

FUTURE OF WORK

06 WHY IT PAYS TO REALLY KNOW YOUR STAFF

08 TACKLING AGE DISCRIMINATION

18 FIVE MAJOR D&I MISTAKES TO AVOID



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FUTURE OF WORK

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EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

Why it pays to get to know your employees

While coronavirus is impacting everyone, we're not all handling the pandemic in the same way, so employers should take note when managing a remote workforce

Marina Gerner

With remote working now mandated for many of us, making it work for different groups of employees is the next big challenge for business leaders. Why do some people work well virtually while others struggle? The coronavirus pandemic is affecting everyone, but employees are not all the same. It's time for employers to look beneath the surface and really get to know their employees.

To find out how individual personality types feel about remote work, Dr Chidiebere Ogbonnaya, senior lecturer in organisational behaviour and human resource management at the University of Sussex, surveyed 3,200 workers across the UK. Respondents were asked to rate themselves on personality traits such as conscientiousness, introversion, neuroticism, openness to experience and agreeableness.

What Ogbonnaya discovered was that those who were curious and eager to try new things were less worried and less miserable about working remotely. Introverts and those who are generally agreeable also reported higher levels of satisfaction. Conversely, people who are neurotic were more likely to report worse mental health when working remotely. In addition, those who scored low on conscientiousness – put bluntly, those who are disorganised – also struggled to work remotely.

"We often think of remote working as a good thing, as having more freedom or a better work-life balance," says Ogbonnaya. "Yes, it may well be, but not for everyone. Some people struggle with depression and anxiety or even get frustrated when asked to work alone. I think we should give more attention to how people's personality traits affect their wellbeing."

"When someone is messy and disorganised, they find it harder to plan or manage their time properly. This causes a lot of anxiety, particularly when they have to work remotely. Neurotic people have similar problems because they tend to have more angry and depressed moods than others. We need to support them better. For example, give them more flexible deadlines and avoid putting them under too much pressure or stress."

It's equally important for business leaders to consider the disparate circumstances people face. The pandemic has, for instance, exacerbated gender inequality. Women have spent 15 hours more



job security, furloughs, family members who have lost their jobs, also of course COVID, whether it's life disruptions, anxiety and depression, illness, death of family members and friends," she says. "Personality tests are great when we're not in a pandemic; now is the time to really get to know your team by asking what they need and listening."

Marilyn Chaplin, chief human resources officer at NTT, echoes this point. "It's vital to have conversations with every employee to set expectations and find out more about the impact of remote working on their schedules and them personally," she says.

It's clear that new forms of working are here to stay. Chris Kane, author of *Where is My Office?: Reimagining the Workplace for the 21st Century*, says: "Many people are asking themselves, why do I need to spend a fortune, have a long commute, and a lot of personal and mental discomfort to go to an office to send emails?" For business leaders, managing groups of people who are working in a variety of work settings calls for a lot more empathy and a move away from a command-and-control management style.

What's more, the economic fallout from the pandemic means companies are going to be keen to cut costs, as well as trying to keep the right employees, by being an employer of choice, says Kane. "So they're going to have to recognise employees' needs," he says.

In November, Standard Chartered, for example, announced it plans to offer flexible work options to more than 90 per cent of its 85,000 employees by 2023. This will include flexibility on both time – the number of hours and days – and location, which could include the bank's premises, near-home workspaces or home.

In addition to changes brought about by the pandemic, Tanuj Kapilashrami, group head of human resources at the bank, cites productivity, wellbeing and carbon footprint as drivers of this decision. "We also see this as an opportunity to appeal to a wider and more diverse potential future workforce," she says.

Business leaders, who want to understand their employees, need to consider both personality types and individual circumstances because mental health and wellbeing can no longer be ignored. And this means seeing employees in a more holistic way, in other words as human beings, rather than office drones.

on domestic labour each week than men, according to a study by Boston Consulting Group.

We're all experiencing the pandemic differently and Melinda Briana Epler, founder and chief executive of San Francisco-based Change Catalyst, points out that "Black, indigenous and Latinx folks are disproportionately feeling the impact of the job loss and insecurity, extra parenting duties, COVID-19 and racial injustice; now is not the time to ignore these".

People in their 40s who have children and live in a four-bedroom

house are experiencing the pandemic in a very different way from someone who lives in a one-bedroom flat in Hackney, east London, with their family, says Michael Moran, founder and chief executive of career and talent management consultancy 10Eighty. Younger people whose social life centres around their workplace struggle more than those whose friends largely work elsewhere.

Epler notes that many people have a new job they didn't bargain for: teaching their children. "Lots of people are feeling uncertainty around

20% of global remote workers say they struggle with collaboration and communication

20% say they struggle with loneliness

12% say they struggle with distractions at home

Buffer 2020

TALENT MANAGEMENT

Seeing past “potential”

Traditional ways of measuring employee potential are no longer fit for purpose. Instead organisations should embrace collaboration, communication and lateral career progression to get the most from their workers

Magda Ibrahim

The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the rate of digital and business transformation, and capitalising on every ounce of employee potential is non-negotiable. The crisis may be a catalyst for restructures and talent challenges, but nurturing the potential of every employee is the key to unlocking the benefits of these extraordinary times.

With so much uncertainty facing people, the coming year is an opportunity to grow employee engagement, ensuring they want to be part of the journey through the pandemic and beyond.

And while traditional views of an organisation's top talent might exclude vast swathes of employees, there is a surge in thinking that empowering staff to take ownership of their career development can reap rewards for them and the business.

Evidence suggests that “allowing employees agency over their careers can result in more engaged and motivated employees”, leading to positive impacts on levels of performance, says Emma Parry, professor of human resource management and head of the Changing World of Work Group at Cranfield School of Management.

“What is happening in the pandemic is that organisations are learning the importance of open and ongoing communications,” says Parry. “For me this is key to democratising talent development.”

This emphasis on transparent career paths and skills requirements means “identifying leadership potential can become a conversation between employers and employees rather than something done with smoke and mirrors”, she adds.

Encouragingly, research shows many employers are promoting more democratic approaches to talent management.

The Top Employers Institute analysed the practices of 1,500 leading employers in attracting, retaining and developing employee

potential to drive change in their organisations.

It found that 89 per cent of employers designed leadership development programmes for different roles and levels, with the same percentage focusing on the competencies and behaviours needed.

Meanwhile, there is a “clear trend towards a more broad-minded approach to career development”, says Phil Sproston, Top Employers Institute UK and Ireland manager, with 97 per cent of organisations consistently expecting managers to promote development of team members.

The results suggest these employers are focusing more on specific traits and attitudes, rather than identifying high-potential employees by looking at certain departments or seniority levels.

Considering skillsets, rather than simply an employee's ability to do the specific role they were hired for, can be transformational in workforces, especially as businesses adapt to current market conditions.

It is an exciting time to explore these fundamentals of skills and strengths, which can pull out untapped employee potential, rather than using subjective criteria reflecting current leadership.

Traditionally structured hierarchies are not excluded from democratic approaches to maximising employee potential though. Parry



Organisations are learning the importance of open and ongoing communications... this is key to democratising talent development

points out: “This is not about structure per se, but more about enabling open conversations around talent management decisions.”

This might mean the end of the classic nine-box matrix to identify talent. “Developing a culture of transparency in relation to people's talent and aspirations allows a more inclusive and effective approach to identifying employee potential,” she explains.

Dan Lucy, principal research fellow at the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), agrees more rigour is needed in developing employee potential.

“The pandemic has exposed so many inequalities and organisations have to be much more rigorous in identifying talent objectively,” he acknowledges.

Strength-based development plans can lead to 29 per cent increased profits and up to 72 per cent reduced staff churn for organisations, according to a Gallup study. Allowing employees to identify, develop and use their core strengths fosters accountability and a more democratic approach to talent management.

“As well as understanding what skills employees have, widening access to learning and development adds to the flexibility of the entire workforce, which is really valuable right now,” adds Lucy.

Marketing business MVF topped the *Sunday Times Best Companies to Work For 2020* index and its chief people officer Andrea Pattico says ensuring employees can develop their strengths and are aware of opportunities is critical to its success.

“Employee potential is not static so it's important to keep talking about what is right for the individual, their career and the business over a reasonable period such as 12 months, rather than assume nothing changes over a three to five-year period,” she says.

An individual annual training budget for every employee, yearly cross-department learning festival and advanced academies open to anyone in the business, regardless of department, means MVF is “finding ways to help our people to reach their career goals as well as keeping great people in the business for longer”, says Pattico.

At digital services provider Foundation SP, which led the rankings in the annual *2020 UK's Best Workplaces* for medium-sized businesses, a commitment to empowering employees to drive their own career paths is part of the talent management blueprint.

“We actively encourage employees to strive towards developmental progression and self-fulfilment,” says Foundation SP chief executive Simon Grosse. “Continuous two-way feedback is important, ensuring it is a regular dialogue that is heard and acted on, rather than a one-time event.”

Peer-to-peer mentoring and coaching help to spark innovation, along with “cross-pollination of roles and responsibilities”, an approach Grosse says has led to an uplift in profit in the past 12 months, along with low levels of employee turnover.

For firms that have not previously had a digital-led approach, physical changes to workplaces brought about by the pandemic and multiple lockdowns could have a huge impact on traditional notions of career development, talent management and leadership.

Technology is proving an equaliser through collaborative working practices and internal mobility tools, while the spike in online meetings means opportunities for employees to showcase ideas in ways that may not have existed before.

“Progression might not always be upwards, but there still needs to be a sense of development for employees,” Lucy at IES concludes. “Transparency and support are fundamental to democratising employee potential.”

‘Virtual coffee breaks alone will not help organisations innovate and improve culture’

The coronavirus pandemic has presented a multitude of operational and cultural challenges that organisations have had to adopt and adapt to in a short time. With many work style changes becoming permanent, it is now imperative for enterprises to plan for the longer term.

The digital agenda for most businesses is undergoing significant reprioritisation, with successfully and securely enabling more flexible work styles being a key theme dominating the plans. This need around remote work is nothing new; it is a digital initiative many businesses have been actively working to deliver for many years. However, most have centred around technology solutions and we should take this opportunity to consider how we can learn to humanise the workplace in a post-pandemic world.

For businesses, the challenge is in enabling fluid work styles, but in a way that does not negatively impact employee productivity and security. This balancing act has focused on making calculated investments in technologies and services that support these new ways of working, especially important given the budget scrutiny many businesses are working under. Collaboration tools, security applications, using technology to track workplace occupancy and manage shift patterns have all played a role.

However, improving “people practices” and business processes will be just as important. The mass home-working experiment brought about by the pandemic has shown how technology challenges, and others, can be overcome and how new benefits can be realised as a result. The traditional centralised office will by no means become a relic of the past, but new attitudes towards remote working mean businesses have an opportunity to improve employee wellbeing and corporate culture.

People have been isolated over recent months, both in their personal and professional lives, so bringing them closer together is going to be very important going forward. Additionally, a fluid workforce engages and collaborates with one another via different channels, including voice, text and video.

Even when the tools are there to support communication and collaboration among teams, developing an inclusive culture and ensuring all employees have a voice and an opportunity to share ideas is vital.

Management approaches will need to adapt in supporting this ideal and there is nowhere near the focus on retraining managers for a permanent change yet.

Trust and understanding between employees and team members is developed by encouraging communication and the sharing of ideas, but it would be dangerous to assume this is taking place just because the tools are available.

A common approach adopted by some businesses looking to strengthen corporate culture and communication throughout the pandemic has been to launch virtual coffee break initiatives whereby two or more employees from different parts of a business are randomly paired together in a discussion. Virtual coffee breaks certainly have value, but they alone will not foster the active collaboration and outputs that will help organisations innovate and improve culture.

Managers can help foster more active collaboration by making projects and work tasks more collaborative, thus helping create a real purpose for communication. It will take as much effort as redesigning the physical office spaces in the planning, but will ensure longer term engagement and productivity than other, less human tools do. Ensuring employees also have access to the support and training they need, when they need it, should still be imperative for businesses and the multitude of virtual platforms have proven this is possible.

The requirement for technology tools and solutions has proven vital in the initial response to managing a workforce since the pandemic. With permanent changes to the future of work, we must remember not to de-prioritise the employee experience.



Carolyn Dawson
Managing director
Informa Tech

The power of ‘and’ fuels the future of work

The pandemic has meant companies have had to confront the future of work, but they are finding agile decision-making can only be achieved if grounded in the right data

Before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, there was no doubt technology was disrupting the workforce and companies’ business models, yet most organisations did not feel equipped to activate a digitally ready workforce. But the health crisis and economic consequences have now forced businesses to adapt more quickly to a changing world.

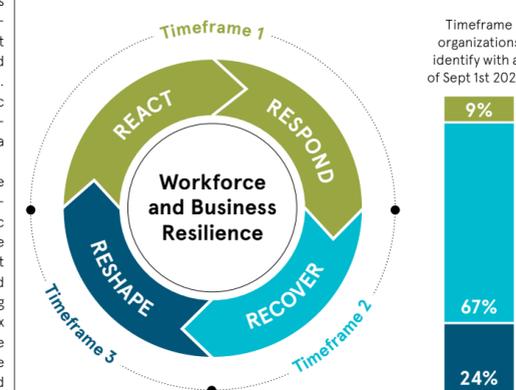
Since March, surveys by Aon have gathered insights into how organisations are responding to the pandemic and the workforce changes they are making. Already in May, 84 per cent of human resources leaders reported they were exploring new working models, with 80 per cent seeing a mix of office and virtual working as the new model. However, four out of five survey respondents also reported they didn't understand the capabilities of their workforce.

“In the initial phase of the pandemic, companies had to change quickly how and where people work, and leaders had to make decisions based on incomplete datasets,” says John McLaughlin, chief commercial officer, Human Capital Solutions, Europe, Middle East and Africa, at Aon, which provides leaders with the data, analytics and advice to make better workforce decisions. “Agile decision-making is difficult to achieve in a virtual workplace, often requiring large-scale infrastructure changes and different processes and structures.”

Looking at crisis response and recovery with the view their workforce model would eventually return to what it was, many companies made changes that were necessary, but no more. Though most now recognise home working as a long-term trend, only 25 per cent have reached a stage of actively reshaping their future, according to Aon's latest research. They know they have to act, but are too often unsure of how to do so.

The future of work can only be a nebulous concept when you lack the data on which to base decisions

OPPORTUNITY TO RESHAPE



* Survey of 2,004 business leaders

In an uncertain landscape, it is perhaps understandable organisations struggle to predict their future workforce needs. Indeed, 75 per cent of respondents to Aon's August *COVID-19 Pulse Survey* said digital skills are key to an agile workforce, yet 61 per cent of HR leaders reported that their organisations do not know how to spot digital potential. For many, the future of work can only be a nebulous concept when you lack the data on which to base decisions.

Aon's Accelerate Model helps companies to think through change across not only HR but importantly the organisation as a whole. It helps to quantify the opportunity of workforce change. The framework powers better workforce decision-making by enabling organisations to answer questions in a better, more detailed way and one which is designed for their unique organisational challenges.

By analysing data and workforce capabilities together, companies can solve workforce issues in a more meaningful way. For example, they should manage diversity and remote working together, as 86 per cent of survey respondents say a diverse workforce is key to building an agile workforce.

“That's the power of ‘and,’” says Michael Burke, chief executive of Human Capital Solutions at Aon. “The Accelerate Model analyses data through over 40 criteria before giving a reliable, validated and considered set of priorities to tackle. The data is curated via an intelligent and robust framework, and the results are

objective, contextualised and actionable. This is how we enable an evolving and compound impact on change.”

Aware that 30 per cent of its workforce will see their existing skillsets become obsolete over the next three to five years, manufacturing giant Siemens turned to Aon to provide a platform that matches employees to appropriate reskilling and upskilling opportunities.

Aon's platform enables workforce agility by fostering future skills, reduces costs through redeployment rather than hiring expensive external resources, and controls people risk in the form of fostering loyalty and lowering staff turnover.

“Siemens can now understand who has the potential to reskill and upskill, and think through their learning and development interventions in a better way,” says McLaughlin. “They can also better understand where their return on investment and dollar spend in this area are high, quantify the impact of intervention and present a clear business case for future-proofing their workforce. They're breaking down the complexity of the future of work and making it real by creating a data-driven understanding of their workforce.”

For more information please visit humancapital.aon.com/accelerate



AGEISM

Tackling age discrimination head on

Hiring biases are not reserved for gender and ethnicity. Failing to tackle ageism means businesses and talented individuals could be missing out

Ed Jefferson

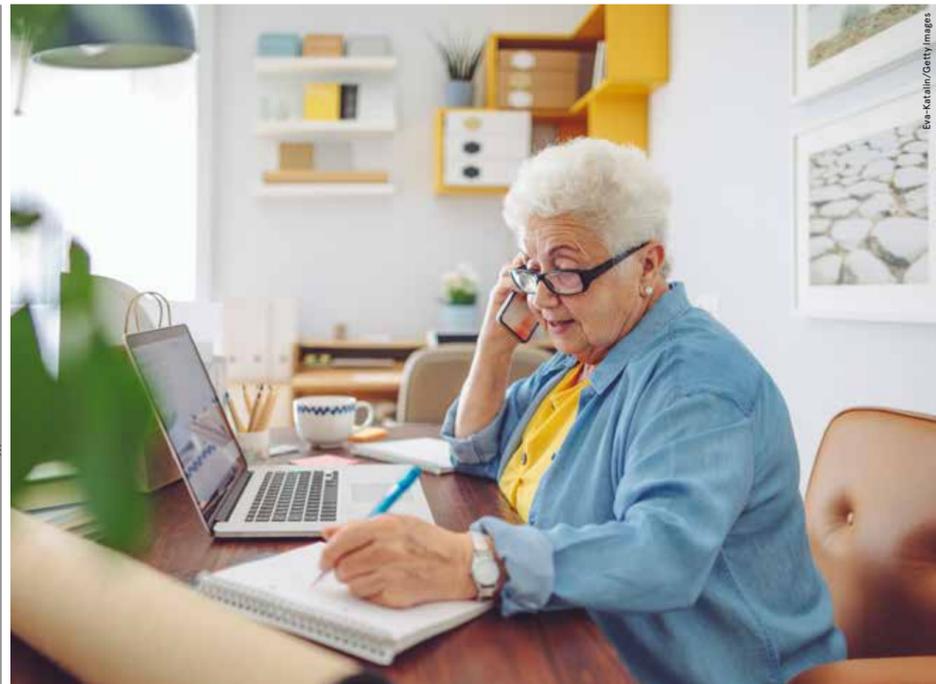
When thinking about the future of work, it's easy to focus on what work will be like for those just starting, or yet to start, their careers. But as the workplace changes, it's important not to forget about the impact on older workers.

More than a third of people in the UK report having experienced ageism in the workplace and over 64 per cent of older workers are concerned about being discriminated against at work. How does discrimination in the workplace manifest itself, what can we do about it, and how do companies and human resources departments need to change their thinking about older workers?

Treatment of older employees is a bigger issue than ever. While redundancy rates have risen dramatically across the board during the coronavirus pandemic, job losses tend to affect older workers more. Pre-pandemic research by over-50s website Rest Less found redundancy rates were more than double for workers in their 50s compared to those in their 40s. Indeed, over the past 12 months, unemployment has risen by a third for the over-50s and by 75 per cent for the over-65s.

Rest Less chief executive Stuart Lewis sees this as only the start. "Sadly, these numbers are simply the canary in the coal mine. With the furlough scheme winding up and 2.5 million over-50s having been furloughed, we expect this to leave a permanent scar on this generation and their employment prospects," he says.

Beyond the immediate future, rising retirement ages will see ageism in the workplace become relevant to more of us. Already people have started to talk about the concept of "unretirement", with retirees returning to the workforce through financial pressure or simply because changing attitudes and increasing standards of health mean they don't feel like leaving work behind yet. The old ideal of a job for life setting you up for a comfortable retirement by your early-60s is increasingly



Eva-Kathrin/Getty Images

There may be a perception that older job candidates are more inflexible, less likely to have up-to-date technical skills and they'll ask for more money compared to a younger, potentially more productive candidate. Though sadly for us all our mental and physical performance will probably decline as we get older, this doesn't necessarily tell us much about how our performance at work will change.

Academic studies in this area have found that the knowledge gained through experience of a job, which older workers are inevitably more likely to have, is one of the most important predictors of how well someone will perform at that job.

Ageism in the workplace can play a factor in how older workers can progress in their careers. Stereotypes may affect who firms are willing to spend money training, making it harder for older workers to keep pace with the skillsets of those newer to the workforce. If productivity drops as a consequence, they are likely to face more barriers to progression and eventually face redundancy, whereas investment in training could enable them to keep pace and apply their existing experience to new situations and tasks.

By failing to hire, invest in or, ultimately, keep their older employees, employers may not only be opening themselves up to accusations of having broken anti-discrimination law, but be fooling themselves into thinking successful companies must be comprised entirely of young faces rather than looking at the potential a different kind of workforce brings in terms of knowledge and experience.

Lewis at Rest Less concludes: "If we lose this generation from the workforce entirely, we risk losing valuable key skills and key workers from the workplace for good." ●

“During a job interview a candidate was told, 'I'm sorry, but you remind me of my mother and I wouldn't want my mother working here'”

should be “investing in interview and assessment skills training to ensure every candidate is treated with parity and fairness”.

Lewis cites an extreme example when during a job interview a candidate was told, 'I'm sorry, but you remind me of my mother and I wouldn't want my mother working here', and had the interview terminated. Companies seeking to avoid complaints of age discrimination would be wise to ensure their hiring processes have no space for such gross stereotyping to be a factor.

Ageism in the workplace can be a real issue at the hiring stage. More than one in seven workers over 50 believes they've been turned down for a job because of their age and nearly one in five have or have considered trying to hide their age during a job application process because they feared such discrimination. Older workers are unconvinced that employers will always take a fair, or indeed legal, attitude to how age affects someone's ability to do a job and are behaving accordingly.

mythical and it's important employers face up to the reality of what the hiring pool their staff are coming from is actually like, rather than just trying to fill positions according to a misinformed stereotype of the ideal employee.

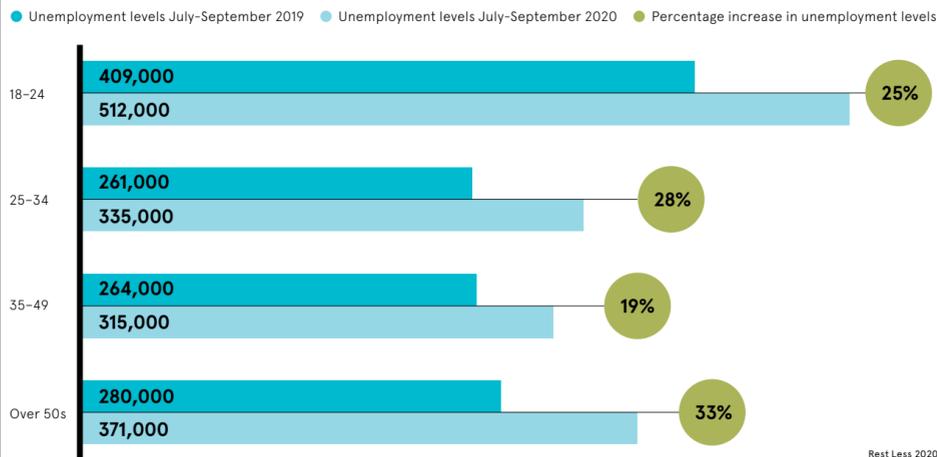
Despite the progress against ageism in the workplace made by the Equality Act 2010, ensuring that age is a protected characteristic, some firms have a long way to go in improving their hiring practices.

Victoria McLean, chief executive of career consultancy firm City CV, points to companies that try to side step the law through wording. "Loads of job ads include age-biased language," she says. "They should be avoiding using words that suggest they're looking for applicants from a particular age group, for example terms such as 'two to three-years' experience', 'enthusiastic young people', 'recent graduates' or 'we invite people to join our young team!'"

Interview processes need to be structured to avoid conscious and unconscious biases, says McLean, advising that all the candidates are asked the same questions and firms

OVER-50S ARE IN AN INCREASINGLY PRECARIOUS POSITION FINANCIALLY

Data shows there has been a 93% increase in the number of over-50s claiming Universal Credit in the UK as levels of unemployment spike

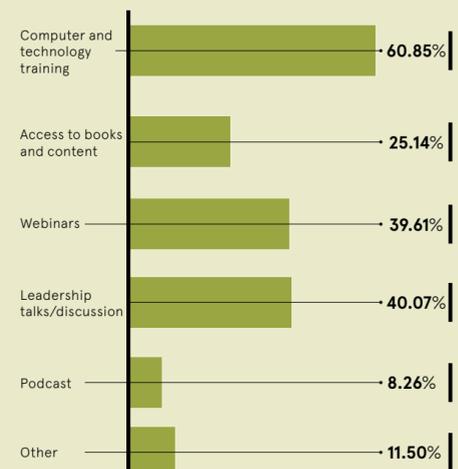


Rest Less 2020

Commercial feature

US EMPLOYEES CONTINUE TO EMBRACE REMOTE WORK - NOT WITHOUT STRUGGLE

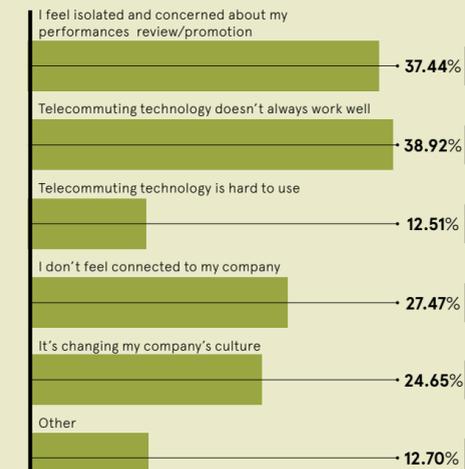
Companies provided support and resources to employees COVID-19
Total 1078 respondents



Employees are concerned about job security due to COVID-19
Total 1104 respondents



Biggest anxieties about working from home during COVID-19
Total 1079 respondents



getAbstract US Survey with 1200 full-time employees. September 2020

The future of work is bright and blended

The coronavirus pandemic has illuminated the benefits and drawbacks of remote working, and given companies the chance to reimagine a work-and-learning model for everybody

In the initial stages of the coronavirus pandemic, organisations had very little time to think about the advantages and disadvantages of various workforce models. There was only one option on the table, so enabling an immediate transition to remote working was prioritised to keep companies operational during an unprecedented crisis. As days turned into weeks and weeks into months, however, even the most traditional organisations came to accept that their employees kept productive with relative ease.

When the pandemic is finally over, therefore, it's unlikely the world of business will return to its previous status quo. Remote working, at least in some form, is undoubtedly here to stay, as companies have discovered a whole raft of meetings and tasks that are so much more efficiently conducted online, rather than commuting into an office. Equally, however, the pandemic has exposed many of the downsides of remote working.

While a study by getAbstract in September found that US workers are mostly supportive of working from home, 67 per cent reported feeling concerned about their job security and 89 per cent felt isolated, disconnected from their companies or distracted and less productive at times. It's clear remote working doesn't work for everybody, certainly not all the time. This has caused organisations, including getAbstract, to reimagine what their workplace will look like in the future.

"For many companies, there will be a new way of working together and that way is hybrid," says Thomas Bergen, co-founder and chief executive of getAbstract, the world's largest online library of summarised content. "We already no longer view the office as our workplace per se, because most of us can work more easily and efficiently from home. But what is the advantage of the office? It's the informal contact and exchange of ideas."

"This is exactly what we are trying to achieve right now with rebuilding our office. It will be a space where we meet and gather to exchange ideas, launch projects and have informal interactions, not regularly but on a more random basis. We are installing, for example, a nice kitchen, and on a weekly basis we will have a cook prepare a great lunch for everyone. "People won't come to the office because they have to, but because they want to, and for the informal meetings for which we will build space to facilitate. They'll also invite customers to give them an understanding of who we are and how we work."

“It's not just the future of work that's hybrid, but the future of learning too”

For getAbstract, and indeed numerous other organisations that are currently considering a new workplace model, this blended approach will be more befitting of people's expectations. It will not only maximise productivity, but also attract better talent, as the pandemic has ushered in new possibilities to create an environment where people's private lives and professional lives align in much better harmony.

At least for some initiatives, the pandemic has also been the final nail in the coffin of traditional classroom-based employee training. Onboarding processes, for instance, where companies train people for weeks or even months, had to change as people could no longer meet, exposing the more traditional companies to the value of online learning.

This means it's not just the future of work that's hybrid, but the future of learning too, and on both a corporate and an individual level. Companies are investing more time and energy into online learning initiatives than ever before, as they seek the knowledge and agility to pivot their operations and business models. Equally, many individuals, particularly in the sectors most blighted by COVID-19, have realised they need to be agile and, to make themselves most employable, they cannot stop learning.

"Those not adapting to this new world, or the new ways of doing business, are just no longer in the market, they are dropping out," says Bergen. "Most people don't want to go back to the pre-COVID working environment, but they must ensure their skills are still relevant and in demand. And it's practically impossible now for a company not to develop a learning and training strategy for the whole workforce. I believe in the long run, COVID-19 will lead to more responsibility for every employee."

The expert editorial team at getAbstract finds and rates the most relevant business books, articles, video talks, and podcasts and summarises

them into ten-minute abstracts. By constantly updating its online library of text and audio summaries, currently standing at more than 20,000, getAbstract provides quick, easy access to relevant information for employees at every level, giving them the knowledge to make better business and career decisions.

The flexibility of getAbstract's learning platform also means global companies can take a more nuanced approach to working and learning. For all the value of remote working and learning, there will always be industries, departments and regions where the benefits of meeting in person outweigh what can be achieved from home. The ability for global corporations to choose the right model for the right scenario will be paramount.

"The future of learning is brighter than ever," says Bergen. "Most companies and employees figured out that such a crisis means they have to adapt and to adapt successfully you have to learn. You have to change your behaviour and behaviour change is a learning process. Learning is one of the key elements of mastering the future, individually and for corporates, and those not willing to learn will ultimately fail."

"Companies with a learning culture are really strong. In a world where the lines between real and fake information is increasingly blurred, the ability to quickly find and digest relevant knowledge, which has been summarised, rated and put in the right context, is crucial to continually learning and making smarter and faster decisions. We've been doing that for 21 years, and we are hiring and growing faster than ever."

For more information please visit getabstract.com



Businesses refocus on customer centricity with digital process excellence

Coronavirus has placed unprecedented pressure on companies to digitalise their operations. Smart businesses are prioritising process excellence with customer-centric, omni-channel offerings that combine in-store with online experiences

C OVID-19 has created radically new realities for businesses, driving an urgent need to learn how to continue serving customers and operating efficiently while balancing the demands of mandatory physical distancing and multiplying online processes. With intensifying pressure to differentiate, omni-channel experiences combining online and in-store offerings, such as click and collect, are increasing.

"It has been a fast, painful, even furious change for companies that are not primarily digital, but have suddenly needed to offer a full range of online services," says Greg Ouilion, chief technology officer for Europe, Middle East and Africa at the software business New Relic. "Even the smallest businesses have needed to digitalise entire customer journeys, realigning processes and redefining flexibility."

Meanwhile, businesses of all sizes that were already primarily digital have faced challenges, with many experiencing five to tenfold increases in web and mobile traffic. Weaknesses in ways of working and in technological processes were quickly exposed.

Customers' online and mobile needs must be met, alongside their expectations of a seamless experience. This has driven substantial changes in working across sectors, from local retailers offering click and collect, to airports offering touchless interactions for everything from check-in to boarding, to manufacturers operating in more agile ways with fewer people on factory floors. Quick adaptation has become a matter of survival.

Marrying systems and processes

A key challenge for businesses in meeting new demands lies in resolving the complex web of systems they operate and shedding work silos and disjointed processes.

According to Ouilion, delivering an engaging and trustworthy digital customer experience requires unifying data across disparate systems. Only then can businesses obtain a full view of their digital business performance.

"Outdated set-ups don't serve customers or staff well. They erode loyalty and trust, and worsen how information is communicated internally and externally," he notes. "For example, if your

ecommerce site and in-store stock management systems are disconnected, you're going to run into problems resulting in frustrated customers and employees. Digital systems need to offer a real-time shared awareness for every person and system involved in each customer touchpoint."

The smartest businesses are achieving digital and overall operational progress by employing cloud technologies for agility and scale, combining IT operations with software engineering practices (DevOps) to swiftly address issues when they arise, and employing best practices around the digital customer experience (DCX). These businesses also understand the value of observability, a method of understanding the full picture of a business's systems, including problems that might ordinarily go unseen, but can result in outages and competitiveness issues.

Real-time observability provides businesses with a fully connected view of all software telemetry data in one place, enabling them proactively to master the performance of their digital architecture, accelerate innovation and software velocity, and reduce toil and operational costs. It also enables deeper and shared insights that improve transparency across teams.

Then there is the contextual aspect, where data is enriched and correlated to build a complete understanding of how the system behaves. Using this information, the technology deploys visualisations so organisations can understand data much more clearly and comprehensively, query it, and know how to action improvements quickly and proactively.

According to New Relic research, businesses with the greatest digital maturity, resilience and data visibility integrate their data on system performance with information on end-user

web and mobile performance, compared to only a fifth of companies that lag behind in technical maturity. Six in ten of the mature firms polled say these capabilities lead to more perfect software and unlock better staff collaboration. Nearly half can fix problems more quickly and 36 per cent can count on faster innovation.

Observability in practice

Businesses across industries are using New Relic's observability software to derive fast analysis on all their systems and improve how they operate. "Out of the box, they can extract all the necessary data and compile it into analysis dashboards, detecting anomalies, correlating incidents and demonstrating how well new services and code will function," Ouilion explains. "If businesses can proactively detect and resolve issues, they can better focus on creating value and innovating."

Observability typically spreads throughout an organisation, beginning with IT and operations management, then often expanding to production, sales, marketing and finance as the results are demonstrated.

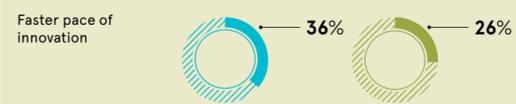
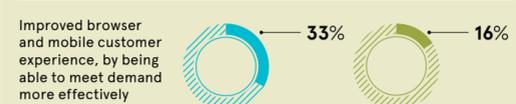
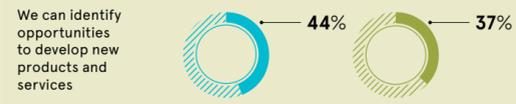
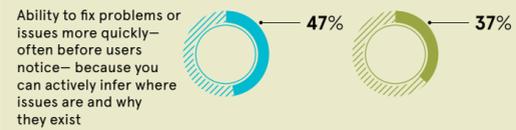
Among the companies using New Relic tools is Pharmacy2U, whose online NHS repeat prescription services faced unprecedented demand in the initial phase of the UK's coronavirus lockdown in spring 2020. Patients were told to help stop the spread of the virus by staying home, which brought Pharmacy2U's services sharply into focus. Handling the rapid upsurge in demand presented the UK's biggest online pharmacy with major logistical and operational challenges.

Using the observability software, Pharmacy2U was able to move from 650,000 to more than one million medicines delivered a month through the course of 2020, saving patients over three million unnecessary trips to collect their prescriptions. New Relic supported this growth by quickly resolving technical obstacles, scaling up with cloud architecture and maintaining customer experience throughout the surge in demand.

Large enterprises have long sought to refine their digital processes, but the scope, speed and affordability of observability means companies of all sizes can compete with reliable

END-TO-END DATA VISIBILITY

More Perfect Software leaders integrate data on software and systems performance with data on end-user performance



Modern software leaders drive for outcomes



Deeper Than Digital Research, *More Perfect Software: Why and how it drives business success*

digital excellence. Furthermore, many consumers are more keen to support their local businesses. Such firms have a golden opportunity to improve how they operate and prepare for future uncertainties. Observability will support local demand and other emerging customer needs. "One big shift this year has been a desire to support local businesses and do so via digital channels," says Ouilion. "Identifying where these companies can drive good performance and enhance their digital propositions



To find out more about using observability to deliver digital process excellence and customer success please visit newrelic.com

FREELANCERS

Treading a path all your own

Career progression applies to all jobs, not just those within a company, and freelancers looking to survive the pandemic should start getting serious about their future

John Crowley

Often jilted at the first sign of trouble, the humble freelancer is the workforce's poor cousin. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), the self-employed "appear to be an increasingly marginalised group", subject to low, slow and sometimes no pay.

The IFS study, published in November, says coronavirus had made freelancers' prospects even worse. Before the pandemic, average pre-tax earnings for those working for themselves during 2018-19 were 30 per cent lower than their employed counterparts.

If 2020 has taught the self-employed anything, it is that career planning is not solely the domain of those in the C-suite. Freelancers have hustled during lockdown, but as a consequence they've also had plenty of time to reflect and then retool, retrain and pivot.

"First up, freelancers should recognise they have an increasingly valid career path," says Penelope Jones, founder of My So-Called

Career, a company which offers career coaching for early to mid-career women.

"We sell ourselves short if we deny we are essentially CEOs of our little business of one. No CEO out there in the world would not have a sense of who their clients are.

"Who are the people that I want to work with? What are their problems that I can solve? And how can I ensure the people whose problems I can solve know that I exist?" These are just some of the questions freelancers must ask themselves.

Jones says a creeping sense of imposter syndrome, which she describes as "a mind monkey", needs to be constantly challenged.

This is achieved through a mixture of peers and mentors, what Jones calls a career community. "We must seek connections with other people with whom you can open up a conversation so you can challenge your mind monkey," she says. "Nine times out of ten it is leading you down a bad path."



Where so much of our wellbeing, rightly or wrongly, is defined through our success at work, Jones says she works with women to achieve harmony and balance, as well as develop their careers.

She reminds her clients to over-index on the bits they are good at, but says "real, true confidence also comes with self-acceptance which is, 'I'm brilliant at this stuff. I'm crap at this stuff.' And that's fine".

Fred Pelard is a strategy trainer whose book *How To Be Strategic* is a mine of golden nuggets for freelancers. His first tip is to have ten tiny ideas rather than one big one. "Around seven are going to flop straightaway, two will show promise and one will work," he says.

The next is to "flip and split" a question. "Don't ask yourself, 'How am I going to pay my bills in a

“We sell ourselves short if we deny that we are essentially CEOs of our little business of one

"Looking back, this is the pause in life that many of us needed without realising: time to focus on your own business and personal development."

Thomas, who has been passionately involved with the UK hotrod and drag racing scene, established HT Automotive PR in 2018. Her business helps niche automotive firms increase their brand awareness. As well as supporting clients, the position allows her to engage her "passion for custom, retro and modified cars".

She warns that many businesses have jumped on the bandwagon, offering courses at ridiculous prices. "I choose the courses run by people who are active in the groups and networks I'm part of as they are more aware of the painpoints PRs and digital marketers experience."

Joining online freelance communities can lead to job and networking opportunities in your sector. Perhaps most importantly, they also provide a safe space for freelancers to vent and celebrate wins too.

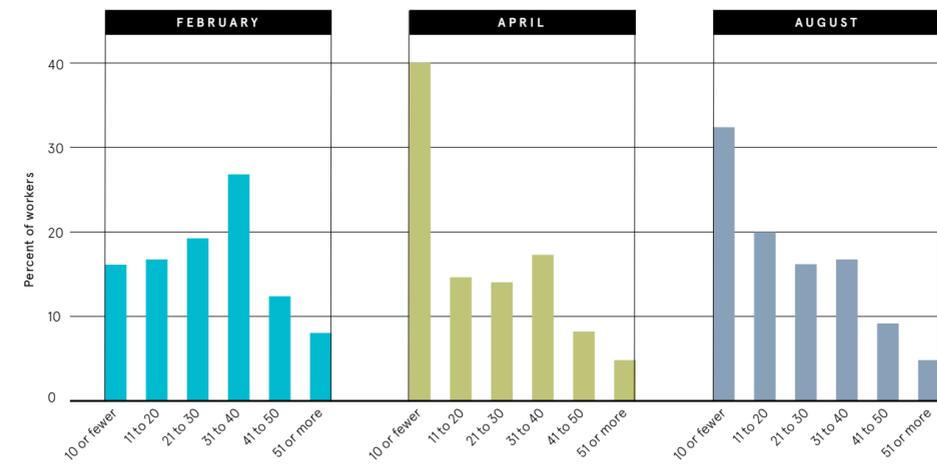
Meanwhile, critics of the government's COVID-19 support measures say freelancers come in different guises and many have fallen through the gap. Among those adversely impacted are new freelancers who haven't filled out a 2018-19 tax return, sole traders earning more than £50,000 and those who take their income as dividends.

Jones says that while there is a lot of structural help about seeking salaried employment and "a ton of support at C-suite or exec level", there is far less out there for the self-employed.

"Freelancers should realise this isn't a game. This is a career. This is my business. If we don't think like that, no one else is going to think like that about us either," she says.

FREELANCERS TAKE A HIT AS COVID PROGRESSES

Self-employed workers share their weekly hours worked throughout 2020



LSE Centre for Economic Performance 2020



INEQUALITY

Closing the blue and white-collar divide

As millions move to working from home, millions more do not have this option and face losing their jobs, creating a new social divide which could have far-reaching consequences

Peter Yeung

For decades a remote working revolution has been predicted, but until the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic it had not arrived. While the revolution has yet to benefit the majority of blue-collar workers, white-collar staff across the world, previously based in offices, are reaping the rewards of working from home, including a better work-life balance, reduced physical health risks and lower living costs. The rise in remote working, jet propelled by the pandemic, has been heavily skewed towards highly paid, white-collar jobs and a huge proportion of the global workforce doesn't have the same luxury. As a result, there are concerns over a growing new social divide, which is worsening long-established inequalities.



Research published in June by the University of Chicago found 37 per cent of jobs in the United States can be performed entirely at home or, in other terms, nearly two-thirds cannot. Based on an assessment of more than 800 occupations to classify the feasibility of working from home, the researchers then used US Department of Labor surveys to see how many of each of these jobs exist in America. "The pandemic has widened inequality," says Dr Jonathan Dingel, co-author of the study and the university's associate professor of economics. "Those who cannot work from home face a nasty trade-off between protecting themselves from the disease and protecting their paycheck." According to Dingel's research, the industries best suited to going remote are well-paid, white-collar occupations in large cities, whereas blue-collar workers in sectors such as agriculture and hospitality are finding it much more difficult or even impossible to pivot, which means some could be severely impacted while others are relatively unscathed. "The collapse of the restaurant and entertainment industries has been hard on the lower-wage workers in those industries," he says. "And there is also a broader set of concerns related to the fact that many service economy jobs, which cannot be done from home, are

supported by the white-collar office jobs that, in principle, could be done remotely." Dr Juan Palomino, an economist at the University of Oxford who worked with colleagues from the Complutense University of Madrid to analyse the impact of the pandemic in 29 European countries, similarly found that remote working in Europe is strongly tied to higher earnings. The team concluded that social distancing and lockdown measures could create a sizable increase in poverty and inequality, suggesting existing income inequality could be compounded by the gap in access to the benefits of remote work. Their findings, published in October in the *European Economic Review*, found women are less affected in their jobs than men on average, but that temporary, part-time and self-employed workers are, in general, worse off. "If you are essential and frontline workers, you are exposed to risks of course, namely health risks," says Palomino. "But the most vulnerable in our simulation are workers in closed, non-essential sectors." He nonetheless distinguishes between blue-collar workers in factories and those working in the services industries who require in-person contact with customers. "The blue-collar industry was affected in initial lockdown, but it's not so much affected now," he says. "Factories have reopened, for

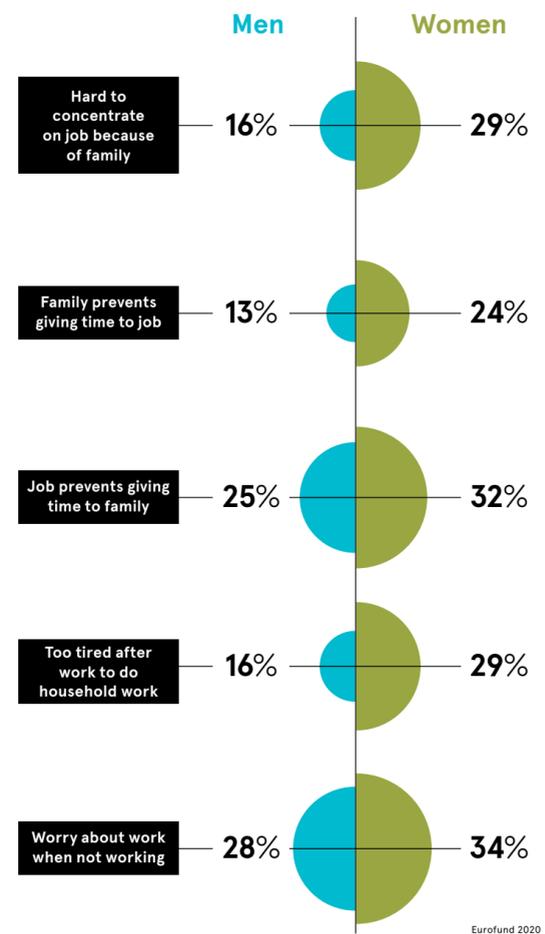
example. The sectors more likely to be closed are the ones with face-to-face contact. The divide isn't exactly blue collar white collar." But Dr Martina Bisello, research officer for the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, argues the pandemic has opened up more opportunity for some lower-paid white-collar workers, with the share of employees in the European Union's 27 member states working from home now at 48 per cent. "The typical profile of a remote worker was high skilled, high paid, typically white collar," she says. "The COVID crisis has, in some ways, neutralised and equalised the access for remote working for people, allowing younger workers the opportunity too." Bisello, who studied the effect of the pandemic on more than 130 occupations, also found dramatic differences in the "teleworkability" of jobs, by wages and by education level. Further inequalities, she says, could emerge from an increase in the household burden on women, juggling work, home-schooling and care. However, race-equality experts are concerned that Black and ethnic-minority blue-collar workers could be left in even more precarious and disadvantaged situations due to the shift to remote working, not only in the short term, but for years to come. "We know from our research that Black and minority-ethnic people are featuring disproportionately in essential work, as high-risk key workers," says Nick Treloar, research analyst at the Runnymede Trust, a leading independent race-equality UK think tank. "It's disproportionately and detrimentally affecting them. Basically all the risk factors are higher for them." Treloar says the inequalities are not only a race issue, but one involving class and poverty. "If you take Uber

“The government has to realise not everyone has lost in economic terms to the same extent

drivers, you have an overwhelming number of ethnic minorities," he says. "You're asking them to choose between putting food on the table and avoid getting the virus, which is a very hard choice to give them." Factors such as lower levels of savings and the fact that Black and minority ethnic people tend to live with more people in smaller households mean the impact of the pandemic has been particularly severe on them, he adds. Treloar argues that governments could do a number of things to help counter this inequality, including providing temporary housing for those who test positive, offering state-backed financial support for those who need to self-isolate and therefore cannot work, as well as helping to provide IT equipment for those who cannot afford it. "They could solve it quite easily," he says. "It would be better if the government supported the most vulnerable with the tools they need. It's time for action because race is still a social determinant of health in 2020 and we know the solutions." Dingel at Chicago University believes a period of substantial experimentation is necessary on the part of companies and governments to help reduce inequalities for blue-collar workers. "Companies, workers and governments are now exploring a much wider variety of working arrangements than before the pandemic," he says. "There's a lot of uncertainty because there's a lot to learn." Governments must attempt to envisage what aspects of remote working will remain in the long term and what the implications of this are, adds Oxford's Palomino. "Before it was a white-collar blue-collar divide, but now there will be those whose in-person work is restricted versus those whose work is unrestricted and those who do remote working," he says. "The government should ensure remote working is possible for as many people as possible, but we will always need people doing retail." Palomino says a form of furlough scheme may need to be made permanent to provide better job security for certain industries and this could be paid for in taxes by industries that have not suffered. "The government has to realise not everyone has lost in economic terms to the same extent," he says. "Policies and tax schemes should adapt to this and those who have done well economically may have to pay higher taxes to share the burden."

INEQUALITIES DRAWN ALONG GENDER LINES TOO

The percentage of European men and women who stated they were experiencing work-life conflicts during the pandemic



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OUT OF OFFICE

After a few teething problems, many office-based organisations around the world quickly adapted to home-working at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as digital technologies and remote connectivity enabled employees in disparate locations to continue working productively. But as the crisis rages on, how have feelings towards WFH changed? Are people still rejoicing in more flexible working patterns, or are they now craving a return to 'normality' in a traditional office setting?

70%

of global organisations said some portion of their workforce will be allowed to work remotely full-time

CBRE 2020

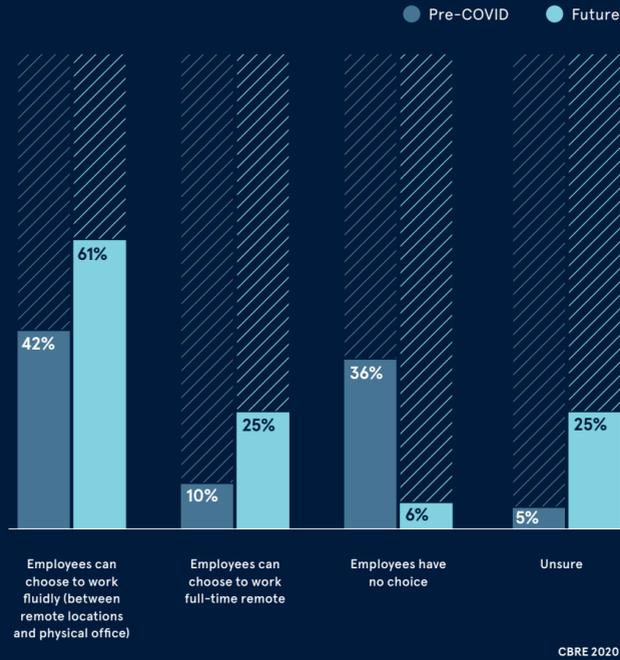
72%

say the COVID-19 crisis will likely have a significant impact on their long-term real estate strategy

CBRE 2020

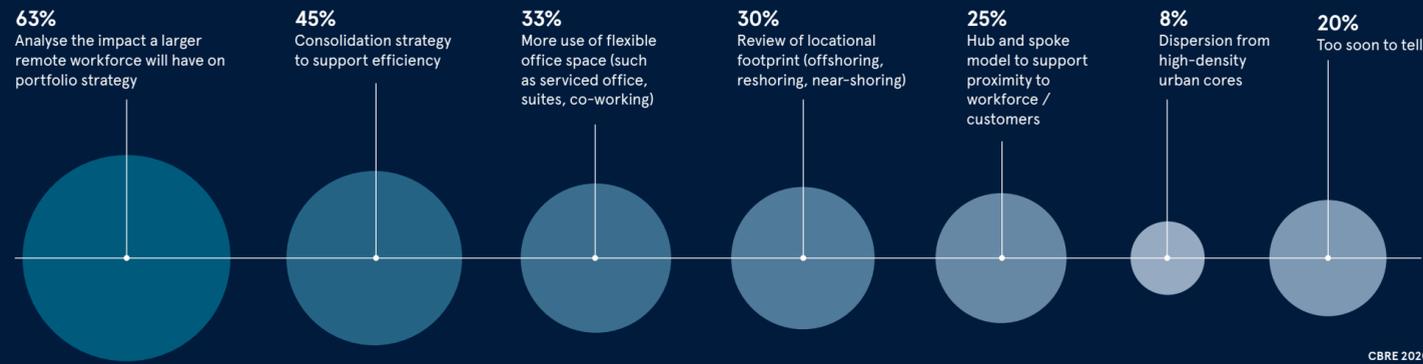
CHANGING EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT

Global organisations were asked, compared with pre-COVID, whether they will allow employees to choose when and where they work



FUTURE OFFICE STRATEGIES

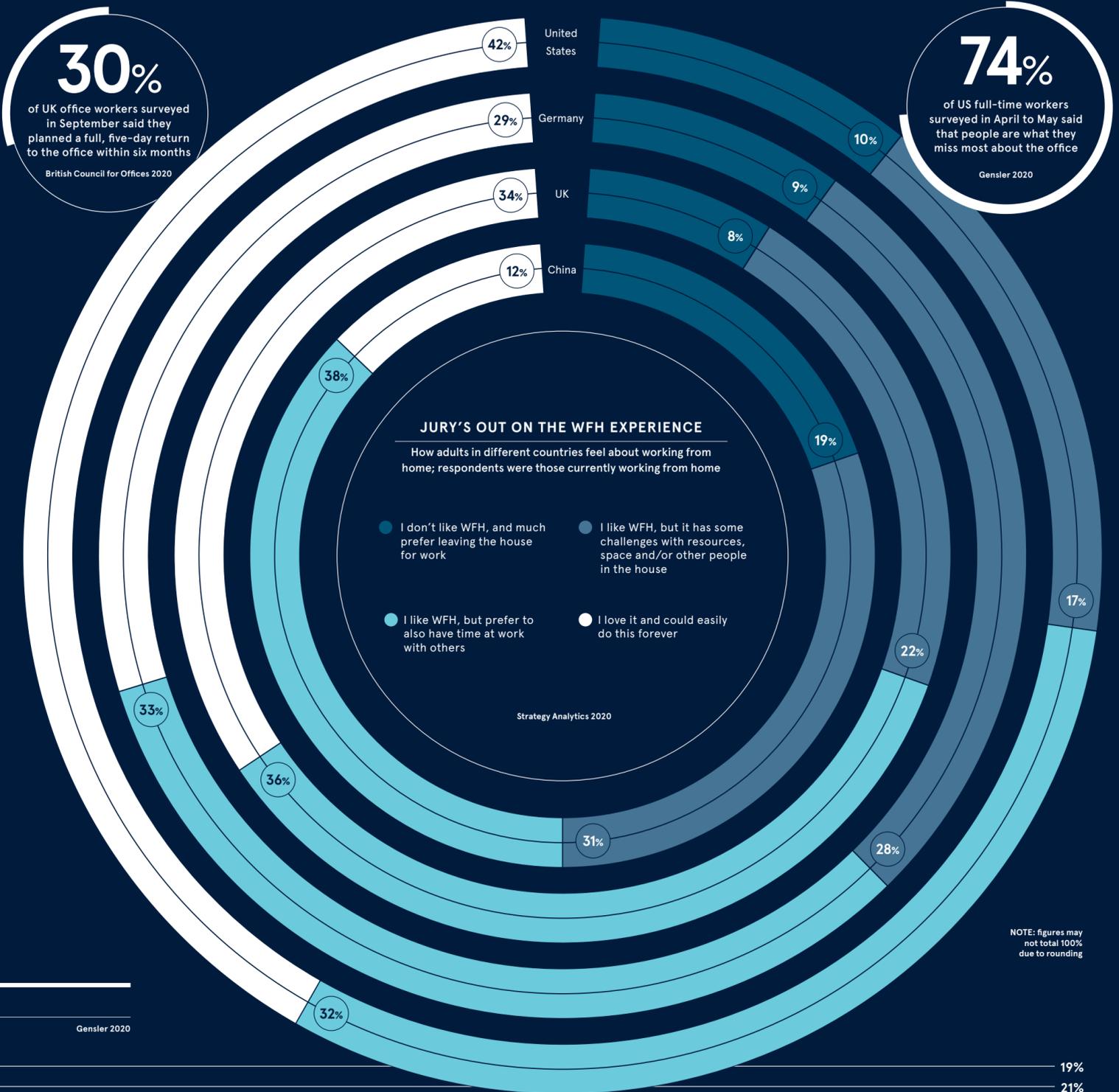
Global organisations were asked about changes they were making to future office portfolio strategies



CHANGES NEEDED TO OFFICES

How US workers feel office environments should change in order to make them comfortable returning

Gensler 2020



NOTE: figures may not total 100% due to rounding

Is Big Brother helping or hindering?

Employee-monitoring software can aid productivity and performance, or damage morale and trust, depending on who you talk to

Emma Woollacott

Productivity and employee-monitoring software is becoming increasingly popular, especially with so many staff now working from home. These packages enable management to monitor staff performance by recording clicks and keystrokes, time spent on websites, emails sent and more. But they have been criticised for invading workers' privacy.



For

"Since the start of the pandemic, we have seen three times the usual business from both direct customers and our partners," says Eli Sutton, vice president of global operations for productivity software supplier TeraMind.

With record numbers of people working from home, employers are, more than ever, looking to keep track of their staff. Indeed, according to data from Top10VPN, global demand for employee-monitoring software increased by 87 per cent in April, compared with the monthly average before the pandemic.

Productivity software can give managers a clear view of exactly what workers are doing, from the times they log in and out, to their active and idle periods during the day, and the websites and social networks they use.

"Anyone that has worked at home before knows it is very easy to become distracted for various reasons and it takes a certain level of discipline to work at home," says Stephen Morrow, co-owner of monitoring software supplier SentryPC. "Businesses are paying their employees to perform specific tasks and they want to make sure their time is focused on those tasks."

Monitoring also enables managers to assess the effectiveness of processes, as well as individuals, and to reassess targets or teams.

The advantages don't end there. There are clear security risks associated with home working, for example, and monitoring staff activity helps with both prevention and detection of security breaches and risky behaviour.

It can also help avoid micro-management and allow employers to demonstrate their objectivity when evaluating staff performance.

Tyler Sellhorn, director of customer experience at productivity software supplier Hubstaff, points out that employees can benefit from access to their own productivity data.

"Because work is tracked more easily, employees don't need to stop what they're doing to report back on progress. They can avoid the daily status calls or frequent check-ins with their manager," she says. "This allows for more focused work time."

With the information provided, employees can make smarter decisions and focus more time on critical work, while a dashboard gives employees a clear overview of their working week.

And, says Sutton, monitoring software can actually help employees keep staff on board through the pandemic.

"Not only are we seeing a dramatic uptick from new customers, but most of our active clients are adding licences as opposed to removing them, hiring rather than firing," he says.

"Apart from this, we're also getting reports from our customers that not only are their employees happier working from home, but they are also completing tasks at an accelerated rate. So employees are grateful for the opportunity to work from home."

“Businesses are paying their employees to perform specific tasks and they want to make sure their time is focused

Against

Earlier this year, Barclays was forced to scrap a system that tracked the time employees spent at their desks, with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) launching an investigation.

"People expect they can keep their personal lives private and that they are also entitled to a degree of privacy in the workplace," the ICO commented at the time. "If organisations wish to monitor their employees, they should be clear about its purpose and that it brings real benefits."

And many believe that it doesn't, with research from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) revealing that nearly half of workers believe they're being monitored at work and three-quarters saying the use of such technologies damages trust within the workplace.

Only one in eight thinks the benefits of workplace monitoring outweigh the downsides from a worker perspective and 43 per cent are concerned introduction of these technologies could make it easier for their privacy to be violated.

Monitoring on a smaller scale, such as using timesheets and aligning to sales targets, was seen as more acceptable.

"CIPD research shows that intrusive monitoring at work can damage trust and morale, and can cause stress and anxiety," says Hayfa Mohdzaini, CIPD's senior research adviser for data, technology and artificial intelligence.

"Moreover, employers can get into trouble if monitoring breaches an individual's right to respect for their private and family life."



Research from the Prospect Union reveals that employees are most uneasy about camera monitoring, with four in five saying it made them uncomfortable.

Two-thirds were uncomfortable with keystroke monitoring and three-quarters with the use of wearables.

And this translates to real issues with trust between employer and employee, with around half of workers saying they thought introducing monitoring software would damage their relationship with their manager. This figure rose to 62 per cent among younger workers.

As the pandemic continues, there's also a real danger of mission creep, says Professor J.S. Nelson, an expert on business law and ethics at Villanova University.

"New technologies come out and are spun with a pandemic-related aspect to them, but then you find out they are truly being used for other things after the initial rollout," she says.

"Once tracking software is installed in a building or on a device, even a personal cell phone, there is not much impetus for an employer to remove it and there is no check on what the employer can record."

“New technologies are spun with a pandemic-related aspect, but then you find out they are truly being used for other things

'All models were broken in the pandemic; as we look to 2021, it's important to strategise for how the game will change again'

An entire generation is now hooked on technology to power every function of their lives. And just as all great inventions create excitement as they make new things possible, the real question is not whether there will be more major technological changes in 2021, but how organisations can learn to better handle the disruptions that follow.

Real-time everything is the new wave in respect to skill management, learning, tasks, communications, performance and productivity, and health is observed as the key to sustainability for organisations of the future.

While the live workplace is truly missed, organisations are seeing productivity gains of at least one day a week as human resources activities, such as virtual onboarding, provide a better, faster and cheaper employee experience.

Many organisations have easy-to-use apps that let customers make instant transactions online. Behind the scenes, however, many of the company's own employees have wait times of two to eight weeks to get their necessary tools of the trade, including admin work, training, software logins. I am reminded of a conversation I had 12 years ago with the then-Tesco chief executive when he commented, "We know more about our customers and their behaviours than we do about ourselves and our employees."

UNLEASH customers such as Amazon have added 427,000 employees – 2,800 employees a day – over the past ten months and are delivering digital employee experiences in onboarding and learning. These virtual experiences will continue and evolve long after the coronavirus pandemic.

Imagine Zoom or Microsoft Teams calls where you have a conversational inbox that creates actions, automates work as you go, shows you all the interactions and current status of customer relationships, and alerts you on the performance analytics, learning needs and project status of employees as you interact with them.

What we have experienced in this crisis is how office distractions have been eliminated and replaced with real-time communication. In the months and years ahead, decision science will be taken to a whole new

level and a new chapter in trust of information versus intuition. Or, what all of us on the job refer to as data versus your gut feeling.

The business world changes fast and all models were broken in the pandemic; as we look to 2021, it's important to strategise for how the game will change again. Data as the new oil sits firmly evident at the top of the Fortune 200 and successful employee experience is becoming the sweet spot.

Tony Hsieh, founder and chief executive of Zappos, sadly passed away this year. Zappos was really the first company to adopt holacracy, with varying degrees of success, but adopting a concrete framework for encoding autonomy, agility and purpose alignment into your organisational DNA feels really smart ten months into a pandemic.

My personal view is, while well-intentioned employee practices are put on the table, they won't work unless full environmental factors are considered. This is just one example of what's already in place at UNLEASH, in our think tanks, as we create a new vision for what globalisation looks like.

In many ways, these fast-forward thinking practices were ahead of their time and, increasingly, new-wave practices of being self-managed are seeing results. Long gone is the idea of turning up to an office, hugging the CEO, being lured by a carrot and beaten by a stick to do your job or being paid handsomely for micro-management.

What this future world reveals is how exponential technologies continuously have humankind on the cusp of a change most people can't fathom and keeping up is where survival of the fittest rings true. ●



Marc Coleman
Founder and chief executive
unleashgroup.io

Quality audio powers the hybrid workforce

The coronavirus pandemic has transformed the way organisations operate, with the accelerated rise of hybrid working increasing the importance of audio in business

The sudden mass shift to home working in the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic forced companies to embrace collaboration technology in ways they hadn't previously. The result was a widespread realisation not only of the strong productivity people maintain at home, but of the crucial role reliable audio solutions play in maximising that. Importantly, it has ushered in an age of hybrid working sooner than expected.

When it comes to staying connected in this hybrid world, audio quality is clearly no longer a luxury. A recent global study of 2,000 business leaders by high-end audio solutions company EPOS found the role of audio is changing and it has never been a more significant business tool. Effective call quality leads to better customer service, employee engagement and collaboration, with four in five business decision-makers considering audio content to be very important and two in five saying it is essential.

"Working culture is changing and it's changing very quickly," says Jeppe Dalberg-Larsen, president of EPOS. "More of us are connecting with customers, colleagues and other professional contacts using audio technology than at any time in history. And with this rapidly growing reliance, the grade of equipment and technology we use to have these conversations is, or should be, becoming increasingly important."

With the already emerging hybrid-working trend accelerated by the current public health crisis, it is perhaps unsurprising that 83 per cent of leaders told the EPOS study that audio equipment has become more important to their business in the last two years. However, this is by no means a temporary trend that will be reversed when the pandemic is over. Just 2 per cent of decision-makers expect

“Audio and collaboration technologies have a vital role to play



investments in audio equipment to decrease in the coming years, with 57 per cent anticipating an increase.

This is because when it comes to recreating a face-to-face conversation, audio is king. Two thirds of business leaders said the quality of audio technology is more important than the quality of a laptop or PC equipment in enabling good communication with clients. Across the board, audio quality is outpacing other equipment considerations in the unified communications decision-making process, with 49 per cent listing it as the most important factor, 56 per cent considering it essential to their business and 34 per cent saying it is desired.

"It is encouraging to see employers across all markets and sectors taking their responsibility to provide quality audio equipment seriously," says Dalberg-Larsen. "Now is the time for leaders to ensure they have the right technology for the tailored experience that will help them deliver on their goals."

Business leaders can't afford for any parts of their conversations to be disrupted, which is why EPOS's research found quality of sound was cited as the highest priority when searching for an audio solution. Companies also want to help employees work at their full capacity, requiring equipment that is effective, long lasting and easy to use.

Premium audio, supported by technology such as artificial intelligence, will influence the optimal layout for businesses in a post-COVID world, helping companies to personalise their hybrid work experience.

"The 0.5 per cent you miss during a call becomes 100 per cent of your concern," says Dalberg-Larsen. "EPOS audio devices allow you to not only hear, but fully understand everything being said, from explicitly stated information to implicit details carried by pauses and tone of voice. Users can also be confident their message is delivered loud and clear, thanks to noise-cancelling microphones that filter out background noise and enhance speech."

"In the future, I expect to see the global workforce move to fully embrace hybrid working, to a model where we won't be in the office all the time, where people will work in a place that suits them. This will change the future of work forever, and audio and collaboration technologies have a vital role to play."

For more information please visit eposaudio.com

EPOS

How learning and development teams can help organisations emerge stronger

Digital transformation will be the platform that enables organisations to thrive after the turbulence caused by coronavirus. But skills will be the factor that ultimately determines success or failure, says **Thomas O'Reilly**, head of group strategy at QA

There is no doubt that we as a nation are in uncharted territory. Against the backdrop of a long-term issue of low levels of productivity in the UK, the coronavirus pandemic has impacted every organisation in the country, ushering in a recession that looks set to be even worse than the one caused by the global financial crisis of 2007-8.

Research conducted by the *New Statesman* in July found 82 per cent of UK-based business leaders expect the economic impact of COVID-19 to be more severe than the last recession, which itself was the worst in most people's memories. In fact, the scale of contraction seen as a result of the pandemic has not been seen since the South Sea bubble burst in 1720, some 300 years ago, albeit with more potential to bounce back if and when an effective vaccine is hopefully deployed.

If there is a ray of light for UK firms, it is the potential of digital, whether through broader and better adoption of online payment and finance systems, cloud, advanced artificial intelligence or big data as a means of boosting productivity and developing new products and customers.

According to Boston Consulting Group's *Digital Strategy Roadmap 2020* global study, more than 80 per cent of companies regard accelerating digital transformation as a strategic necessity and for many operating online it has become essential for survival as lockdown has restricted other channels.

But such projects and companies will succeed or fail as a result of the talent available. The digital talent shortage, which was already in evidence, is now turning into a drought as organisations scramble to identify those with the right skills to help them move forward. The reality is there is simply not enough talent to go around and the situation is set to get worse.

Bridging the gap

Those in human resources and learning and development (L&D) roles are in a prime position to create an effective

talent pipeline that will enable and drive digital transformation. Here at QA we believe there are a number of actions organisations can take to start closing this gap.

Firstly, they must conduct detailed skills mapping at a technical level, assessing the specific skill levels of their employees and comparing them with what is required by the organisation to support digital transformation. This needs to be the priority for L&D professionals. Educating themselves in the latest technology trends and working with the right business partner is essential to success. L&D professionals need to maintain an open mind, and also assess aptitude and attitude to learn as much as possible about staff's pre-existing tech knowledge and skills.

The second step is to recognise shortcomings in the quantity of staff available. The ability to foresee capacity issues in specific areas, such as cybersecurity or data engineers, requires a clear understanding of both the business needs and timeframes involved for programmes of all sizes across the organisation.

The third area to consider relates to widening the talent pool. With everybody looking for more tech talent, organisations can't keep recruiting from the same talent pools with the traditional qualifications and recruitment process. Instead, they need to look proactively into new pools of talent. Relaxing the constraint of a STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) degree, or comparable academic and technical qualifications, as a requirement is one way of increasing the number of potential candidates. This approach also supports greater diversity in recruiting, helping to increase BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) and female representation in the tech workforce.

Targeted selection

Taking this a step further, it's also possible to select candidates using assessments and algorithms, which look beyond background and education to get to the underlying attitude



and aptitude that matters. This is the approach we take at QA when recruiting for digital bootcamps, an intensive 12-week training programme, which transforms participants from a complete novice into ready-to-go junior-level talent.

These can take people who may not have a tech background and in a short period of time, usually three months, help them become work-ready in a tech job, such as software development or robotic process automation. This allows firms to assess individuals on their attitude and aptitude to learn new skills, rather than existing knowledge, and gets them to a point where they are productive quickly.

Another route is tech apprenticeships. These are longer programmes than bootcamps, but take those who have taken alternate paths into employment, potentially from a more socially diverse background, and build up their skills over a period of 12 to 24 months.



Talent will be the determining factor of success in a digital transformation

At the same time, organisations need to reskill staff that no longer have roles. In 2013, AT&T reinvented itself as a digital business and reskilled more than 100,000 employees to create that tech talent. We've recently worked with Nationwide, taking those from areas where there is now less demand and moving them into tech positions. Not only does this approach reduce the need for redundancies, it is also much more reliable because these individuals have already worked for, and are known by, the organisation. It means they can inject new skills without necessarily changing people.

Here, firms must take a rigorous approach to skills assessment, using an L&D platform to help managers identify skills and monitor development. This not only supports skills development, but also helps L&D teams to demonstrate tangible results of the reskilling programmes put in place.

Finally, HR and L&D professionals must lead discussions at a strategic level. It can take six months to make a successful hire and 18 months before they reach peak productivity, so taking a long-term view is essential. If tech talent is integral to the future success of the organisation, and let's face it, there are few organisations where it is not, those leading the process need to be looking at a three to five-year horizon.

In a world digitalising fast, most organisations change too late and too slowly.

So now is the time to act. Talent will be the determining factor of success in a digital transformation and, as is hopefully now clear, there are a myriad of ways for HR professionals to broaden the skills of the organisation and bring diversity to their talent pipelines.

However, don't try to do too much. Capacity is scarce and, as any good strategist will tell you, a successful strategy is as much about what you don't pursue as what you do. So line up talent initiatives with the organisation's big bets, then make big moves to support it. Those moves will support true transformation of talent and position the organisation to emerge stronger from the 2020 pandemic.

QA is the UK's largest tech skills and talent provider. It works with organisations to help identify skills requirements and develop the talent needed to emerge stronger. In the last year, it has trained more than 293,000 individuals and served more than 5,000 corporate clients. To find out more please visit qa.com



CO-WORKING SPACES

Has the shared office finally had its day?

With rising health concerns and falling footfall during the coronavirus pandemic, co-working spaces in city centres have taken a serious hit, but all is not necessarily lost

Angelica Malin

This year, the face of work changed forever. 2020 saw the daily grind get a new look. Gone are office tea rounds and packed tube carriages, replaced with Zoom calls and commuting to your living room.

The challenges facing the co-working industry are clear: with more people working from home than ever before, demand is reduced. And hit by the coronavirus recession, many freelancers can no longer afford the spaces either.

Speaking to chief executives, however, the outlook is largely optimistic. Flexible workspace made up 0.5 per cent of total office space in 2014, grew to 7 per cent by 2020 and was predicted to be 30 per cent by 2030. Co-working is not dead; in fact, it might just be the solution to many businesses' problems as we emerge from the pandemic.

Hygiene is a big issue for shared offices. Jitesh Patel, chief executive of office design experts Peldon Rose, explains that businesses now want private space and their own front door. This, of course, is a huge challenge to co-working spaces, whose very premise is built around shared space and socialising.

Gabriela Hersham, co-founder and chief executive of co-working group Huckletree, which has seven UK sites, says making their venues feel safe is a top priority. They have a cleaning team of "lifesavers", who are specially trained in hourly COVID-secure cleaning measures.

The biggest benefit of co-working spaces before the pandemic – flexible contracts – has been their biggest downfall during it



A WeWork co-working space in Tokyo this May. A month earlier, the Japanese multinational conglomerate SoftBank Group scrapped a deal to buy \$3bn WeWork stock, as the company warned it didn't expect to hit its financial targets in 2020

But a drop in demand is unavoidable. With pay-as-you-go contracts, customers can simply choose to end their membership. Unlike traditional office space, where you might have a five-year lease, you're not tied into a difficult contract. As Tushar Agarwal, co-founder and chief executive of office-finder platform HubbleHQ, explains: "The biggest benefit of co-working spaces before the pandemic – flexible contracts – has been their biggest downfall during it."

Vacancy creates a huge cash-flow problem for the spaces, made worse by national lockdowns. Patel predicts 2021 will see increased vacancy, with the added loss of income from day-hire meeting rooms and event spaces, which are no longer in demand. But the biggest loss will come from small and medium-sized enterprises of 20 to 30 people that will, thanks to successful home working, realise they no longer need an office at all.

Others believe the drop in occupancy is overestimated. Huckletree had the strongest year in its history, signing 120 new member businesses during 2020. Hersham attributes this growth to a longing for community; it's no longer about the need for an office, but about curated communities, with skill-sharing, networking and team-building opportunities.

Flexibility is the key to survival and Agarwal sees the future of co-working as a hybrid-work approach, where companies base their headquarters at a shared space, but have limited capacity. Companies can create a weekly rota of employees who are present at one time, allowing flexibility and cost-saving, using a "credits" system.

He sees work falling into three "buckets" post-pandemic: a head-quarters, home working, and on-demand space, such as with day passes. Not only is this a more cost-efficient way of running your company, but it also enables greater flexibility.

Antonio Wedral, founder of e-commerce specialists Novos, is one chief

executive who has adopted this approach. His team has grown by 50 per cent during the pandemic. They have a weekly rota and allocate WeWork workspace credits to 15 staff, who book a desk to go in once a week. Opting for his model over a permanent lease, Wedral says: "This hybrid approach has saved us money on rent and our team love it; they get flexibility and we can continue to grow our culture despite the limitations."

Another trend which may ensure survival is unprecedented interest from corporate occupiers. WeWork is aiming for 70 per cent corporate occupiers by the end of 2021, focusing on attracting corporate clients,

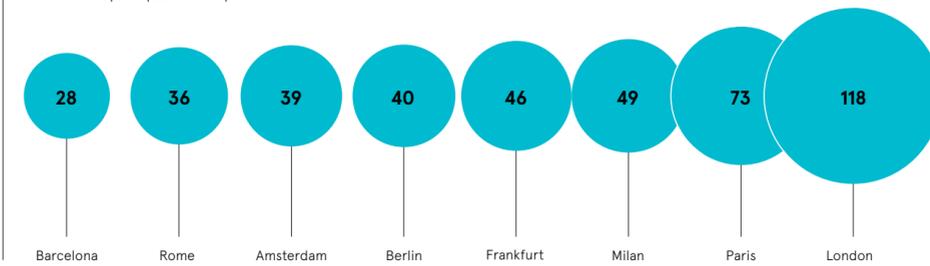
Catarina King, who runs Society1 in Preston, has seen a lot of corporate overspill in their shared office space, as more companies move their innovation hub away from London. According to HubbleHQ, 86 per cent of employees want to work somewhere other than the office at least once a week, though only 15 per cent want to do so every day, and perhaps working close to home is the next move.

It seems co-working spaces may have a bright future after all. The office isn't dead, it's simply taking a new form that offers businesses of all sizes greater flexibility, choice and lower risk, which might work better for employees everywhere. ●

THE PRICE OF FLEXIBLE OFFICE SPACE

Colliers International 2020

The cost of rent in co-working spaces in city business districts around Europe, which could be set to change dramatically post-COVID. (Price in euros per square metre per month)



DIVERSITY

Stumbling blocks on the journey to D&I

There is no quick fix to improve diversity and inclusion, but careful thought and consideration can prevent organisations making five major mistakes

Shahed Ezaydi

One of the many things the Black Lives Matter movement has done this year is to shine a bright light on diversity and inclusion (D&I) in the workplace. And when you consider 66 per cent of FTSE 100 companies have all-white management teams and just 3.5 per cent of senior executives come from a BAME – Black, Asian and minority ethnic – background, you can start to see why.

It doesn't just stop at a lack of diverse representation either. It's also the lack of a safe and inclusive workplace culture. According to Glassdoor, 55 per cent of employed adults have witnessed or experienced discrimination in the workplace. Employees should expect to feel safe and comfortable in their working environment and not alienated or isolated by their organisation.

Renewed discussion around D&I in working environments has exposed wide cracks and revealed five common mistakes companies make.



Using the same recruitment and hiring process to find diverse talent

A common mistake when it comes to embracing D&I in the workplace is approaching the hiring and recruitment process in the same way as before. Sonya Barlow, a D&I expert and founder of Like Minded Females, says "companies are not expanding their reach when it comes to looking for a talent pool", while also attempting to attract diverse talent through the same old recruiters. Companies are simply not diversifying their efforts to find the available talent.

Mac Alonge, founder of The Equal Group, says companies need to be looking at the "big picture" when hiring new employees. Where is the

vacancy being advertised? Are the ads accessible to the people you're trying to reach? Which recruitment agencies are being used? These are just some of the questions employers need to be asking themselves.

To bridge this gap and successfully bring on new and diverse employees, Barlow suggests working with community groups and consultants to ensure all parts of the hiring process are diverse and inclusive. A new focus on remote and online working has shown companies can consider "new talent without borders", reducing the need to approach the same recruitment agencies again and again, she says.



Hiring a D&I lead to fix the issues

There is an assumption that hiring a D&I lead will fix everything. Glassdoor recently reported that June saw a huge 50 per cent increase in D&I job openings. But bringing in a D&I lead can be just another form of tokenistic hiring, says Leyya Sattar, co-founder of The Other Box. She says that unless the D&I lead has "buy-in from senior leadership, budget and influence, it will be a superficial, surface-level action and ultimately a waste of money".

The Black Lives Matter movement has exposed companies that use diverse employees as token hires and ultimately approach D&I as a tick-box exercise. That's not to say companies shouldn't hire a D&I lead. An employee dedicated to D&I in the workplace is a good thing.

But, as Sattar says, this role must become an integral part of the company and not just viewed as an add-on, if companies want to see real benefits. They must be given adequate budgets, staff and the freedom to implement effective policies.



Depending on diverse employees to organise D&I initiatives

As well as token hires, some companies decide to look inwards to their diverse employees. These employees may have no specific skills and experience when it comes to D&I, but have simply been approached because of their personal characteristics.

Sattar points out that The Other Box has had hundreds of conversations with people from diverse backgrounds who've had to take on the responsibility of their company's D&I efforts. She says: "It cannot fall to the

most marginalised to do the work, or for them to do it without compensation, when D&I isn't part of their job description." D&I should not be viewed as something that only affects those from marginalised backgrounds.

Instead, companies need to be properly prioritising and investing in D&I efforts. Training programmes, such as unconscious bias training, should be put in place and regularly maintained. Experts should be consulted on how to establish D&I policies and practices in the workplace, and be paid for their work. This way, extra responsibility isn't passed off to employees, while also creating an inclusive working environment.

Classing D&I as one and the same

Another crucial mistake that companies make is grouping D&I together, without distinction. This assumption couldn't be further from the truth. Liz Johnson, founder of The Ability People and Podium, explains that "diverse hiring doesn't automatically translate into an inclusive culture". If a company has only thought about the diverse representation of employees, without giving proper thought to the working environment and culture these employees are walking into, that's a failure on the inclusion front, she says.

The differences that impact individuals and their needs at work must be recognised, if companies

want real change. Johnson uses the example of how disabled employees can be treated. She says: "Even with all the talent in the world, if workers with disabilities are parachuted into roles without the appropriate resources, equipment and support, they cannot be expected to do their jobs to the best of their ability."

People need to feel safe and supported at work. Alonge says employers can do this by taking the time to have genuine conversations with their employees, to give them a voice and to also see if additional support is needed. Because, as Jess Mally, writer and co-founder of Belovd Agency, explains, organisations that fail to look beyond the issue of access and hiring tend to find there is a high turnover among the diverse talent coming in.



Fixating on signing pledges and commitments

The final mistake is one that has become much more common in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement: the signing of company pledges and commitments. "Human resources departments have become public relations departments, where the way a company is perceived is more important than the reality," says Jack Mizel, founder and chief executive of Pride 365.

There is a fixation on wanting to appear a diverse company with an inclusive environment, without doing any of the work. It's an

attempt by companies to cut corners and avoid investing in the long, and sometimes uncomfortable, D&I process.

Signing public pledges is an empty gesture if it isn't backed by action. So instead of making grand statements, companies should focus on work behind the scenes. D&I in the workplace shouldn't be viewed as a potential PR opportunity, but something that will benefit the company as a whole. D&I is for everyone. As Mally concludes: "A shift in perspective to an understanding that a fair, equitable and diverse workplace will ultimately benefit all of us is absolutely essential for D&I work to be fruitful." ●



84%
of business leaders say a physical workplace contributes to instilling vision and purpose

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Managing the future workforce

Making the right technology choices will greatly impact how businesses interact with employees and navigate the way forward after coronavirus

The coronavirus pandemic has brought about unprecedented change for thousands of businesses and their employees. With the dramatic shift for many organisations from physical workplaces to almost fully virtual working, traditional notions of what it means to “manage” someone are being challenged at a scale and in a timeframe never before imagined.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the human resources department. Charged with the general welfare of a workforce they cannot physically meet and whose behaviour they cannot easily observe, HR finds itself unprepared to perform many of its strategic services.

These include recruitment, workforce optimisation and retention, along with supporting career development for employees and supporting performance management for managers, and tackling thorny people problems that lower productivity and feed turnover.

Meanwhile, COVID-19 has driven morale to an all-time low and the C-suite is looking for more impact, not less, from HR’s strategic services.

While for some this is a perfect storm, for others it might be a perfect opportunity. Navigating the sea-change in how people work and what it means to be employed, we may see a sorting of winners and losers. Innovators in the new paradigm are likely to achieve breakout performance and dominance with others unable to make the evolutionary leap to manage their workforce in a new way.

“Companies have lost their home-court advantage,” says Dimitri Boylan, chief executive of Avature, a software company that supports strategic HR programmes in 110 of the Fortune 500 and 23 of the FTSE 100 companies, including Siemens, Metro Bank and Deloitte.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that the knowledge worker is ambivalent at best about returning to the office after COVID. Companies including Twitter have confirmed that employees don’t ever have to go back to the office, unless they want to. Even staunchly traditional fund management firm Schroders is allowing employees to continue working from home beyond the pandemic, marking a huge shift in the way the City works.

This is a rejection of the office experience, where power, status, and privilege are hard-wired into the corner office, explains Boylan. But at the same time, we see employees have not mastered the work-from-home model with its short-term increases in productivity quickly followed by a combination of burnout, low productivity and disorientation.

Will a new engagement model arise out of this turmoil? Boylan says: “Progressive companies have begun implementing strategic HR transformations based on better engagement models and new technology, but I don’t have a single customer that feels its mission accomplished.”

“Building on a new paradigm of engagement based on influence requires innovation: creation, destruction and recreation to find out what works.”

This type of agility will be the hallmark of success for strategic HR going forward. And it’s pretty clear existing core HR technology is not fit for this purpose.

Now is the time to really leverage technology as an enabler of business. An engaged workforce is the lynchpin of success and companies that invested in creating cool offices to help facilitate collaboration, communication and productivity must rethink how they nurture a positive and productive culture.



“The overturning of traditional workplace structures means you will see the emergence of social networking features and even advertising systems embedded within HR technology

The new challenge for HR and business leaders is how to create engagement in virtual spaces that doesn’t just feel like the physical workspace, but a better workplace.

A solution that can respond to challenges beyond working from home, think diversity and inclusion and generational shifts in attitude.

What tools can be used to create these important intangibles in a remote setting? “It is a huge challenge,” acknowledges Boylan. “HR leaders need to be able to create experiences over the internet that support real HR strategies.”

Now that employment is untethered from commuting, do we see dramatic changes in how recruiting is done?

“Recruiting has been transitioning to an engagement model for some time now. Agility in the form of advanced campaign design and automated personalisation is built in to modern customer relationship management systems,” he explains.

But recruiting without retention is wasted effort. “True. If you are not looking at refining your retention models, while you are engaging employees, then from a HR perspective you are lost,” says Boylan.

Engagement starts before an employee’s official first day, he says. Branded, relevant and personalised communications, such as a welcome email from a senior leader, a virtual agenda for the first week, job-specific training opportunities and even a virtual mentor, can help reduce churn and ramp up productivity.

Then what about those difficult conversations? Without the informal daily interactions and feedback of a physical workplace, getting a tough review in an online space can become a beacon of negativity.

The solution, says Boylan, is continuous review in the flow of work: a steady stream of honest and timely feedback, a form of engagement that is paramount for remote workers.

Engagement with purpose certainly seems like a good antidote for the current situation. And if the

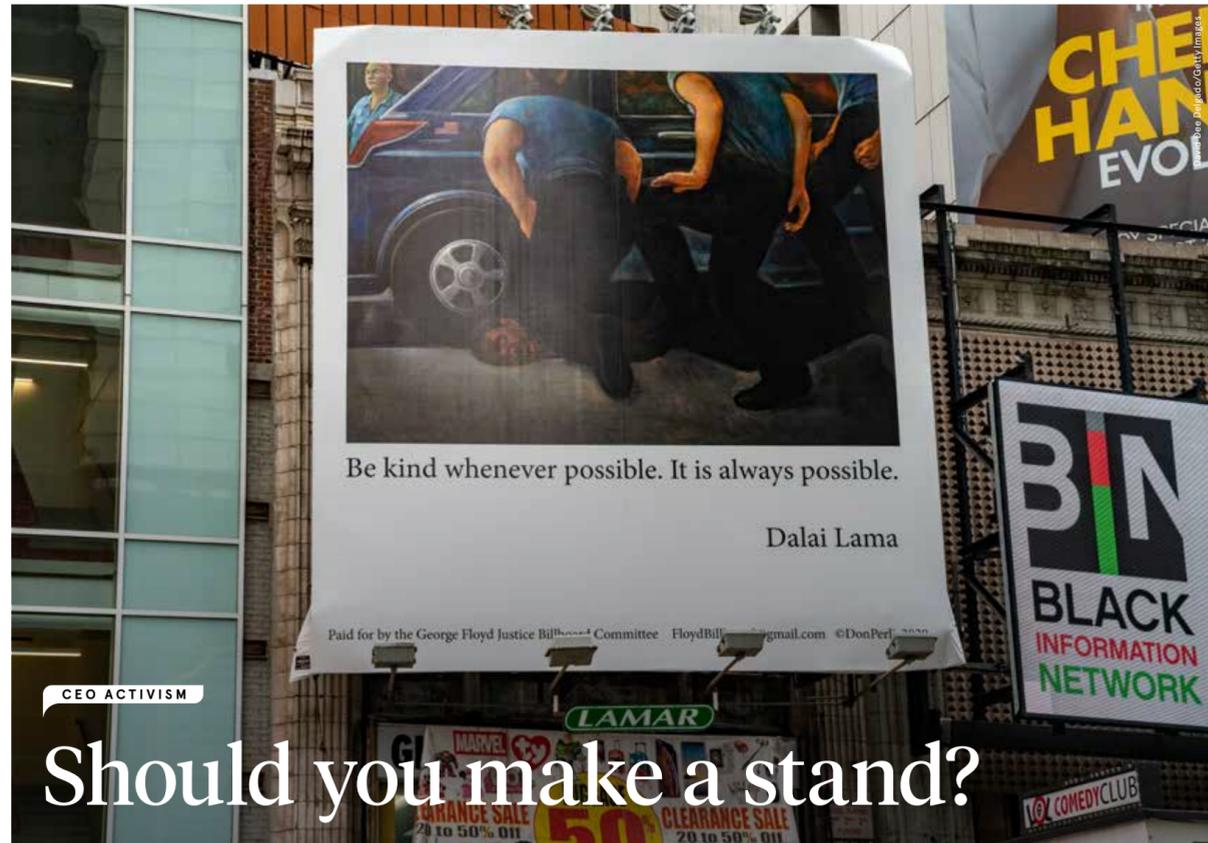
HR approach to the post-pandemic workforce is agile and adaptable, the opportunities for HR to redesign the workplace are limitless.

Making the right technology choices through which you interact with employees will greatly impact the way forward. These are choices that facilitate an agile game plan and creation of adaptable programmes, which leverage new technology to create the modern work experience.

The overturning of traditional workplace structures means you will see the emergence of social networking features and even advertising systems embedded within HR technology, says Boylan, opening the door to big data and new insights.

Those organisations that pull together a modern technology platform for the design of innovative practices have the best chance of adjusting their culture, hiring across global markets, boosting internal mobility, improving performance and expanding the diversity of their workforce in 2021.

To find out more about how Avature can help your business please visit www.avature.net



CEO ACTIVISM

Should you make a stand?

Customers want companies with a purpose and this starts from the top, but there are pitfalls to being a chief executive who speaks out

Cath Everett

CEO activism can be a double-edged sword, but chief executives are increasingly recognising the value of taking a stance on key societal issues, not least in terms of employee engagement.

Although adopting a public position on important matters is still not widespread, it is set to become more commonplace over the next few years and for good reason. According to research and advisory firm Gartner, 87 per cent of staff now expect senior executives to make a public stand on issues that are relevant to the business, while just under three-quarters believe the same should be true even for unrelated matters.

The biggest push in this direction is coming from millennials and Generation-Z workers, many of whom are not only socially active and vocal themselves, but will also make up the single biggest segment of the workforce over the next five years, which means the subject is not going to go away.

As a result, those senior leaders who fail to don the CEO activism mantle around issues of their own choosing risk being overtaken by

to do something positive can have an equally positive effect on employee motivation and morale”.

On the downside though, if leaders get it wrong, they can do serious damage not only to employee engagement, but also to the company’s wider brand and reputation. “If a particular stance seems opportunistic or as if someone’s jumping on the bandwagon, it can feel jarring and will be considered insincere and cynical,” Gitsham explains. “So it’s a really good thing if done in the right way, but it’s pretty negative if not.”

It is this fear of sipping at a poisoned chalice that puts many senior executives off from going down this route in the first place. While the acceptability of sticking their heads above the parapet is more widely recognised than in the past, few have benefited from the leadership development training necessary to prepare them for speaking out publicly in ways that avoid potential misinterpretation and subsequent attack, particularly in polarised societies, such as the UK and America.

But, as Gitsham points out, leaders are essentially damned if they do and damned if they don’t. “While you need to be aware of the risks to the brand, you also need to balance it against the risk of not saying anything at all, as both approaches will inevitably upset someone,” he says.

Put another way, says Matt Gitsham, associate professor and director of the Ashridge Centre for Business and Sustainability at Hult International Business School, there is “much evidence that those organisations trying

As the ramifications of George Floyd’s death, and ensuing protests, continue to be felt in business and beyond, CEOs must decide whether or not to use their platforms to serve social causes

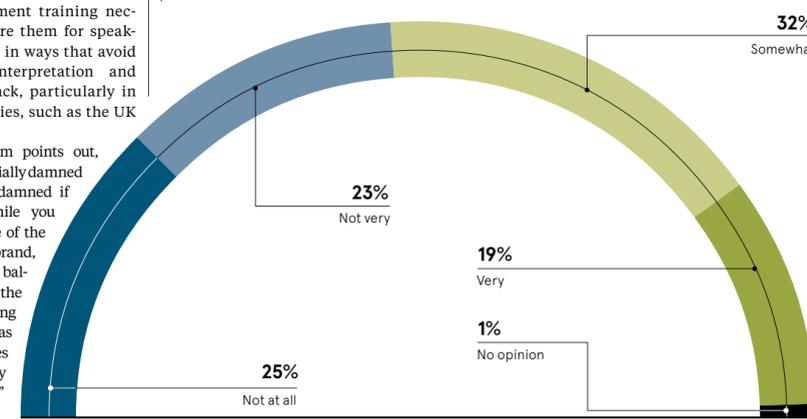
As a result, not only is it beneficial to obtain professional guidance, but it is also advisable for senior executives to support only those issues that chime with their own beliefs and values, although ideally they should connect with the core purpose of the business too.

“The crucial thing is that you believe in it, as taking a stance will only work if it’s meaningful, authentic and aligns with what you’re doing in the organisation,” says Gitsham. “So if you speak out against institutional racism and can talk about what you’re doing to tackle it internally, it’s much more powerful and convincing than if

AMERICANS SPLIT ON CORPORATE ACTIVISM

Pew Research Center 2020

The percentage of US adults who believe it’s important for companies to publicly address social or political issues



“It’s partly driven by a desire to serve society, but there’s also the view that by doing so, employees will be more motivated and work harder for you

you’ve never done anything about it before.”

In the case of a sudden epiphany though, public statements must also go hand in hand with a meaningful programme of work to follow through and effect change, he adds.

Interestingly, the importance of taking action is also reflected in Gartner’s research. It reveals that if business leaders simply make a public statement on a given topic without doing anything, staff satisfaction rates fall by 38 per cent as cynicism and disillusion set in. If words are backed up with appropriate activities though, engagement leaps by 60 per cent.

Another consideration when trying to get CEO activism right is discussing the reality on the ground with a range of stakeholder groups, which includes employees. This involves canvassing opinions on various topics, but it also means “doing the groundwork, finding the gaps and blind spots, and understanding what’s going on” in the organisation day to day, says Vann.

This kind of approach not only boosts individual credibility and prevents basic errors, but also helps create a wider feeling of shared purpose and values internally and externally, which again boosts engagement.

“You don’t want your brand to be wholly wrapped up in, and dependent on, the CEO. The issue also needs to be accepted as part of the organisational culture so other people can own it in their own way too. But if the CEO can infect others with their passion, that’s where it becomes really powerful,” Vann concludes. ●

C-SUITE

Do you need a chief diversity officer?

Hiring an executive to spearhead diversity and inclusion initiatives might seem like a step in the right direction, but assigning such an important responsibility to a single person is risky

Karam Filfilan

The murder of George Floyd on May 25 in Minneapolis sparked a wave of protests across the globe. As the Black Lives Matter movement grew, society was forced to confront the systemic inequality embedded in our day-to-day lives, from schools to courtrooms, policing to housing and, of course, in our workplaces.

Panicked business leaders felt pressured to act. Many organisations offered statements of support, with some donating to the movement. Yet others chose to look inwards, promising to change how they operated. According to data from LinkedIn, job postings for diversity and inclusion (D&I) roles jumped 100 per cent in the 45 days after the protests began, with leadership jobs, such as chief diversity officer, prime among them.

But here's another LinkedIn statistic: the median tenure for a chief diversity officer is three years, compared with six years for chief executives. And another statistic, from CNBC: six years after their first diversity reports, Alphabet, Apple, Facebook, Microsoft and Twitter have only seen single digit increases in their percentage of Black employees. So are chief diversity officers actually helping or are they just there to make it look like companies are trying to change?

"Of course, chief diversity officers are destined to fail because when they're appointed, they're left on their own to change culture with everybody paying lip service to them being on the executive. In truth, the whole construct of diversity as an add-on to a business, rather than a central talent strategy, is the problem," says Simon Fanshawe, co-founder of Diversity by Design.

He believes business leaders are confused about what they're trying

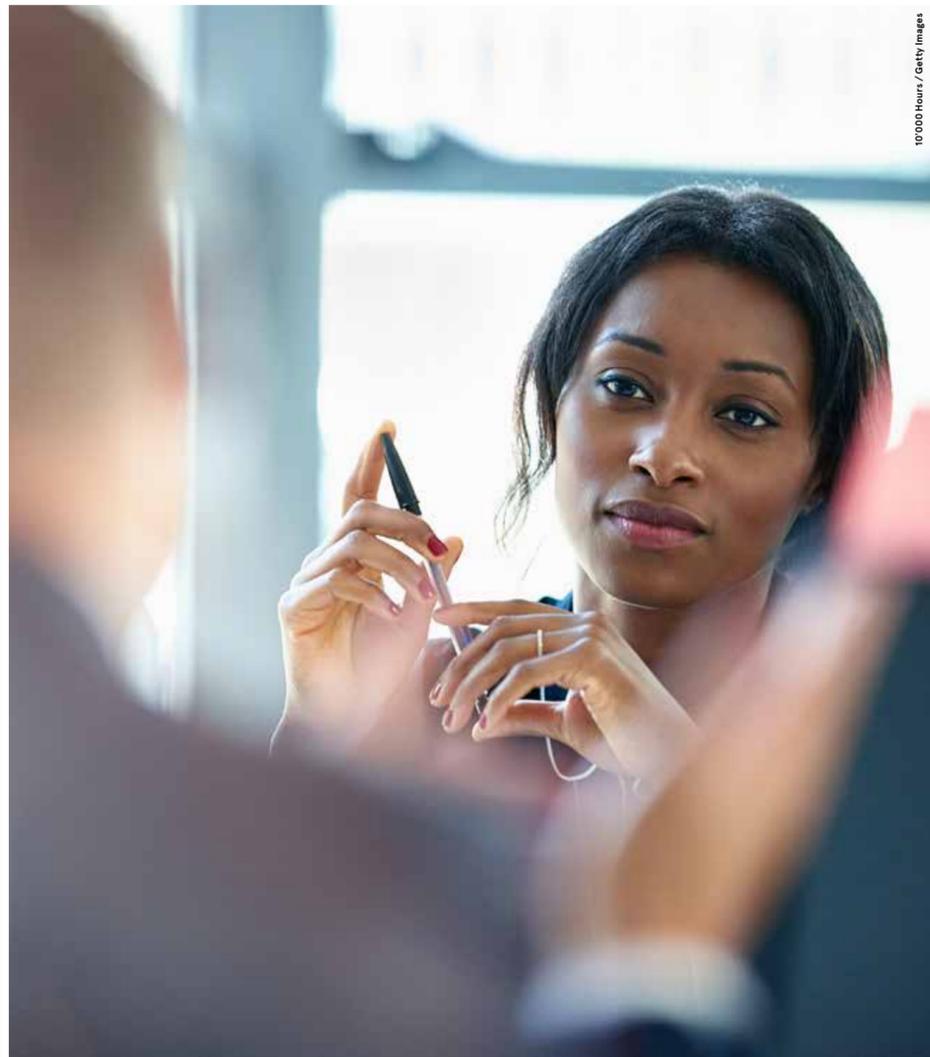
to achieve with D&I. For Fanshawe, too many businesses think of diversity in terms of a deficit – "we need more female employees" – rather than as an asset – "more female employees will make us better at this objective". Doing so means diversity becomes about numbers, rather than a central part of what makes a business succeed.

The second issue is around inclusion. "People define inclusion in the following way: 'to be inclusive, we have to use this language, think this way and behave this way, and if you don't, we'll exclude you'," says Fanshawe.

"Actually, inclusion is about enabling spaces for difficult conversations about differences within your organisation. These spaces should encourage disagreement, as that's how we get progress. It is a hard thing to do, but it's the essence of good management."

Human resources expert Josh Bersin recently wrote a blog post entitled "Chief diversity officer: the toughest job in business". In it, he argues diversity is a management strategy, not an HR programme and that fairness and equality have to be part of organisational culture, not a set of initiatives.

“It's partly driven by a desire to serve society, but there's also the view that by doing so, employees will be more motivated and work harder for you



10 000 Hours / Getty Images

Claudia Iton, founder of Replete Consulting, agrees that chief diversity officers are destined to have little lasting impact unless they have buy-in from the top. She spent 15 years in senior HR roles at Unilever, including six as global HR director.

"There isn't always the strongest link between diversity agendas and strategic business objectives in many organisations. Without this, D&I teams are at risk of being buffeted along by what the competition is seen to be doing, losing out on resources and leadership attention," she says.

However, Iton believes societal change is having a huge impact on businesses and changing demographics means workplaces will have to get D&I issues right or face losing out on both customers and talent.

"Millennials and Gen Z are the consumers and future talent of all serious organisations and they are solidly behind movements like Black Lives Matter. They will demand inclusive workplaces. As more businesses cultivate such workplaces, this will drive competition," she says. "So, today's push to be inclusive will become a pull as the realities of the talent magnet effect alongside enhanced creative and financial performance drive more businesses to get on board."

The social impact of not getting diversity right is increasingly occupying business leaders' thoughts. Gen Zers, born between 1996 and 2010, will make up a quarter of the world's population by 2021, with more than two-thirds (68 per cent) expecting brands to contribute positively to society, according to a survey by Facebook.

Engaging this new audience in the workplace is about more than free lunches and onsite gyms. COVID-19 has put paid to that perk anyway. But rather it's about building long-term value through social, environmental and sustainable initiatives. In the future of work, business value will be about more than just financial success. It will also be about what an organisation stands for, how it engages consumers and the skills of its talent pool. D&I is at the heart of these issues.

"Today's leaders have to be better at inclusion, better at empathy and better at looking after people. The domain of responsibility for leaders has shifted from just making money to ensuring you take your people with you," says Jim Carrick-Birtwell, founder and chief executive of Future Talent Group, a publishing and events company for senior business leaders.

Its recent Future Talent Conference focused on D&I, with Carrick-Birtwell arguing talent professionals have a major opportunity to shape future workforces that are more representative of society. More conversations about inclusion are needed, but they must lead to action.

"Too often, the whole D&I debate is driven by people who hold the power wanting to look like they care. They control the narrative and outcomes, and we don't hear from those who have been marginalised. That's not good enough," he says.

So how can diversity officers truly make a difference in an organisation? Sarah Jenkins, managing director at Saatchi & Saatchi London

107%

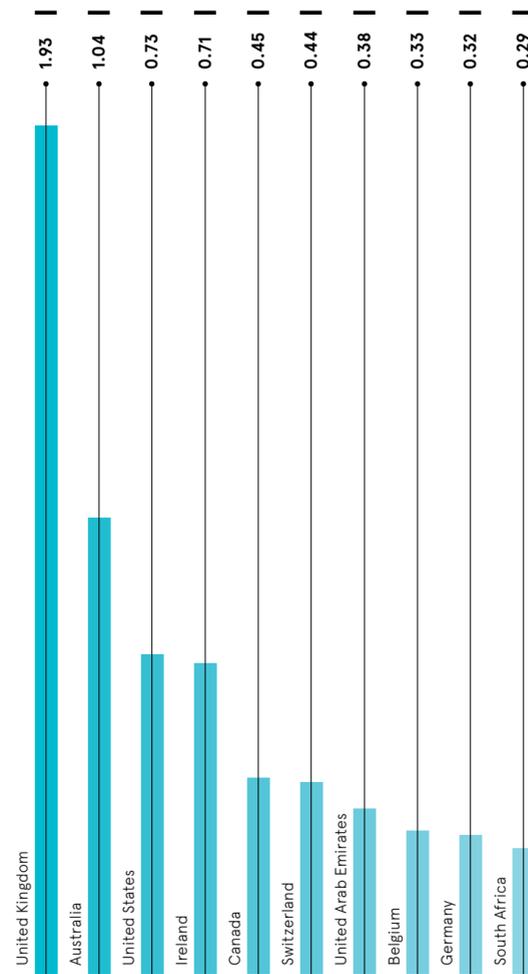
increase in the number of Heads of Diversity over the past 5 years

LinkedIn 2020

GLOBAL LEADER IN DIVERSITY ROLES

LinkedIn 2020

Number of diversity and inclusion roles per 10,000 employees



and co-founder of the Advertising Diversity Task Force, believes there is no shortcut to improving D&I in business; there are ways of bringing teams together.

"To create solutions, you have to understand the problem, not just at leadership levels, but across the entire business," says Jenkins.

The Black Lives Matter movement is a case in point, she says. Saatchi & Saatchi's employees had a real willingness to learn more about the protests, but the complexity of the issues were a barrier.

To change this, the advertising agency ran a three-hour diversity awareness programme for employees, deep diving into the movement to give the organisation some core knowledge and examples from which to continue learning. They invited some clients and key partners to the event to widen the debate, with individual departments tasked with creating roadmaps towards greater inclusion.

"D&I is about continuous learning and having lots of conversations. It's a complex issue that requires investment and leadership energy to succeed," says Jenkins.

The role of chief diversity officer is a thankless one. Often brought

“Diversity and inclusion is about continuous learning and having lots of conversations. It requires investment and leadership energy to succeed

in to clear up after high-profile scandals, they provide a convenient scapegoat should D&I issues subsequently fail. And while having a chief diversity officer is better than not having one at all, the reality is that achieving inclusion in the workplace goes beyond one individual or one department. Instead, it's the role of the organisation as a whole, from leadership teams to junior employees. The future of your business depends on it. ●

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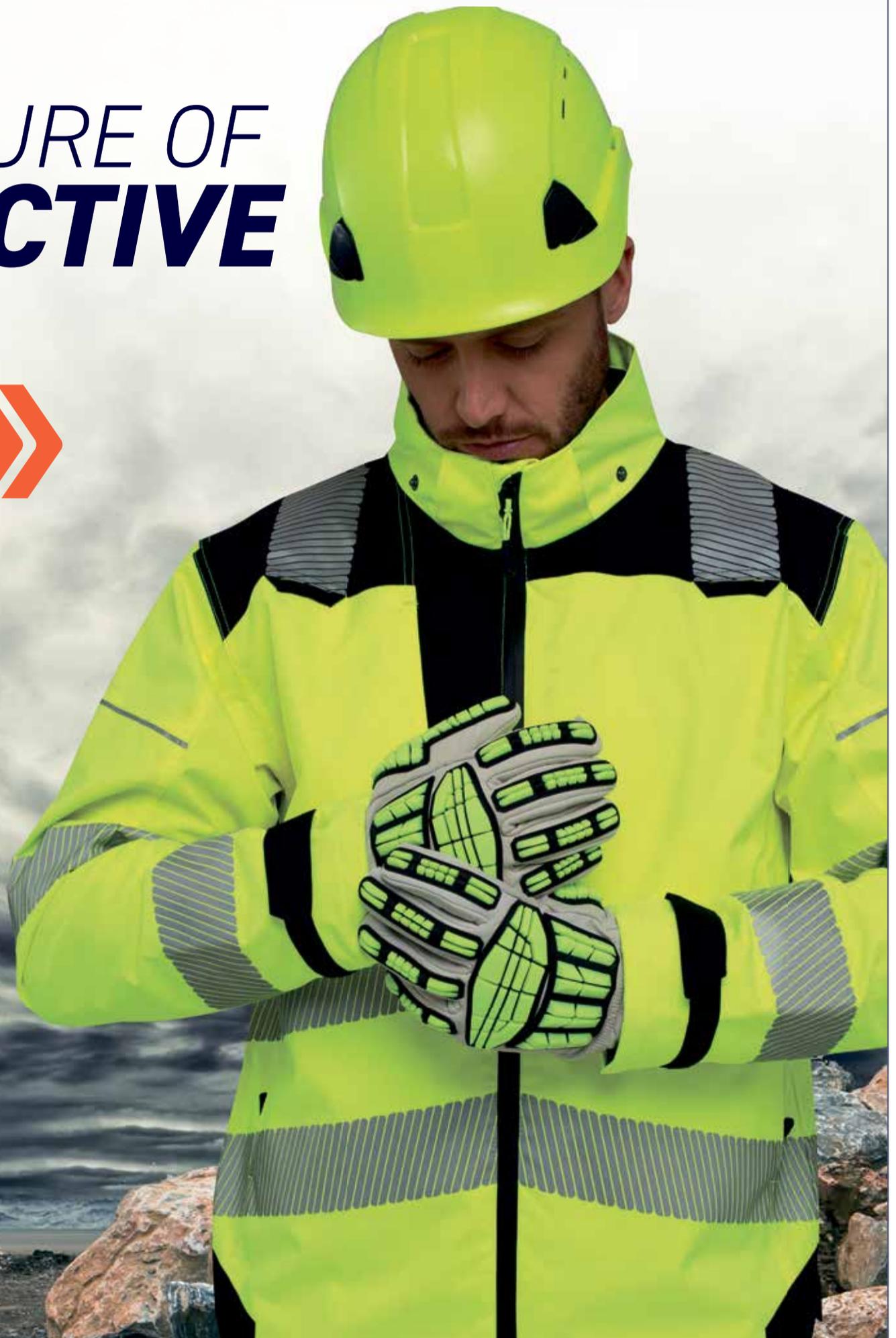
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