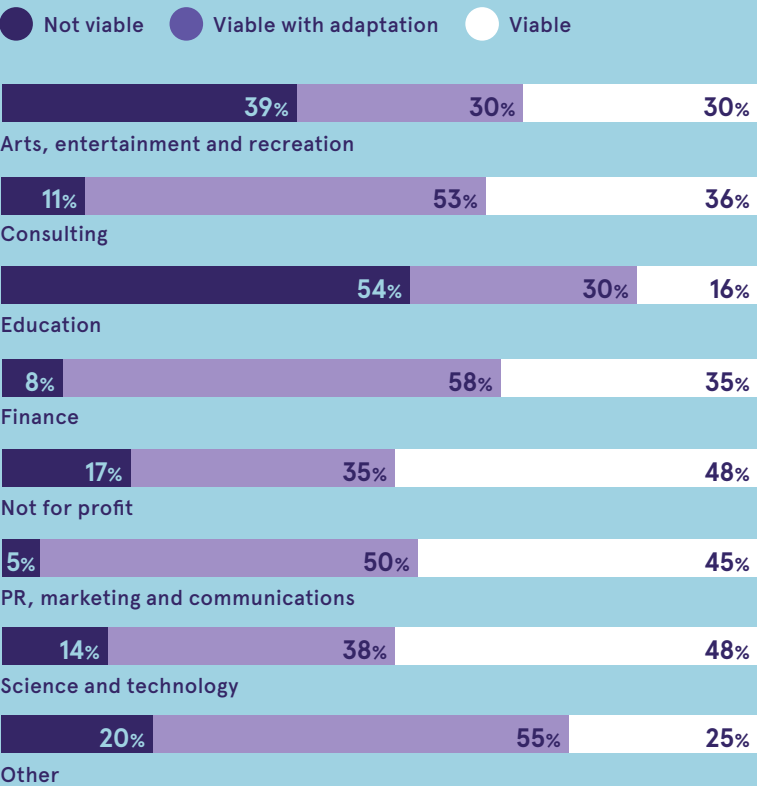| 5%	50%	45%

PR, marketing and communications

14%	38%	48%

Science and technology

20%	55%	25%

Other

83% believe their company's business model could be made to work if everyone WFH

Sergiy Trofimov Photography/Getty Images

ONBOARDING REMOTE TALENT

UK survey of employees about looking for work remotely

	Agree	Unsure	Disagree
I think a video interview would be more stressful than an in-person one	22%	43%	35%
With the right insights such as photos, videos and culture interviews, I am likely to accept a job without visiting the office	72%	23%	5%
I would be comfortable accepting a job without meeting any of the team in person	70%	18%	13%

Hired Inc 2020

TALENT

Your ladder out of the crisis

While many companies have ceased hiring, people have never been more important to an organisation, pushing training, talent management and employee wellbeing to the top of the agenda

Rachel Muller-Heyndyk

The coronavirus pandemic has presented challenges that have forced leaders to think long term and act quickly in every part of their organisation.

Talent management is no exception, with bold action needed to provide long-term growth. In early-June, almost nine million workers were furloughed in the UK alone. While the country grapples with an entirely new way of working life, this unexpected influx of talent in the remote workforce could provide a needed boost to talent management strategy.

For the companies that are hiring, Godelieve van Dooren, partner at Mercer, says it's no time to cut back on talent. "With the uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 crisis, some organisations may be taking stringent measures to manage their current costs, however they cannot be short-sighted in their approach," she says.

"They must consider the resources needed to ensure the organisation can rebound to growth post-crisis."

For businesses that have long been seeking a change in talent management, the rise of the remote workforce could offer a more globalised, diverse talent pool.

To achieve this, it's vital human resources use the data at hand to understand their talent supply. This involves taking a close look at the skills, capabilities and experience within the workforce. From there, organisations can devise a talent management strategy based on the skills needed to take them through the crisis and look at ways of opening up the hiring process to get the very best.

Despite high living costs and expensive commutes, the promise of a wider range of job opportunities and higher earnings has meant a disproportionate amount of resources has remained concentrated in city centres. This has created extraordinary wealth for some and stark, entrenched inequalities for many more.
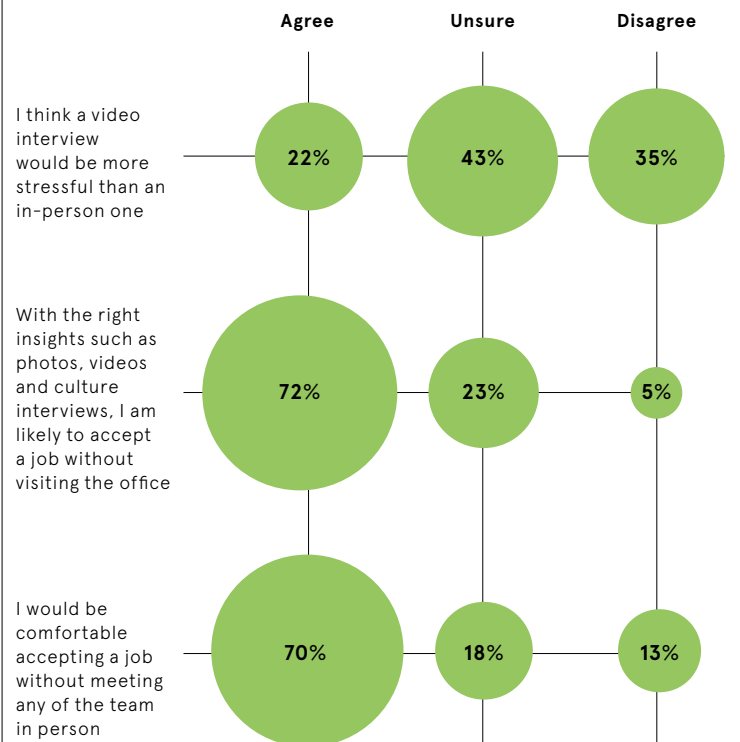
Unequal distribution between cities and rural areas has created a postcode lottery for access to skills, training and employment. The *2019 Social Mobility Index* found moving regions could shift social mobility, but that people from

affluent backgrounds are 70 per cent more likely to move regions than those from working-class beginnings and three times more likely to move to London.

Meanwhile, just 31 per cent of people living in North-East England felt there were good opportunities to make progress in their careers, compared with 74 per cent in the South East and 78 per cent of Londoners. There's a clear moral and strategic need for talent management and HR professionals to address the regional skills gap.

But as the COVID-19 outbreak sees thousands leave the world's capitals and set up office at home, could we see a shift away from mega cities? Darren Murph, head of remote at GitLab, says remote working provides an opportunity to level the playing field and operate a new strategy in talent management.

"Remote work has opened up a global talent pool for us and new opportunities for dedicated people who may not be in a position to move to advance their career," he says. "We believe remote work can reverse rural depopulation, make communities less transitory and spread opportunity to underserved areas."

The company has recently publicised their experiences as a way to support other organisations looking to expand their talent pool through remote working. They've highlighted that implementing a company handbook, taking a stripped down, accessible approach towards remote working software and technology, as well as strong leadership, are all key to rolling out mass remote working during a crisis.

Removing long commutes for employees can also dramatically improve work-life balance and overall mental health, and management can benefit from the increased productivity as a result.

The rise in remote working has also created new opportunities for

learning and development, which acts as a pillar in talent management for attracting and retaining employees beyond the pandemic.

While some companies are cutting back on learning and development, others are using this moment to increase their investment in training. Earl's Restaurant chain, a family-owned premium casual dining chain of 68 restaurants in the United States and Canada, is investing in virtual learning not just for Earl's leadership team, but for all of its 6,500-strong workforce.

There's also a window of opportunity to provide a more cohesive learning and development strategy for employees globally. Four thousand employees at BBVA bank in Spain and Argentina have access to a "campus wallet", an open platform providing courses and training. The company also recently held a virtual hackathon, which was accessed by one thousand of its employees across seven different global locations.

"We now have a unique opportunity to rethink and redesign the way we work. Not just work methods, but talent management in general: how we attract and retain talent, and how we can conceive talent in the most decentralised way, not pinned on certain physical locations," says Ricardo Forcano, global head of engineering and organisation at BBVA.

Rapid digitalisation, skills shortages and retaining a global workforce were all issues surrounding talent management long before the crisis. In a few short months, organisations have no longer been able to afford the time to ponder what this might mean for the future of work. While there's no clear way out of the crisis, implementing a talent management strategy that keeps the wellbeing of workers at its core is a good place to start. ●

> "
> **We have a unique opportunity to rethink and redesign the way we work. Not just work methods, but talent management in general**

Coronavirus ushers in a new age for contact centres

Contact centres had to adapt rapidly to life in lockdown, but their insights could open up new opportunities for improving interaction and working remotely in the digital age

O f all the businesses impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, it is perhaps those with large contact centres that have had to adapt the fastest. In a matter of a few short days, organisations, which traditionally always gathered agents in one location to service customer queries, suddenly had to enable everybody to work from home.

And with demand for some contact centres, such as in banks, hitting unprecedented levels, they had to attempt to do all this with no interruption to their response rates.

The operational challenge of moving contact centres into people's homes is enormous and that's before even looking at the impact on customer satisfaction (CSAT) scores. Loyalty takes a long time to build, but can be lost in an instant. Contact centres typically arrange hundreds of agents in groups of 12 or 15, with a team leader dishing out work.

BUSINESSES USING OUR CUSTOMER INTERACTION SOFTWARE HAVE SEEN:

270%
improvement in colleague productivity gains

15%
decrease in operational costs

35%
increase in first contact resolution rates

50%
increase in AOV

175%
increase in advisor productivity, from eight emails processed per hour previously, to twenty two emails per hour

With home working, however, the visual environmental awareness making that tick disappears. Agents rely on access to notes or knowledge bases, often have to entertain kids in between calls and find it difficult to signal for assistance or escalate an issue.

"I've seen a real mixture of responses to COVID-19, though I've been surprised by just how badly many contact centres have been prepared," says Mark Chamberlain, chief technology officer at Lokulus, which provides intelligent digital solutions that support and streamline customer interactions.

"Most business continuity plans were focused on moving to a different environment because of a flood or power outage, not working from home. The unpreparedness is actually across the larger companies as well as the small ones."

Contact centres that were already on a journey to digitalising their customer interactions prior to the pandemic, leveraging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and robotic process automation (RPA), have fared much better. Lokulus's automation tools, in particular, have proven hugely valuable, not only helping companies to manage major spikes in volumes coming in, but also enabling a seamless transition to remote working.

Lokulus utilises AI and RPA to manage customer interactions through three bots, which work equally well whether 600 agents are in a single contact centre or 600 different homes. REG, its resourcing agent, takes on the role of team leader, deciding who to give the work to and not just a group of 12 or 15 agents, but the entire agent workforce.

Armed with real-time information on who's doing what and when they are likely to become available, and an ability to categorise staff based on their skills, REG uses decision rules to ensure each interaction is directed to where it will be dealt with best.

CAL, Lokulus's classification agent, automatically categorises and prioritises incoming queries. With AI, the bot can identify the nature of emails and texts before assigning them to REG or, if needed, a human. Customers with simple non-transactional queries, such as 'is your store still open?', can be pushed to the website to self-serve. And during the pandemic, customers can be told that only certain inquiries are being answered.

Completing the trio is FLO, the workflow agent. FLO automates repetitive and low-level processes and ensures a bot or human picks up jobs at the right stage of the customer journey. For example, over half of contact centre queries are typically basic requests for an update on an order, and a significant amount of time is spent simply verifying a customer's identity and locating that order. FLO can handle this verification process and only passes the query on to a human if there is a more complicated element to it.

"RPA is great for taking on a single task because it's able to replicate what a human would do but much faster," says Chamberlain. "We stack RPA in an end-to-end way, one after the other, so that once one query is completed, depending on the outcome, it will either proceed straight to the next task or pass it to a human if needed. So FLO may do task one, task two and task three, but task four requires human input so it is pushed to an agent, then it moves on to task five and so on. It takes the pressure out of their job."

While many organisations in the first wave of AI and RPA deployments saw automation as an opportunity to reduce human capital costs, the greater value has proven to be the ability to free humans from the mundane. Instead, they can focus their efforts on work that creates more value for the business. This has given birth to "super-agents" who can sit anywhere in the business and give spot advice on specific topics when needed.

"A lot of people hear AI and robotics and think they're replacing humans, but our technology is most effective as a way of freeing humans to spend more time on higher-value work," Chamberlain adds. "Improving your relationship with customers is so much more powerful than just looking at processing a task as a blunt instrument that can reduce human input. If you allow humans to use the time robotics has saved them to improve CSAT scores or upsell and cross sell, you're retaining customers and growing revenue."

As businesses enter a new normal post-COVID-19, the impact on contact centres is likely to be long lasting. While centralised offices will certainly open again, the pandemic has shown that, with the right tools in hand, contact centres can operate as productively with agents working from home. This will not only see more contact centres embrace flexible-working arrangements as they continue to modernise their customer interaction channels, but it could also see some begin to embrace the gig economy.

"As long as an agent commits to, say, four hours in a day, it doesn't matter what time they work because REG will always be there to do the resource allocation," says Chamberlain.

"Our robotic agents can cope with people coming on and off work when they choose, opening the opportunity for somewhat of an Uber for contact centres. As soon as you come online, our engine will start pushing work to you and measuring your productivity. It knows how many hours you've done. If it sees that some SLAs [service-level agreements] are going to be breached, it can message agents, asking them to come online. The opportunities are huge, but contact centres need to first take the step to digitalising their interactions."

> "Most business continuity plans were focused on moving to a different environment because of a flood or power outage, not working from home

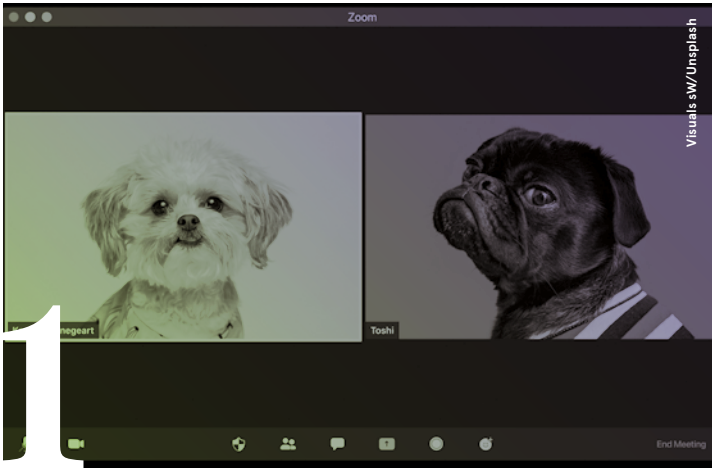For more information please visit
lokulus.com/remote

LOKULUS

How to handle human resources issues remotely

Meeting face to face has always been an important part of human resources, but with the coronavirus crisis companies are having to reimagine how processes work in a remote HR world

Mark Frary

Recruitment

When many people are being furloughed or made redundant, recruitment is probably the last thing on the minds of human resources directors. Yet crises always mean some sectors get busier – healthcare and supermarkets in this crisis – and companies are using video conferencing to recruit.

Alastair Cleland, managing director of specialist recruitment company Pentasia, says online casino platforms and the esports sector have been continuing to recruit too. Pentasia's clients include Inspired Gaming, who produced the virtual Grand National, and FSB Technologies, who ran the Remote Darts League.

Cleland says that in some industry sectors not doing interviews face to face is becoming the norm anyway, its IT recruitment division in Barcelona does this routinely. In part this is to allow HR departments to review more candidates in a shorter time, but also to reduce pre-hire travel.

He says there are also some very good candidates on the market at the moment because of the crisis.

Claire McCartney, senior policy adviser at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), says companies need to ensure they are assessing and comparing people fairly in this new world. "If you can record the interview, you can compare and contrast candidates effectively. Also, some people are going to be more comfortable in front of a camera than others and you need to make allowances for this."

Inductions and employee onboarding

Meeting new workmates and having the coffee machine pointed out is one of many things that has had to change as remote HR strategies develop.

CIPD's McCartney says: "You need to put in extra support to make new hires feel part of the team." This could include sending out a digital handbook to get them up to speed and giving remote access to the intranet. "It is important for line managers to make sure they set tasks for new hires and schedule in regular one-to-one meetings to help address any issues," she says.

Pentasia's Cleland adds: "We have just had an offer for a very senior role in Berlin accepted and they are going to onboard and induct that person remotely. The client has agreed to start the employee remotely and relocation will happen in the next few months."

Lawyer firm Pinsent Masons' director of HR and learning Jonathan Bond says: "I normally run an offsite day for new partners and there are group workshops, time to speak with senior partners and a nice dinner. We can't do that this year. I am running one on Microsoft Teams and have various innovations and I think they will get just as much from it despite not getting the networking in the evening."

Training

Learning and development could easily fall off the radar in this time of crisis, but many companies are looking to virtual learning to support their remote HR efforts.

"It is really important to make content interactive and short bite-sized learning is best when doing training virtually," says CIPD's McCartney. "You should encourage people to interact with one and other, otherwise they are going to switch off. We know that a lot of people are experiencing fatigue from back-to-back virtual meetings at the moment."

Jaime Debono, managing director of iGaming Academy, which trains some 30,000 staff online worldwide every year, says: "We now provide an extensive catalogue of live webinars ranging from multi-jurisdictional compliance to vocational courses such as virtual sportsbook or casino management and introduction to iGaming and customer relationship management, which are ideal for businesses looking to upskill their staff during these times.
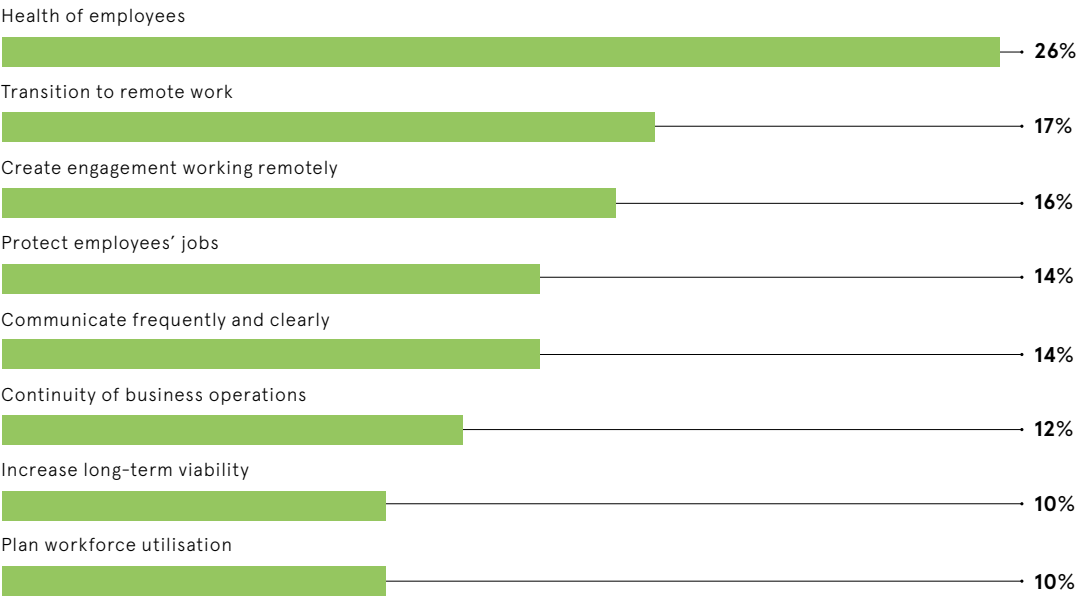
Pinsent Masons has been experimenting with technology in other ways. In 2019, it introduced the concept of virtual work experience and internships for would-be solicitors.

Peter Daly, principal lawyer at employment law firm Slater and Gordon, warns the current crisis might create unintended age discrimination. He says: "There is very little professional training that doesn't involve face-to-face conversations. In law, trainee solicitors learn their job by following a trained solicitor doing their job for up to two years. If this can't be done, you have to find a way around that or you end up in a situation where university leavers and people at the beginning of their careers are potentially being disadvantaged." ●

TOP ISSUES ON HR DEPARTMENTS' MINDS

Survey of HR professionals conducted during the first week of April

Issue	%
Health of employees	26%
Transition to remote work	17%
Create engagement working remotely	16%
Protect employees' jobs	14%
Communicate frequently and clearly	14%
Continuity of business operations	12%
Increase long-term viability	10%
Plan workforce utilisation	10%

Josh Bersin/Culture X 2020

Chris Benson/Unsplash

4

Appraisals and salary reviews

"It is really important to have regular check-ins, particularly during this crisis," says CIPD's McCartney. "Managers need to make sure they are asking open-ended questions and making sure people are OK as we know mental health issues are coming through."

Many HR directors had already realised that it isn't wise for problems to fester for a year and video conferencing has made regular reviews easier.

Discussions on salaries have also become another potential remote HR problem, but this can be navigated, says Pinsent Masons' Bond.

"During the lockdown period, the board asked me to devise a scheme to save costs because our revenues were predicted to turn sharply down for the next three months. We created the Together Plan and asked everyone to voluntarily sign up to a 20 per cent pay decrease for several months with the first £20,000 of income exempt to protect lower earners. In return for the 20 per cent pay cut, everyone has gone on to an 80 per cent working week," he says.

"To deliver that we had to get consent. We had a number of webinars and then followed up with their line manager and gave access to an online portal. Over 98 per cent of our people signed up to it. That proved anything is possible."

Charles Deluvio/Unsplash

5

Disciplinaries

Crisis or not, some relationships between employees and employers are destined to turn sour.

But Slater and Gordon's Daly says that, if anything, working from home has made disciplinary meetings more palatable.

"I am advising clients who are having to do these meetings through Microsoft Teams and Zoom, and they have preferred to do things with video conferencing rather than in person. Very often, being in the room with the HR director, particularly if it is a disciplinary or a grievance procedure, is unpleasant," he says.

It is enshrined in legislation that people have the right to be accompanied in certain HR procedures, but that has had to change. Daly says: "The only problem is what does the accompanier do other than be a face on the screen. They can't sit with them and offer physical or moral support. What they can do is help them prepare, give feedback and take notes."

Daly says the ability to record video meetings could be useful and online platforms do inform users when they are being recorded. "Handwritten meeting notes very often become a significant point of contention, particularly if it reaches an employment tribunal. Where it becomes a recorded conversation, it is in everyone's best interests," he concludes. ●

Commercial feature

Virtual assistants will power the future workforce

In the digi-sphere, chatbots powered by artificial intelligence are everywhere

Mainly used for improving customer service, virtual assistants now have the potential to transform how organisations work internally. Remote working is fuelling their use. The blended workforce, where humans and bots work together, could eventually outperform those that don't deploy them.

"The current crisis has made many realise they need to access their work resources from anywhere, easily and intelligently, as if they were searching on Google, whether it's a holiday form from human resources or a pricing sheet from finance. These requests were easier when everyone was in the office. Now these tasks can be fully automated and delivered remotely," says Angus Gregory, chief executive of Biomni, a UK company that's been at the forefront of software development for 20 years.

"Employees now want to search corporate content and share knowledge instantly with colleagues to boost productivity. Yet endless portals and static documents are difficult to navigate. Increasingly workers want to be able to self-serve, self-help and make their own choices at work, like they do in their digitalised personal lives, with browsing for services on Amazon or chatting on WhatsApp. A virtual employee assistant can now answer this need."

The workplace has changed radically over the last five years and by 2022 more than 70 per cent of white-collar workers will interact with conversational platforms, according to Gartner. "This research was done before the coronavirus pandemic hit. I suspect this threshold has already been reached," says Gregory.

Gartner's *2019 CIO Survey* also proclaimed that chief information officers believe chatbots are one of the most significant artificial intelligence-based applications to be used by enterprises. One of the key reasons for deploying a chatbot internally is cost. If you call an IT help desk, for instance, the average cost is £12 per interaction, according to Gartner, yet many requests are repetitive and avoidable.

It's not just IT, as contacting a real person in HR or finance also sucks up valuable company time and resources. That's because in many organisations knowledge exists in islands and is dispersed. Finding information is not always easy.

"Deploying a virtual assistant can be one answer. It makes sense for organisations to leverage and unlock their internal resources, as well as hidden knowledge. It's their number-one resource after talent. Chatbots can build intelligence into these processes, levelling the information asymmetrically within a corporation so everyone benefits," says Gregory, whose company delivers IT solutions for T-Systems, Cognizant and Fidelity Investments among others.

"Recently, natural-language processing has improved tremendously, which means bots can make sense of employee searches very efficiently now, even understanding human sentiment. Unstructured data can also be referenced into bite-sized chunks so it's searchable, while artificial intelligence and other cognitive services can learn from how employees use the bot and answer requests more efficiently."

This comes at a time when organisations are seeing the rise of a new persona in the workplace: the business consumer. This is an employee who wants to be as productive as possible, uses whichever platform is fastest at getting the job done. They don't want to be bogged down by corporate processes and have a nomadic existence when it comes to working habits. This group is able to be as effective in the office, on a train or at home and they are thriving in the current climate.

"Business consumers tend to make consumer-like choices when it comes to navigating internal systems, the intranet and computing environment they operate in for work. They are very conscious of using their own initiative and have a willingness to help others. This persona find chatbots incredibly useful, but more importantly they're looking for virtual assistance more than anything else," says Gregory.

To date, some big organisations and multinational companies around the

> ❝
> **We think it's a good time to launch a new virtual employee assistant that's affordable and easy to use**

globe have already built internal virtual assistants. These have been at great cost in terms of developer time and effort. There are also bot services where the licensing can be expensive or there's a need to invest significant resources to set up and maintain the chatbot over time. Big tech players are in on the act too.

"We want to make virtual assistants easy to use and accessible for all organisations; these could be much smaller businesses, public organisations, even schools. It shouldn't be as difficult as

some vendors make it out to be. Virtual assistants should also bring about immediate gain, with no pain, when it comes to setting them up. This is why we developed Tenjin," says Gregory.

"A virtual assistant used effectively within a business can empower staff. An effective virtual assistant can also offer up precise answers to common questions and bring up any resources instantly, 24/7, 365 days of the year; the virtual assistant does not rack up an hourly rate. It can also be integrated into other collaborative software from Microsoft Teams to Slack."

The COVID-19 crisis saw the office environment evaporate and the seizing up of support by phone as workforces dispersed. But it also saw the need to maintain internal communications within an organisation and how important that two-way dialogue is to maintain morale.

"The pandemic has made organisations realise they too need to interact with employees. Virtual assistant technology can initiate this, share policy changes when remote working,

promote wellbeing and mental health with push notifications. COVID-19 has changed the paradigm for virtual assistants. Business leaders must prepare now for this shift as it becomes mainstream. A lot has changed recently," says Gregory.

"We think it's a good time to launch a new virtual employee assistant that's affordable and easy to use. With Tenjin, we've masked all the back-end complexity so businesses can just plug and play, creating a chatbot within minutes. It's all about improving the flow of information within an organisation. If it makes workers happier, more productive and more empowered, that can only be a good thing."

To find out more about Tenjin and remote working please go to biomni.com

$15

average cost to IT help desks per interaction from the business it supports, many of which are repeatable and avoidable

70%

of white-collar workers will interact with a conversational platform on a daily basis by 2022

Gartner

biomni

CYBERSECURITY

Using the crisis as a cybersecurity opportunity

Organisations across the world are finding themselves newly vulnerable to cybercriminals looking to exploit mass uncertainty, but this could be just the push needed to transform cybersecurity

Nick Easen

With a minute's countdown to a crucial video conference, a remote worker will click on any link that gets them into a meeting on time. Yet that's the trojan horse criminals are using to breach defences during the coronavirus pandemic. People aren't the only ones being infected; devices are too, with COVID-19-themed phishing and malware. It's no wonder cybersecurity is now topping the business-risk agenda.

"This new work-from-home experience makes everyone vulnerable, especially because threats are harder to track over personal home networks," explains Chris Boyd, lead intelligence analyst at Malwarebytes. The rapid shift to a distributed workforce has been a golden opportunity for cybercriminals, even coining a new phrase – Zoom bombing – where video calls are hacked.

23%

of global cybersecurity professionals surveyed in April say cyber incidents experienced by their organisation have increased since transitioning to remote work

81%

said their organisations view security as an essential function at this time

(ISC)² 2020

In March alone, the UK's National Cyber Security Centre removed 2,000 online scams related to the pandemic, including 555 malware and 200 phishing sites. "This is why IT teams are rethinking the levels of oversight they have over network activity, especially as it now takes place across so many more disparate devices and locations," says Carl Leonard, principal security analyst at Forcepoint.

Digital assets are now sprawled across many soft targets, rather than a handful of centralised harder ones; it means the business risk is greater. "It's currently open season for criminals. Distracted, afraid, frustrated, confused and isolated from colleagues, it would be impressive if we found a way to make remote workers into easier targets for cyberattacks than they are right now," says Dr Patrick Scolyer-Gray, associate research fellow in cybersecurity at Melbourne's Deakin University.

Faced with this threat, companies are waking up to the risk of remote working. Password-less technologies are now more prevalent, as is multi-factor authentication. One-time password tokens and biometrics are also being implemented. "User behavioural analytics, which leverages artificial intelligence, can establish a baseline of normal behaviour for individual devices and create a new layer of security," says Ronan David, vice president of strategy at EfficientIP. "Many companies have also expanded their reliance on the cloud, whether in-house or third party. But as an increasing number of apps and devices connect to the cloud, they become harder to keep track of."

It helps that businesses are rolling out cyber-resilience plans that highlight digital hygiene to employees. Remote workers are required to stay alert, do some training and take a more proactive approach when it comes to cyber-threats. "The fact is many employees are just not that vigilant around security when at home compared to when at work; it's an issue," says Phillip Larbey, managing principal for Europe, Middle East and Africa at Verizon Enterprise Solutions.

But let's not forget remote working is not a new phenomenon; security experts were prepared, but the sheer scale of those doing it is novel. "Basic security principles haven't changed. What has is the need for everyone in a business to know how to apply them right now," says Amanda Finch, chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Information Security.

"This democratisation of security across the whole organisation is likely to become the great change in the coming months and years, as organisations recognise cybersecurity culture has to be embedded in the individual not the environment. There will also be a need to do more with less."

Security budgets are feeling the pinch from COVID-19 as enterprises tighten their belts to get through this period, despite pleas from the Cybersecurity Tech Accord not to compromise on cybersecurity and

47%

of cyber professionals have been taken off some or all of their typical security duties to assist with other IT-related tasks, such as equipping a mobile workforce

15%

indicated their information security teams do not have the resources they need to support a remote workforce

(ISC)² 2020

to see it as an investment, not a cost. But with a recession inevitable, budgets for, say, upgrading to cloud-based services with enhanced security or getting in third parties to mitigate business risk are unlikely to be forthcoming.

"However, you can expect zero-trust network architectures, where employees are only provided with the level of access to data and systems needed to perform their role, to become more prominent over time," Ollie Whitehouse, global chief technology officer at NCC Group, points out.

The big question is whether data privacy and compliance will be compromised with dwindling budgets and a dispersed workforce, even though the General Data Protection Regulation and fierce fines still loom large. But the regulator, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), is sympathetic.

"We acknowledge our responsibility to take into account these exceptional circumstances. We've set out the flexibility the law gives us to be a pragmatic and empathetic regulator. We also confirm our efforts will be focused on the greatest threats," the ICO says.

As fallout from the pandemic continues, the ICO will no doubt experience a growth in its workload. What's also likely to come out of this, as the business risk of remote working and access to digital resources continues, is a much more vibrant identity management industry. It will move to centre stage for all operations and security will be firmly on the C-suite agenda.

"Coronavirus is unlikely to be the last of these types of crises, therefore strong user enrolment, identity verification and authentication will be essential to ensure the resilience of any enterprise in the future," says Mathew Newfield, chief information security officer at Unisys.

Once remote working is truly established as a major part of an employee's existence, no longer novel or a work in progress, regulators as well as enterprises will have to hold this way of working to account in terms of business risk, cybersecurity and data breaches in exactly the same way it does for office-based work.

"Unfortunately, there's no privacy and cybersecurity pixie dust that can be sprinkled on organisations to ease their woes," says Dr Zulfikar Ramzan, chief technology officer at RSA Security. "The good thing is the pandemic has been the single greatest accelerant for digital transformation in recent times. This can also be accompanied by a security transformation." ●

> **"** The pandemic has been the single greatest accelerant for digital transformation and can be accompanied by a security transformation

Global responses to the new WFH era

From Tallinn to Ho Chi Minh City, people are adapting to the new normal of working from home. Here's the experience of five cities

Alex Wilson

As governments around the world turn to quarantines and lockdowns to control the coronavirus pandemic, businesses have been forced to transform and embrace a new remote-work culture. For some, this has meant accelerating the implementation of existing plans. For many others, it's meant scrambling to adjust as established ways of working become all but impossible to maintain.

But where in the world are workers adapting to remote working the best? Who is struggling the most? What are the lessons that can be learnt? And perhaps most importantly, what are the warnings that need heeding?

Michael Kraus / EyeEm/Getty Images

Lagos, Nigeria: overcoming obstacles

Leaving the office behind has caused headaches for many business leaders, but for entrepreneurs in Nigeria, building a remote-work culture in a country where infrastructure has not always kept up with economic development presents its own obstacles.

"There are two major challenges," says Charles Dairo, founder of CKDigital, a digital marketing agency based in Lagos. "One is power. There are a couple of places that have stable electricity, but there are lots of places that don't, so when team members are in those areas that don't have constant power supply, they find it very difficult to work. Second is internet. Generally in Nigeria internet connectivity isn't a problem; the challenge is the speed. So you have some connections that are really bad and make it frustrating to try and work online."

But for the enterprising businessman, there is always a fix. "For electricity, the solution is using a generator," says Dairo. "Even before the pandemic, almost every Nigerian home has a generator because we know what the power situation is like. Some other people use sources of renewable energy like solar," The entrepreneur also suggests that workers struggling with Nigeria's unpredictable internet speeds can rely on their mobile data as a back-up.

While remote working is a recent change for most Nigerian companies, Dairo and his team made the switch more than three years ago. After staff were growing increasingly frustrated with Lagos's famously hellish traffic, the company started to allow its staff to work remotely one or two days a week. Once they saw the change was working, they decided to take the plunge and go remote full time.

Dairo is confident that Nigeria's bout of forced remote working will have a long-lasting legacy, despite the challenges. "Before the pandemic, if someone asked for a meeting in this region, it wasn't common to say 'can we have this over Zoom?'. You couldn't say that earlier because the average business owner wasn't open to that option. But now, even after the pandemic, more people will be open to it because they've tried it and they see it works."

Mumbai, India: empowering women working from home

For much of Indian society, working in the home is an unremarkable part of everyday life. The houses of some of the country's poorest workers have long doubled-up as small-scale recycling centres or tanneries, while in recent years the widespread adoption of the internet has allowed housewives to supplement their family income through remote jobs, such as data entry or online selling.

In contrast, the office is typically the place of more prestigious and higher-paid work. But as the COVID-19 pandemic shutters offices across the country, some are worried the association of home working with less prestigious jobs will mean women's professional work will not be taken seriously if moved into the home.

"A huge mindset change is required for people to start looking at remote jobs as really serious jobs that require time, effort and mindspace, and not as something women just do to keep themselves occupied," says Gayatri Krishnamoorthy, a Mumbai-based software professional who has worked remotely for the past four years.

She thinks employers across the country can do more to help women who are having to work remotely and is concerned that in India's patriarchal society working women will be expected to be available for housework as long as they are physically located in the home. This could mean women are asked to juggle cooking, childcare and transportation with a full day of professional work, dramatically increasing the labour expected of them.

Krishnamoorthy argues that as part of their remote-work culture, companies must make sure benefits like childcare continue to be provided and should also consider reducing the hours female employees are expected to be online.

When it comes to how much importance they have in the home, the amount women are paid is also significant. In particular, Krishnamoorthy believes that closing India's extremely high gender pay gap is crucial to making sure women's jobs are respected when done remotely.

"The reason why a lot of these so-called 'work from home' jobs are not taken seriously is because women are paid a pittance for it," she says. "When women start earning as much as men, they're going to be taken seriously."

Alex Robinson Photography/Getty Images

Tallinn, Estonia: building a digital society

When it comes to working online, there is arguably no city or country in the world with a better head-start than Tallinn, capital of Estonia. Facing a lack of cash and manpower after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early-1990s, the small Baltic nation decided to embrace digital transformation. Decades later, initiatives including paperless prescriptions, electronic tax declarations and digital signatures have made Estonia arguably the most advanced digital society in the world.

So how is life in Estonia easier for businesses needing to work remotely? "What sets us apart is that in terms of signing contracts, signing memorandums of understanding, all those legally binding things that usually require a notary can be done online without any issues in Estonia," says Florian Marcus, a digital transformation adviser at e-Estonia, an organisation promoting the country's digital transformation.

As a German national who also runs his own business in Estonia, Marcus has experienced the advantages of Estonia's digital bureaucracy first-hand. "We recently moved house and my Dad asked me whether I need some sort of big shelf for paper folders or something and I said 'I have books. I have no other paper in the house' because there are no forms."

The country also offers a pioneering e-residency programme, allowing businesses to be based in Estonia without a physical presence in the country. There are currently more than 69,000 digital residents of Estonia, located all over the world. E-residency has become popular with British entrepreneurs wanting to maintain a presence inside the European Union, but it's notable that the second largest group of foreign digital residents are Germans, already in the EU but attracted by Estonia's digitalised bureaucracy and lack of red tape.

Allowing companies to manage their businesses almost entirely online has meant disruption during the pandemic has been minimal. Simple accounting procedures and a streamlined digital bureaucracy have also freed up bosses to spend more time focusing on tasks that can add value to the business, such as pivoting to services in greater demand because of the crisis.

For many in Tallinn and elsewhere in Estonia, the most remarkable thing about the switch to remote working is how unremarkable it's been. "Remote working itself hasn't changed, but [the pandemic] has changed the chunk of society that is doing remote working," Marcus concludes.

Amman, Jordan: staying alert to domestic abuse

Domestic violence is a problem throughout the world, but it is particularly serious in the Middle East where, according to the World Health Organization, 37 per cent of married women in the east Mediterranean region, which encompasses most Arab states, have experienced physical or sexual violence by their partner or other family member.

As lockdowns and remote-working policies have been implemented to combat the coronavirus pandemic, increasing numbers of women have been put at risk. In March, the story of Jordanian domestic abuse victim Eman al-Khateeb went viral when she sent an online plea for help after nearly being killed by her brother during quarantine.

"We know that whenever there is [an unpredictable] political, social or economic situation, women and girls become more and more vulnerable," says Suad Abu-Dayyeh, a Jordan-based women's rights campaigner for Equality Now.

As offices close, couples and families are forced into constant close proximity, creating the sort of high-stress environment where abuse is more likely. And as women leave the home less often, there are fewer opportunities for abuse to be reported or discovered by friends and colleagues. Closures as a result of the pandemic have compounded the problem.

"Sometimes women will be beaten or psychologically affected, but they don't have anywhere to go because courts are closed, civil society organisations can't really work properly," says Abu-Dayyeh.

With the adoption of remote working expected to continue beyond the pandemic, businesses transitioning to a remote-working culture have an important role to play in making sure moving away from the office doesn't put staff members at risk. Abu-Dayyeh suggests companies should provide complimentary counselling sessions to employees, which would not only help support staff during a period of change, but also provide opportunities for domestic abuse to be discovered.

She would like to see larger companies use marketing channels and corporate social responsibility programmes to raise awareness of domestic abuse and use their resources to lobby governments for more robust protection for women and girls.

Managers of remote workers should also be trained to make sure they are aware of the signs of domestic abuse, as well as the measures that can be taken to report any potential problems. "We're not just talking about the bruises that might be seen on a woman's face," says Abu-Dayyeh. "Violence against women has a broader definition. If a woman is talking over Zoom, [managers] have to pay attention to the way she talks and her body language."

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: looking to a more globalised future

While nations around the world continue to adjust to the chaos caused by the pandemic, Vietnam has managed to avoid the worst of the disruption. A combination of swiftly implemented travel bans and rapid lockdowns has meant the official number of COVID-19 cases remains in the low hundreds, with a remarkable zero reported deaths. Although some businesses remain closed and health checks are commonplace, life for the majority of Vietnamese people has effectively returned to normal.

Yet despite the relatively minor impact of the pandemic, remote working is playing an increasingly significant role in Vietnam. In recent years the country's booming economy and low cost of living have made it a magnet for nomadic expats, and has also led to the emergence of a small but growing class of Vietnamese professionals working remotely as freelancers for foreign companies, providing services such as computer programming, design and translation.

"I think Vietnamese people are quite accustomed to working remotely," says Hao Tran, founder of Vietcetera, a media company headquartered in Ho Chi Minh City. "The monthly wages here are significantly lower than in the West. So Vietnamese people, who have skills that are relevant to being location independent, can actually earn a lot more money working remotely for clients overseas, or even companies in Vietnam, rather than getting a day-to-day office job in Vietnam."

The appeal is not just financial. "Vietnamese people, especially if they're single and below the age of 30, are living at home. So for them to be able to stay with family, which is a very important thing, and still be able to work remotely, is very compelling for a lot of people," he says.

The increasing embrace of a remote-working culture by young tech-savvy Vietnamese professionals also hints at how the wider adoption of remote working might lead to the globalisation of white-collar jobs that have previously avoided being outsourced.

"In Vietnam there definitely will be more freelancers or at least outsourcing companies," says Tran. "People who are getting these very expensive degrees in the West to work in engineering, for instance, their salaries will go down." ●

Shutter.PMPhotography/Shutterstock
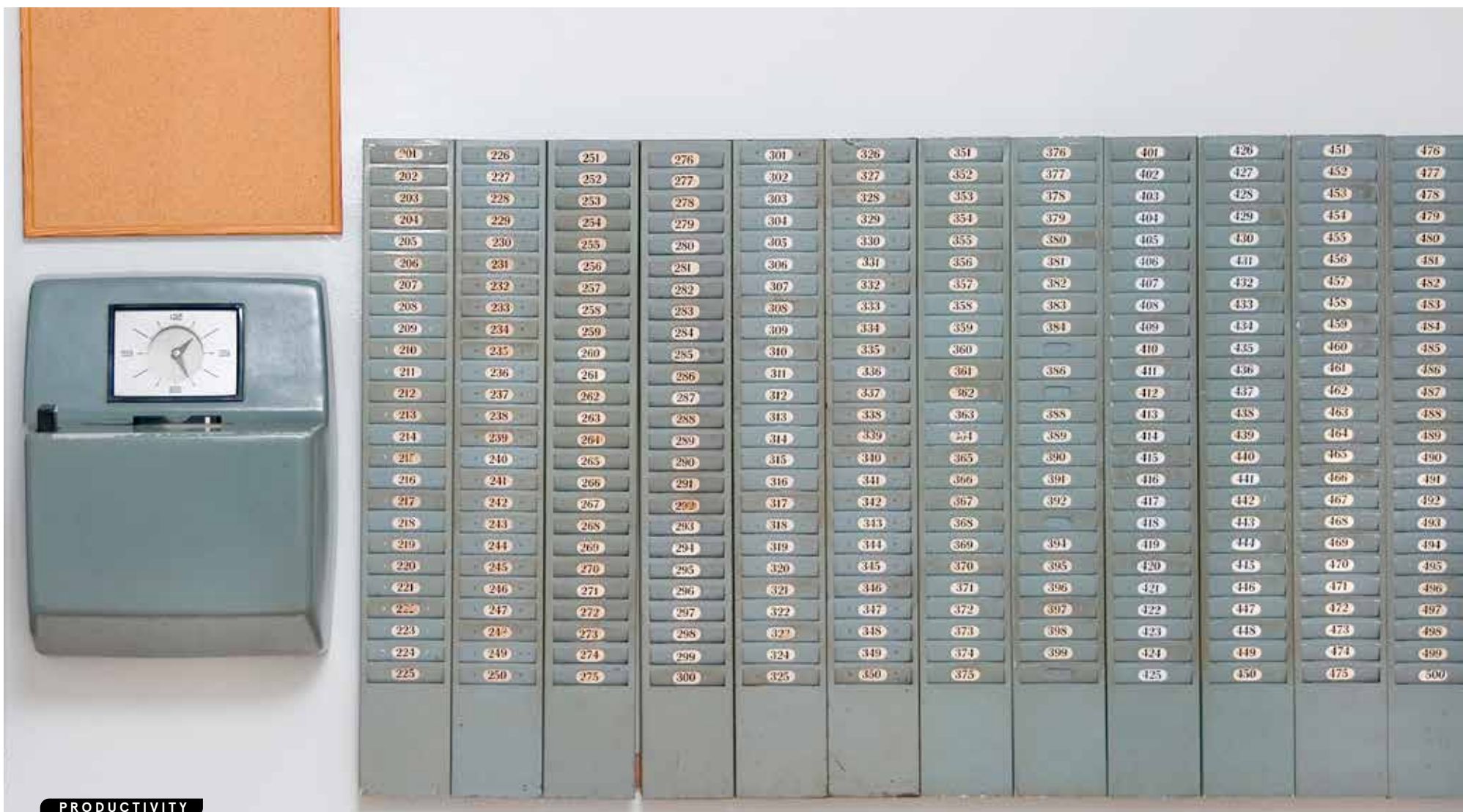
PRODUCTIVITY

Time's up for punching the clock

Widespread remote working has demonstrated that employees can be trusted to manage their time and productivity, so should companies now be letting workers choose the hours that suit their body clock?

Virginia Matthews

US President Donald Trump may require less than four hours' sleep a night, but for the rest of us, not enough shuteye can send our body clock into a tailspin.

While studies have shown that Tuesday morning and Friday afternoon tend to be our most and least productive times, individual circadian rhythms can vary widely. Remote working offers all of us the chance to work, rest and play in sync with our bodies, rather than the demands of the traditional working week.

"As long as people are accessible when clients or team members need them, those who prefer to get non-client facing work such as research, planning or strategising done out of office hours can do so, playing to their own body clock and circadian rhythm to maximise personal productivity," says Aliya Vigor-Robertson, co-founder of consultancy JourneyHR.

Yet working online throughout the day, as well as in the early morning and late evening, can not only impact on productivity and creativity, but may also trigger a higher level of burnout, she believes.

While many organisations have found remote working plays to the strengths of quieter, less gregarious staff, who enjoy working independently and with minimum input from managers and colleagues, being starved of an audience can be very hard for an office extrovert.

Allowing louder team members to regularly host or even lead some of the more workaday Zoom meetings can help boost their morale and, with time, even the most outgoing, sociable employee can learn to love remote working, says John Hackston, head of thought leadership at business psychology provider Myers-Briggs.

"Working remotely does not have to mean being removed from people or from the buzz of social interaction and, provided they are still able to connect with and get their energy from other people and the outside environment, working from home can be positive," he says.

"Things that will benefit these types include creating a stimulating work environment, with background music and lots of visual input, being able to take regular breaks and feeling connected to the outside world. Going for a run or a walk, enjoying the garden or even walking round the house can all help."

While both the early bird and night owl can use the freedom of remote work to explore their own body clock and enhance their personal productivity, there may be a problem with managers who stick to the old ways.

"In reality, it all depends on how flexible an organisation is," says Hackston. "When a team has a mandatory video conference call at 8.30 every morning, remote working may not suit individual needs as well as it could otherwise do."

With misaligned circadian rhythms a known contributory factor to obesity, heart disease and even cancer, sleep deprivation, which costs the UK economy some £40 billion a year, affects us all profoundly.

Brendan Street, professional head of emotional wellbeing at Nuffield Health, warns that despite the many positives of remote working, it may also lead to some of the chronic physical and emotional problems long associated with shift work.

While the natural body clock is, he says, designed to "make us more alert in the morning and drowsier at

> **❝**
> **Playing to your own body clock and circadian rhythm can maximise personal productivity**

night", this can be thrown by unpredictable working hours and a lack of structure in our sleep-wake patterns.

"Living within the circadian rhythm helps manage the chemicals in your body and, when this is disturbed, it is also associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression," he adds.

The dramatic reduction in commuting times during the coronavirus pandemic has given many people enhanced energy and motivation levels, but the need to take regular breaks when working at home is paramount if we are to continue to perform well.

"We have already started to get into what I call Zoom overload and we can very quickly find ourselves sitting in front of our laptops or computers all day long, to the detriment of our overall productivity and wellbeing," says Vigor-Robertson.

"I think all good managers would be able to use both observation and listening skills to build a pretty good understanding of their team's most productive times, but this very much relies on them having a strong EQ [emotional intelligence] and being both supportive towards and interested in their people."

Although she says tracking and collating data on individual employee's sleep-wake cycles would be a step too far, Vigor-Robertson believes a good awareness of when staff are at their most productive will be "of enormous help in managing remote workers".

It's easy to become ageist when assessing how easily different groups of workers can deploy remote technology, but Street explodes the myth that regular home working should be reserved for millennials.

"Most of today's remote workers are over 40, which probably reflects the fact that some businesses are more comfortable if an employee using flexible working is older and has more experience," he says.

Whatever the age of the employee, self-discipline and motivation are the essential prerequisites of all successful remoters, allowing them to manage their own working hours and remain productive without supervision, Street adds.

While many people are enjoying the novelty of working in their pyjamas, the potential distractions of partners, children and neighbours cannot be underestimated. Ensuring the home office becomes a place of concentration and accomplishment may require organisations to embrace the broader, more complex issues of employee wellness.

Jessie Pavelka, co-founder of the health and wellbeing consultancy Pavelka Wellness, urges employers to look at "screen time, not moving enough and not eating well, all of which can destroy a healthy internal body clock, and to consider discussions on nutrition, movement and mindfulness".

"By executing a holistic approach to remote working wellness, utilising external support and being transparent, I believe organisations have the power to impact both individuals and business positively," he says.

In just a few months, those organisations which have clung to presenteeism or micro-management have discovered staff can be trusted to get on with their jobs even without close supervision.

The next business tenet to be put on a final warning is the nine to five itself. "It is entirely possible that the traditional business day may be heading for the dustbin of history, more for economic and pragmatic reasons than because organisations have become more aware of individual working styles," says Hackston.

"If organisations can reduce the need for expensive city-centre office buildings, they will. And as more companies become multinational and work across different time zones, the pressure to move away from a traditional working day will intensify." ●

REMOTE PRODUCTIVITY

How Irish workers' productivity levels have changed since home working during lockdown

About the same — 25%
Higher — 9%
30%
37%
Lower
Unsure

Whitaker Institute 2020
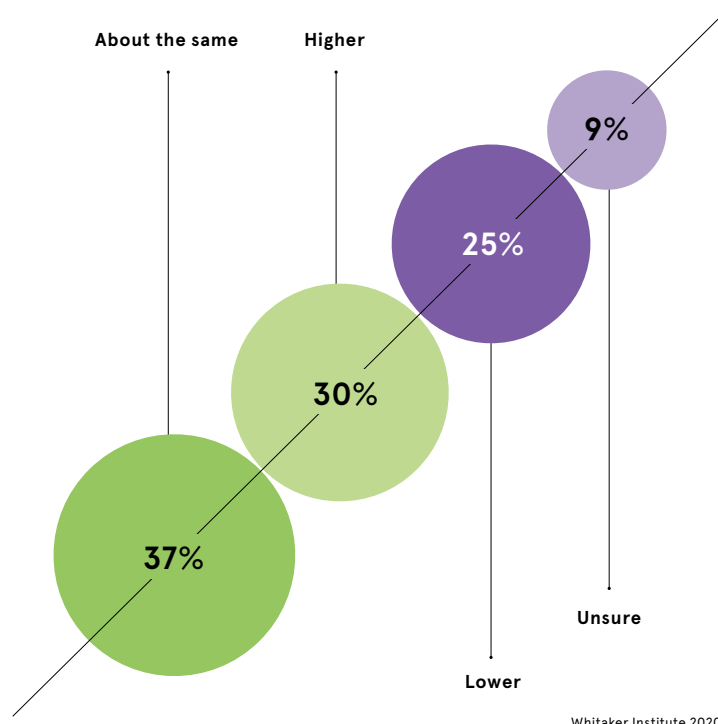
Reimagining work in the new normal

As businesses are presented with an opportunity to reimagine the whole idea of work, it's more important than ever they connect with employees as part of a culture of curiosity

The coronavirus pandemic forced companies around the world and across all industries into crisis mode. Practically overnight organisations had to implement plans to enable their entire workforce to work from home securely and productively, and put in place emergency strategies to ensure the resiliency, and in many cases survival, of their business.

As governments now seek to reopen economies and employees begin returning, albeit very gradually, to office environments, many organisations are realising they can't simply go back to business as usual. An unprecedented opportunity has presented itself to reimagine work in the new normal emerging from the pandemic and to do that they need staff input.

Employee feedback was a vital insight that fuelled decision-making as companies adapted to lockdown scenarios. Organisations must now lean on it further as they think about how to serve their customers, source the best talent and incentivise their workforce in a new age defined by flexible working. A culture of curiosity is key to reimagining work.

"Returning to offices as we knew them is not just about real estate and facilities; it's about how we collaborate and be productive in a more dynamic environment," says Becky Cantieri, chief people officer at SurveyMonkey, a leading global survey software company that helps organisations transform feedback into action.

"Insights from employees enable us to look at our workspaces, how we program our offices, what the purpose of an office actually is, how much we continue to embrace home working, and what perks, benefits and support for staff look like in this reimagined work environment."

Even before COVID-19 surfaced, nine out of ten workers told a study by Harvard Business Review they would be willing to earn less money to do more meaningful work, and the correlation between happy employees and successful businesses will only strengthen further. When employees

> ## Employee feedback can be a rich source of insight to potential solutions
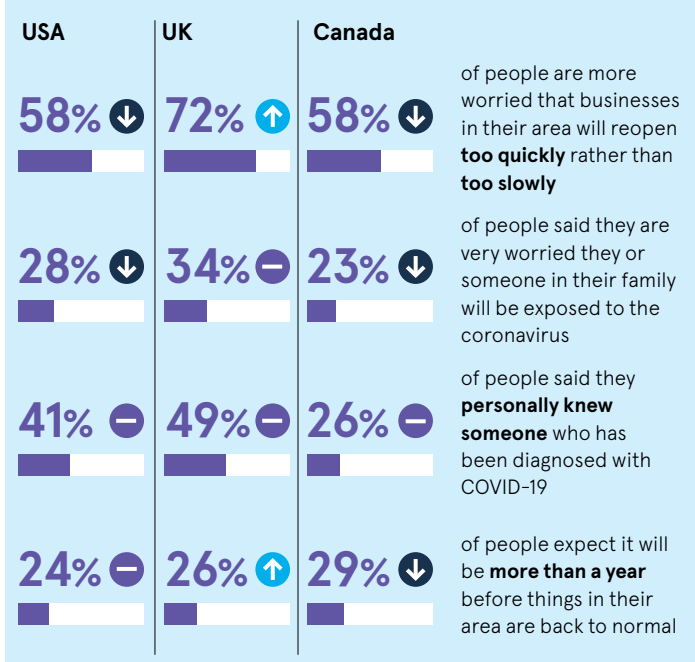
feel supported and engaged, they are more committed to their work, which enhances not only employee retention, but also customer experience.

With employees in multiple sectors facing significant change as a result of the pandemic, it's crucial companies understand what's important to their staff and how they can support them through any transitions. Most important is communication and bringing staff on the journey as decisions are made, rather than simply imposing change.

As they go forward, organisations face a mix of strategic and operational questions, and employee feedback can be a rich source of insight to potential solutions. For example, what new work policies, processes and training are required for health and safety? How should organisations allocate resources across teams? How can organisations foster feelings of belonging and inclusion in virtual or distributed teams?

As organisations navigate these challenges, SurveyMonkey's Enterprise survey plan provides a scalable, secure solution to help organisations collect strategic and day-to-day input from employees and customers. Its professional services team, meanwhile, provides expertise and optional hands-on help to build and launch programmes that enable quick, effective decisions.

"We've long held the belief feedback should be at the heart of the relationship with your employees and I suspect companies that didn't embrace this so much before COVID-19 will now realise its power in shaping both staff and customer outcomes," says Cantieri.

"Dialogue always strengthens relationship-building. We are uniquely positioned to use our own product to support our employees and our employees support our customers using our customer experience products GetFeedback and Usabilla. We've always had curiosity in our DNA and this has guided us through the pandemic and helped us stay agile.

"We've also seen organisations recognise the importance of a culture of curiosity during these testing times, as evidenced by the uptake of our survey templates. Our platform and solutions serve as powerful tools to support our customers with their own curiosity and help them be at the centre of conversations with their employees and customers."

For more information please visit surveymonkey.com

SurveyMonkey®

SurveyMonkey's Coronavirus Tracker now includes insights from surveys of more than 1 million people in the US, UK, and Canada. Here are some topline results from the week June 1–7:

	USA	UK	Canada	
	58% ↓	72% ↑	58% ↓	of people are more worried that businesses in their area will reopen **too quickly** rather than **too slowly**
	28% ↓	34% —	23% ↓	of people said they are very worried they or someone in their family will be exposed to the coronavirus
	41% —	49% —	26% —	of people said they **personally knew someone** who has been diagnosed with COVID-19
	24% —	26% ↑	29% ↓	of people expect it will be **more than a year** before things in their area are back to normal

CULTURE

Bringing staff together while apart

Fostering an inclusive culture is hard at the best of times, but it can feel impossible while most employees are working remotely. Three organisations explain how they keep their people together in spite of the distance

Peter Yeung

C rises always put company cultures to the test. And few are as big as a global pandemic.

Organisations have had to completely re-examine working hours, health and safety protocols, shift patterns, internal communications and cybersecurity policies, to name a few. And to do all of that successfully while maintaining a positive working environment that nurtures employee wellbeing and the bottom line simultaneously is no easy task.

Remote working, whether you were used to it or not, comes with new challenges in the COVID-19 era. But a lot of it boils down to fostering an inclusive corporate culture and the engagement of all stakeholders, staff and leaders alike.

According to research from Bain & Company, organisations that exhibit a winning culture, "that have a strong internal compass and inspire their employees", are 3.7 times more likely to be business performance leaders. And if WFH is set to become the 'new normal', as many have suggested, businesses need to prioritise culture as a crucial element of their long-term viability.

Wes Hicks/Unsplash

1

Schroders: internal communications don't have to be written

Internal analytics recorded by asset management company Schroders, which has more than 5,000 employees globally, found staff were much more likely to engage with internal communications that were not the written word.

"We realised our employees were engaging more with voicemails or podcasts," says Emma Holden, global head of human resources at Schroders, revealing interaction rose sevenfold. "People increasingly prefer to engage with voice rather than text."

With more than 99.5 per cent of its employees working from home during the coronavirus pandemic, internal communication has become increasingly important and methods have had to be altered accordingly to ensure an inclusive culture.

Each week Schroders chief executive Peter Harrison has been sending a weekly voicemail to all workers, senior staff have been writing personal blogs and through Schroders TV the company has been producing internal videos discussing challenges and advice on issues such as work-life balance and home schooling.

"Modern leadership is very much about being humble and open about personal challenges, so that's why these initiatives have been so successful," says Holden. "It's giving people really tangible examples and also provides quite personal stories that help people connect to the firm and their colleagues."

She believes the pandemic has further bolstered the company's support for flexible working. Since 2016, Schroders has had a policy of allowing employees to work from home at least one day a week, thanks to the award-winning, remote working tool made by Citrix known as Schroders S3.

A survey of Schroders' managers in 2018 found 95 per cent believed flexible working improved work-life balance, 87 per cent said it increased engagement in their team and more than 75 per cent said productivity increased as a result.

Given the nature of the business and need to be in close contact with clients, Holden does not envisage employees working from home full time. But the option of remote working is seen as key in creating an inclusive culture. "We believe it can get the best from people and we will continue to use it," says Holden.

95%

of Schroders' managers surveyed in 2018 said flexible working improved work–life balance

Schroders 2018

O2: social activities create an inclusive culture

Loss of informal socialising with colleagues is one of the aspects of remote working that has received less attention, but O2 has found it to be a key factor in fostering an inclusive culture among its 6,700 employees.

Research by the telecommunications network entitled *The Flexible Future of Work* found 30 per cent of employees admitted to feeling lonely while working from home under lockdown and 26 per cent missed socialising informally with colleagues.

"We've all been experimenting with more informal connectivity tools that can replace the between-meeting conversations," says Katy Liddell, O2 director of business sales and service. "Making sure teams are talking regularly about non-work-related topics and taking the time to ask people how they are is so important while we all work remotely."

Francesco Gallarotti/Unsplash

2

30%

of employees admit feeling lonely while working from home under lockdown

O2 2020

The answer has in part been a focus on social activities such as home cooking groups that share photos of best baking, fundraising scheme The 2.6 Challenge, Strava home running groups to encourage healthy lifestyles and a number of game show-style activities based on the likes of *Through the Keyhole* and *Would I Lie to You?*

These activities have been used to supplement an underlying focus on wellbeing, according to Liddell.

O2 recently introduced a company-wide "mystery chat" to address loneliness at work, with the idea that employees can use the tool to speak to someone who they don't know in the business. It also rolled out Evermind, an app that provides advice and tools on topics such as stress, doubt and loneliness, in time for the lockdown, and published a *Happy, Healthy and Productive* guide to working from home.

"While it's difficult to fully gauge what the long-term impact of COVID-19 will be, the demand for flexible working and the role of technology in our working lives are clearly accelerating during lockdown," says Liddell.

"However, another crucial learning is how to maintain a healthy balance with the digital tech and tools in our homes now, and ensure we can step away from our work and take the time for personal and mental wellbeing."

Lloyds Bank: prioritising mental health for the remote workforce

For Lloyds Bank, which has 65,000 employees and a revenue of £42 billion, the focus during lockdown has been prioritising employee experience and wellbeing to create an inclusive culture. The FTSE 100 company has seen some 45,000 workers shift to remote working since the pandemic began.

"This requires taking a strategic approach to not only how, when and where our colleagues work to be at their best, but also how they utilise technology effectively," says Fiona Cannon, group sustainable business director at Lloyds Banking Group.

A key focus has been colleagues' mental health and wellbeing during remote working. The company has 800 mental health advocates, who offer one wellbeing activity a week, employees can talk confidentially to a trained specialist 24/7 and nearly 10,000 permanent staff have signed up to the industry-leading wellbeing app Headspace.

An online space known as Your Resilience has been set up to advise colleagues about COVID-19 in the form of articles, animations, podcasts and webinars, with more than 8,000 employees registering so far. A similar scheme called the Optimal Leadership Resilience Programme has been rolled out for senior leaders.

"Our priority is the safety and wellbeing of all our colleagues to ensure they have the technology and training needed to work from home," says Cannon. "Lloyds Banking Group recognises both the benefits to colleagues and improvements in overall business productivity."

Close support has been given to the bank's women's network Breakthrough, with yoga and meditation sessions provided to help foster an inclusive culture. A virtual choir workshop, launched in conjunction with charity partner Mental Health UK, also draws in up to 500 colleagues each week.

In March, the company used internal forums to survey workers about what they needed to help the transition into their new workspaces and among the measures introduced by Lloyds Bank is the Office@Home programme, which provides technology and training through live webinars. In addition, more than 13,000 pieces of equipment such as computer keyboards, chairs and monitors have been distributed to employees across the UK to date. ●

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Permanent staff at Lloyds Banking Group have signed up to wellbeing app Headspace

Lloyds Banking Group 2020

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