

FUTURE OF WORK

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FUTURE OF WORK

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REMOTE WORKING

What does a city exodus mean for your business?

With knowledge workers now finding they can operate almost entirely from home, many are leaving their urban lives behind. But this raises challenges over pay and company culture for many businesses

Tom Ritchie

The United Nations predicted in 2018 that as much as 68 per cent of the world's population would live in cities by 2050. Better prospects and higher wages turned economic centres such as San Francisco, London and Berlin into magnets for knowledge workers. With the majority of these professionals now largely working remotely, and that expected to continue in large part post-pandemic, will cities have the same pull?

Home buyer inquiries among those living in the UK's ten largest cities increased by 78 per cent in June and July 2020, according to data from property site RightMove. The breakdown of where they were looking to move to shows a 126 per cent increase in village locations, compared with a 68 per cent increase in towns.

Work marketplace Upwork recently claimed that 23 million American workers are considering relocating, with over half of this number planning on living more than two hours away from their current property.

BlueConic, a customer data platform with offices in Boston and Amsterdam, has already seen almost a third of their 45 US employees move out of state, with their head of corporate marketing relocating to Florida to be closer to her parents.

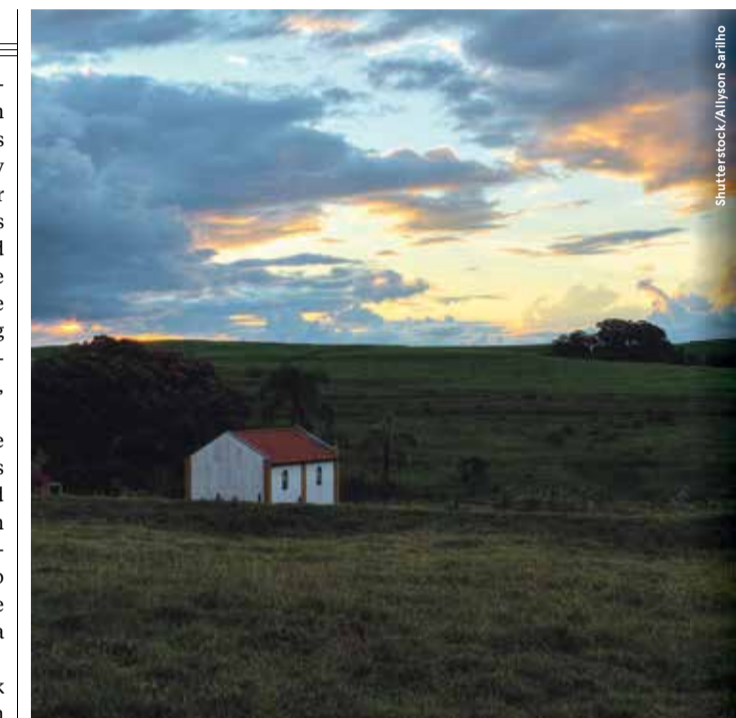
"From the beginning, we told our employees they would not be required to return to an office, even post-COVID, so if they wanted to make longer-term life choices, such as moving to be closer to family, they could do so," says chief operating officer Cory Munchbach.

While BlueConic employees are free to work from anywhere, they must consider how relocating will affect their ability to conduct their duties. Munchbach cites account executives operating in specific locations, not moving across several time zones, as an example.

Moving away from economic centres may seem appealing, but will workers be as keen to up sticks if it negatively impacts their pay?

Spotify recently said all employees in the United States will be paid San Francisco or New York-level salaries, regardless of location. This won't be possible for all organisations, with other tech companies such as Twitter and Facebook saying employees face a pay cut if they want to relocate.

Dr Guido Cozzi, a professor of macroeconomics at Switzerland's



University of St. Gallen, believes that after an initial period of fluctuating salaries, talent moving away from cities will lead to an improvement in quality of life.

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"Nominal wages will fall, however real wages will rise," says Cozzi. "Congestion in big cities forces workers to pay higher rental prices, reducing their real wages."

Munchbach suggests that knowledge-based workforces will eventually see pay packets flatten due to the dispersal of talent from historic economic centres.

"It's how compensation should have been from the very beginning, with wages based less on region and more on competencies," she explains. "This approach will also help under-represented groups in various industries in getting fair compensation and greater accessibility to roles."

Cozzi believes that with "the development and refinement of the technologies and processes of distance

working", the global economy, and in turn companies and employees, will hugely benefit in the next five to ten years.

Increased digitalisation will allow organisations to focus on competencies, recruiting the right people for the job regardless of location, leading to a rise in productivity.

"We believe that geographical boundaries will become less important to employers," agrees Laura Ryan, international director of human resources at Dropbox.

Dropbox has also allowed staff to relocate and work completely remotely since the outbreak of the pandemic, a move that Ryan believes will enable them to access a wider pool of talent.

"We're prioritising skills, rather than location. It's easier than ever to work flexibly across the world, and to collaborate with colleagues and partners in many more ways," she says.

While there are benefits, there are also challenges to this shift away

from cities, with some businesses struggling to connect with their remote workforce. In November, Leesman's ongoing work-from-home study found more than a third of respondents felt disconnected from their organisation. Could this feeling be exacerbated by working further from the company's original base?

"More distance shouldn't mean less community at work," says Nazir Ul-Ghani, head of Workplace from Facebook in Europe, Middle East and Africa.

Ul-Ghani accepts moving out of offices has curtailed the social aspects of work, but is steadfast in his belief that building culture and camaraderie across locales is possible.

"When companies turn to communication and collaboration technologies, they can unite their people and create a safe space where employees cannot only access information, but connect with colleagues on a personal level," he says.

"This can actually level the playing field, creating an equity of experience across the organisation by ensuring workers who aren't based at headquarters feel equally informed, empowered and connected."

Initiatives, such as Dropbox's Coffeebox scheme, are designed to digitally recreate the connections between peers.

"Staff meet informally with the leadership team," says Ryan. "It recreates the chance encounters an office environment used to offer. Remote working means more employees can take part in initiatives like this, bringing a truly unified, global company culture."

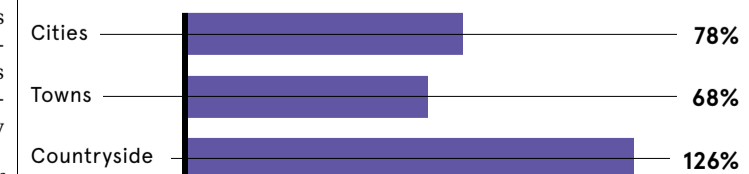
The method of delivering communication across a disparate workforce may be easier to access, but the quality of the message has to be stronger than ever. It also requires the employee to ground themselves in the business and its goals, despite the lack of contact.

"Having a remote workforce puts the emphasis on exceptional communication," says Munchbach. "The onus is on leadership to make sure we're communicating with the right formats, but it also requires employees to make time to digest that information."

"Aside from having technology in place to deliver this communication, leadership also needs to instil those core expectations with their employees."

THE PANDEMIC PROMPTED MORE HOUSE BUYERS TO SEARCH FOR COUNTRYSIDE RATHER THAN CITY PROPERTIES

% year-on-year increase in buyer inquiries in June and July 2020



Rightmove 2020

Let's talk about DEX

As businesses embrace hybrid working it's critical to fix disconnected leadership and, ultimately, boost the digital employee experience, says Nicole Alvino, co-founder and chief strategy officer at SocialChorus

The workforce and workplace have undergone a seismic evolution in the last 12 months and such rapid progress should be cause for celebration. However, fresh evidence reveals there are gaping and, because of the incredible pace of change, growing fissures that leaders must address urgently.

Organisations worldwide scrambled into crisis mode when the coronavirus pandemic hit to achieve business continuity. Remote working was necessitated by lockdown and enabled by technology while digital transformation plans were yanked forward by years.

The direction of travel is clear. Given that numerous surveys highlight people would prefer to work at least partly from home, businesses must embrace hybrid working and the digital era. But effective co-ordination and communication are hugely challenging if relying upon a hodgepodge of old ways of working and bolted-on technology solutions.

Leaders must grasp the opportunity to rethink and shape the future of work, as vaccines are rolled out and restrictions begin to ease. We need to talk about the digital employee experience (DEX).

Even before COVID-19 struck, too much digital noise was a painpoint for wired workers. The speed of digital transformation, coupled with the enforced shift to remote working, has amplified problems; desk workers don't know which of the numerous applications or tools they require for specific tasks.

Conversely, deskless workers struggle to access basic information and systems. Further, a lack of reach across the entire business, especially frontline workers, busy desk staff and employees in the field, has been exacerbated by the rise of remote working, leading to a disengaged, overwhelmed and unmotivated workforce.

New SocialChorus research exposes these broken business systems. Moreover, it indicates that it is critical to fix disconnected leadership, dismantle silos that impede development, and improve company-wide communication and collaboration to survive and thrive in the new normal.

Delivering the correct signal through the noise

As we discovered in lockdown, the right technology can solve these challenges. To maximise the potential of tech, though, there needs to be a more orchestrated strategy. For their organisation's future, where agility and collaboration will be essential, individuals – whether desk or deskless workers – have to be empowered, engaged, aligned and motivated. Leaders need to take charge and work together to drive better DEX.

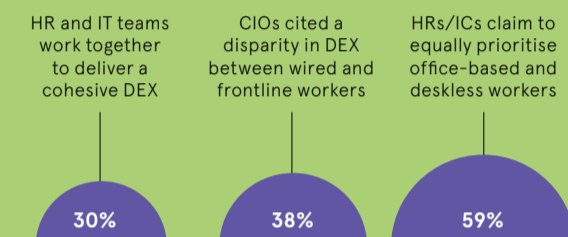
Indeed, according to our data, just 30 per cent of human resource (HR) and internal communications (IC) staff say they collaborate with their information technology departments. To deliver successful employee

EMBRACING HYBRID WORKING: SOCIALCHORUS DATA TAKEAWAYS

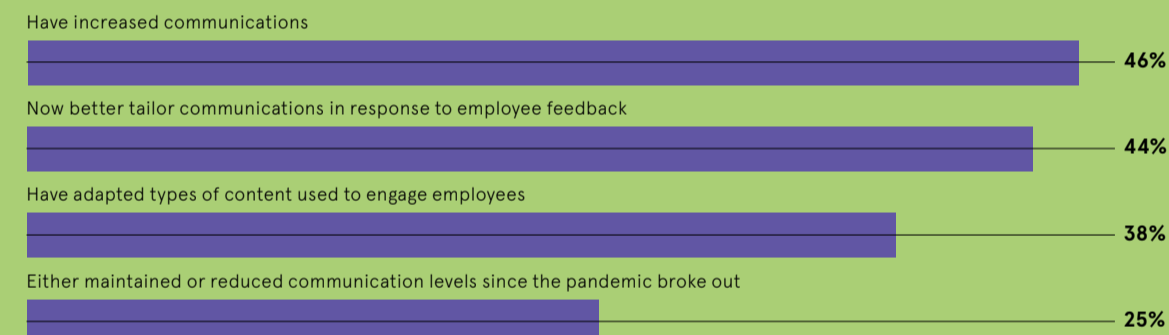
WHY DEX MATTERS (IT, HRs AND ICs)



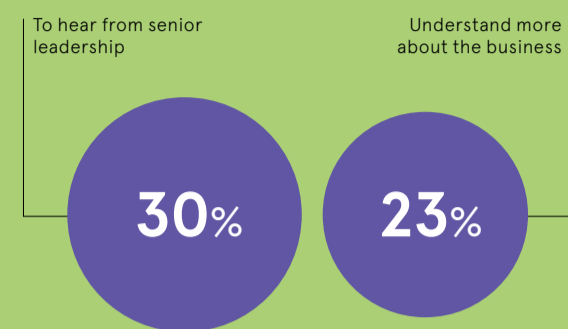
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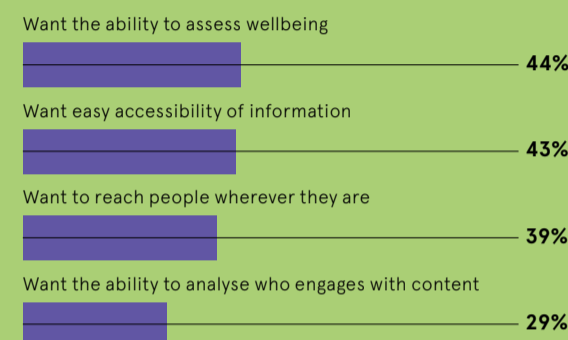
FIRMS ARE CHANGING THE WAY THEY COMMUNICATE



EMPLOYEE EXPECTATIONS ARE EVOLVING, ACCORDING TO HR/ICs WIDER WORKFORCE WANTS



HR & ICs 'PUSH' APPROACH TO DEX AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT



41%

of CIOs worry that centralising employee engagement through a single vendor or platform, rather than using a blend of technologies their workers prefer, will needlessly complicate matters

40%

say new tools might add more "noise" to existing channels rather than complementing or enhancing them

38%

cite a disparity in DEX between wired and frontline workers as a major challenge presented by digital transformation

36%

suggest employee adoption would be low and a quarter admit their business doesn't provide enough access to devices that facilitate better communications

engagement, senior leadership needs to unify these conflicting views or face the long-term effects of low morale, a disengaged workforce and insufficient productivity levels.

And, rather worryingly, 88 per cent of chief information officers (CIOs) believe the purchasing decision for collaboration and communications tools rests with them, with only 11 per cent stating it was a decision for their HR and IC colleagues. The findings uncover a clash between CIOs' "pull" and HR/ICs' "push" approaches designed to meet their organisation's DEX requirements.

Ultimately, our global research, conducted by Opinion Matters and which surveyed 750 CIOs and 753 HR and IC professionals, underlined that without a strong DEX, businesses risk creating a workforce that's feeling burnout and disconnected from the business, hindering success. SocialChorus' driving goal is to make the DEX work for every worker so businesses can deliver the correct signal through the digital noise.

As the war for talent intensifies, progressive business leaders realise that better DEX, which is personalised, targeted and meets people on whichever device or digital channel works best for them, is crucial to attracting and retaining staff. DEX is increasingly vital

For more information please visit socialchorus.com



NETWORKING

How to network in a remote world

Water cooler chats and industry events may have ground to a halt but there are still ways to build contacts in a virtual world

Claire Turrell

Business magnate Elon Musk is known for leading the way. From online payments to electric cars, Musk is often ahead of the curve. In February, he demonstrated his business savvy once more when he excelled at networking in a remote world. Using his Twitter account, which has 46.7 million followers, Musk sent a tweet to the Russian President Vladimir Putin and asked if he would like to join him for a conversation on the social networking app Clubhouse. Musk received an immediate reply from the Kremlin, stating the president was "interested".

Ability. "Human beings are social animals and we need connection to survive and thrive," she explains. "Networking fulfils in us three core needs: it gives us a feeling of belonging; it provides us with insight and influence with others; and it also provides a community of support and mutual trust."

No matter where you are on the leadership ladder, the ability to network well, establish rapport quickly, and build and maintain relationships is key to personal and professional success. In the post-pandemic world, networking matters more than ever.

Networking in a virtual office

Decision-making meetings, status updates and problem-solving sessions are still scheduled, but instead of gathering in an office, people are now working in a Zoom or Webex room and their colleagues may be hundreds or thousands of miles away.

However, San Francisco-based Eat Just chief executive Josh Tetrick warns that companies don't need to organise too many meetings to ensure teams stay connected. "We probably overdid it at the beginning. I had this feeling that I'm not around someone, so I need to talk to them all the time," he says.

Tetrick created trust among the remote team by creating consistency. "We have developed a good rhythm of checking in, depending on whether it's a team meeting or company-wide meeting," he adds. "Having the consistency of knowing when you are all going to get together has also been really important."

While a tight agenda may mean staff want to get straight down to business, to be a successful networker those watercooler-style

conversations need to stay. Conversation in the real world does not only revolve around professional topics and the same should hold true for communication online, says business coach Caroline Vernon of Intoo. She says: "Get to know your contacts and discover what you have in common outside work. Show them they matter to you as more than just a resource."

The easiest way to do this is to log on five minutes before the virtual meeting is scheduled to start. You can chat without holding up proceedings and at the same time build rapport. But remember to say how much you enjoyed this pre-meeting catch-up before you log off. It may encourage other team members to log on early for the next meeting. This connection will create trust in the team and you will have more colleagues who will help or support you when you are faced with challenges. It will also stop people from feeling isolated and starting to look for other jobs.

When you are networking over a computer screen, you also need to think about how you get your message across. In a remote world, you need to take advantage of every chance possible to make a connection. This means you need to shrug off your Zoom fatigue and remind everyone why they need you on their project or board. Executive coach Austin Iuliano says there is an easy shortcut to raising your energy levels. "Look at the camera and imagine your best friend is across the room. Naturally, you will lift your voice and project your energy to meet them," he explains.

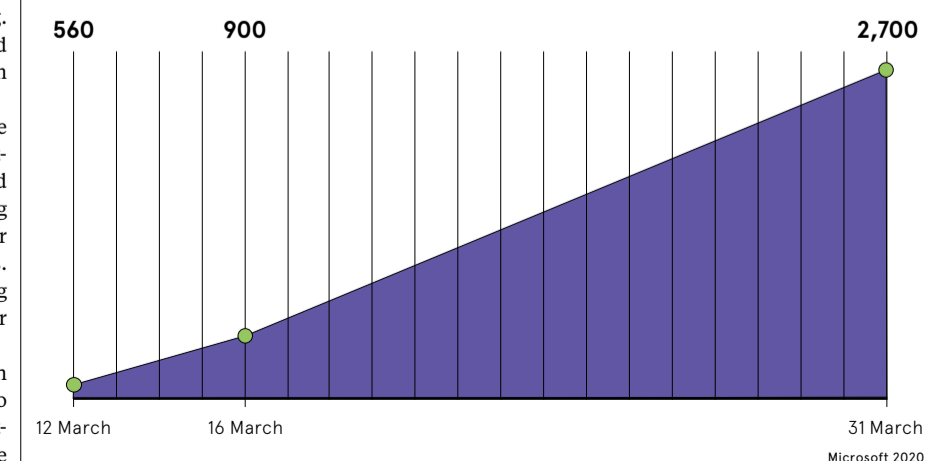
While you can't attend face-to-face networking events, you can network and make connections within your company, whether that's your London, New York or Hong Kong office. If you want to get ahead, Erdin Beshimov, senior executive at MIT, says you should surround yourself with talented people. "Ask yourself who are the people in your field that are doing excellent work and will be stars ten, twenty or thirty years from now and how you can help them excel even more," he says.

Building cross-industry contacts While large scale industry networking events might have ground to a halt, companies are creating innovative ways for their staff to learn from other people and companies

Don't wait until those lockdowns have lifted. Continue to nurture the relationships you do have and begin to build others. Who knows what opportunities are out there and ready to be discovered? ●

BUSINESS USE OF VIDEO MEETINGS SKYROCKETED AT THE ONSET OF COVID

Number of daily meeting minutes, millions



Human beings are social animals and we need connection to thrive and survive

In their sector. Brandon Spears, co-owner of US marketing agency DoubleXDigital, is encouraging his team to start podcasts. "Nobody likes being asked 'Can I pick your brain?', but podcasting gives you the excuse to interview and build a relationship with people you want to meet," says Spears. "This one strategy, when done right, will change your network for ever."

There might not be any wine-and-cheese evenings where you can hand out your business card, but you can still search for industry events that are happening virtually. Whether it is in a Zoom room or Clubhouse, you can still stay abreast of events and connected. Although if you do intend to join, make sure you treat it as more than a fact-finding mission.

Networking expert Megan Bozzuto says you should prepare a virtual elevator pitch you can paste into the chatbox. "Include one piece of contact information – LinkedIn, website or email – and think about how you can draw attention to encourage the connection," she says. This allows you to continue the conversation beyond that one event.

If you are out of practice at flexing your networking muscle after a year of living in lockdown, executive coach Pat Roque suggests a virtual three-way coffee will help you get back on track. "Reconnect with an old friend, colleague or mentor and introduce them to someone they'd enjoy meeting," says Roque. "This process can create amazing momentum to support an upcoming launch or help job seekers navigate their career pivot."

Don't wait until those lockdowns have lifted. Continue to nurture the relationships you do have and begin to build others. Who knows what opportunities are out there and ready to be discovered? ●



Unplash/You X Ventures

LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

Life lessons: is training key to success in a post-COVID world?

The pandemic has wreaked havoc on training budgets but with a growing need to reskill workers, learning should be rising up the boardroom agenda

Daniel Thomas

Since the financial crisis of 2007-8, companies have faced an increasingly unpredictable operating environment, while demand for employees with the right skills and aptitudes has soared.

A growing number of companies have turned to learning and development (L&D) as a solution, figuring that by investing more in training they can prepare themselves for looming challenges, such as the digital revolution, an increasingly competitive business landscape and growing regulatory complexity.

But while spending on training was climbing before the pandemic, coronavirus has forced many companies to review their priorities, even as the need for new skills has jumped. According to a survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), in the 12 months

to January, a third of firms reported a decline in their training budgets while only 6 per cent saw a rise.

That was while demand for improved workforce agility, line management capability, relationship management and digital systems climbed as workers shifted en masse to working from home. Some 84 per cent of firms reported using digital virtual classrooms more often in the past year, according to the CIPD's research.

Investment or cost?

Andy Lancaster, head of learning at the CIPD, believes "performance and productivity is on the mind of all corporate leaders as they try to survive the pandemic" and most realise L&D drives those things.

But while some consider it an investment, others see it as a budgetary spend that is easier to cut

back. "Insightful organisations recognise that investment in learning is vital for the organisation at a time like this. But there will be others that see all expenditure in terms of survival," he says.

One firm determined to prioritise L&D despite the challenges of COVID is Unilever, the consumer goods giant. According to chief learning officer Tim Munden, there is no sign of the "ambiguity, complexity and paradoxes" of business life abating and lifelong learning would be key to dealing with challenges such as digitalisation once the pandemic subsided.

"We're realising there are two sets of capabilities needed for this digital age," he says. "There are technical abilities and there are some human abilities, like agility and emotional intelligence. And we are going to need to continue to deepen and deepen those, partly because the unpredictability of the world is going to grow."

Online versus face-to-face learning

Lancaster thinks L&D will play a central role as firms rebuild after the pandemic, but that the crisis has permanently changed the way it is delivered. With the rise of remote working, there has been a big increase in demand for pure online courses and personal coaching using tools like Zoom, he says.

At the same time, demand for face-to-face training has dropped massively due to social distancing, a trend he believes is now "baked in".

Not everyone is so sure, though. Take London Corporate Training, which ran exclusively face-to-face courses for business and the public sector before the crisis, but has had to move its entire operation online during the pandemic.

Sales and marketing director Praveen Mathews says organisations and individuals may well decide to stick with virtual training after the crisis because it is more "convenient, time efficient and cost effective". But he says the pandemic has also exposed the limitations of this model.

"Some of the less tangible benefits of face-to-face learning, on motivation, cross-fertilisation of ideas and perspectives, for example, are now much clearer and therefore we could see a decisive shift back towards good-quality face-to-face or blended learning."

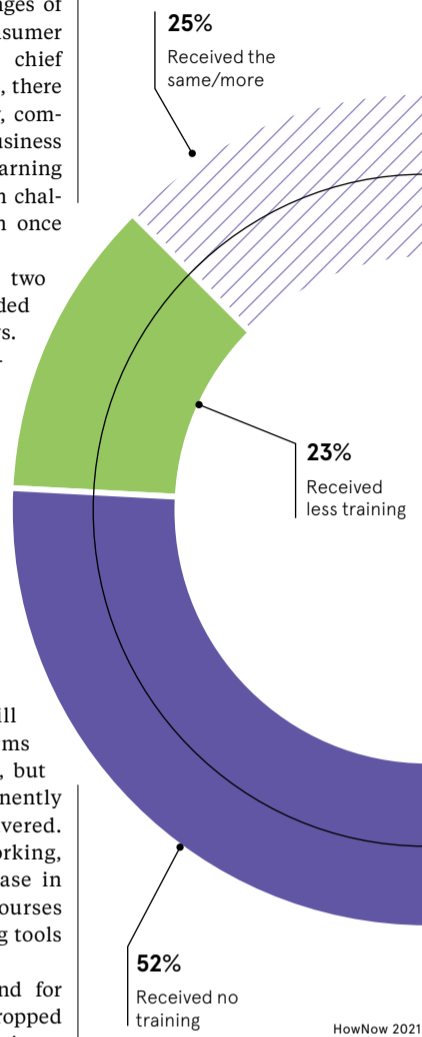
Making learning more flexible

For Dean Corbett of Avado, an online learning company that has delivered training for the likes of BT, Barclays and AXA Insurance, firms are going to have to make L&D more flexible after the pandemic. This is because there is now a greater acknowledgement of the different pressures people face in their lives outside work as a result of the crisis.

"That emphasis will continue and businesses will look for flexible L&D options that work for their people, not just in terms of 'place' of the learning, but time as well," he says. "On top of this, flexibility

INVESTMENT IN LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT HAS DROPPED SINCE THE START OF THE PANDEMIC

% of British workers



HowNow 2021

of delivery that supports individual ways of learning, which can be driven by artificial intelligence, for example, will absolutely be worth the investment."

CIPD's Lancaster is confident there will be a strong rebound in corporate investment in training as soon as company finances are back on an even footing.

Firms don't just stand to gain a stronger workforce by having good L&D programmes, it also helps to attract and retain talent, boost employee engagement and build stronger corporate brands.

Of course, employers could always be ruthless and just hire in the skills they need, getting rid of existing workers. But this is not a good strategy financially or morally and would leave firms without proper talent pipelines, says Unilever's Munden.

Corbett believes the biggest driver of L&D spending in future will be digitalisation because the pandemic has shown digital skills can no longer be ignored or seen as a nice to have, no matter the industry.

"Nobody could have predicted the impact of the pandemic, but some businesses were better able to respond because they had the right skills in-house," he says. "As we look to the future, that lesson will definitely make L&D a higher priority than ever before." ●

Leave no one behind in the new digital world

The coronavirus pandemic presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change the way we work for good. We must empower people with the skills they need for the jobs of today and tomorrow

Rapid acceleration of digital transformation over the last 12 months has undoubtedly had many positives. Having forced companies to adapt their systems to allow for remote operations, the pandemic has demonstrated the value of flexible working to even those business leaders who were previously sceptical.

But as the need to quickly embrace technology has further increased demand for digital talent, it has also widened an already large digital skills gap.

Considering the skills gap was already a cause for concern before the pandemic, it's an issue that should be a priority for all of us now, not least because it could lead to an even larger inequality crisis across many different communities and areas.

COVID-19 will leave a permanent mark on how people work, with the potential of a new-found flexibility that can enable better working environments for everyone, but to ensure nobody is left behind in the digital economy, it is crucial that businesses commit to digital reskilling.

"We need to be careful we don't create a two-tier society in the digital economy," says Adam Spearing, Europe, Middle East and Africa field chief technology officer at Salesforce.

"There will always be sectors of society that can't work from home because of the nature of their job. It's not just about coders and programmers, digital skills can encompass everything from creating a spreadsheet to even using Zoom. Those of us working from home today need a level of digital skills. We have to bring everybody along in this new world.

their hand up or is leaning forward to say something, which we normally recognise instinctively in a physical office environment.

"Younger generations are much more comfortable with this technology. Companies need to think about the digital and soft skills they need, and how they can help people thrive in the new economy, whatever stage they are at in their career."

A recent survey by Salesforce found half of UK and Irish workers are looking to reskill post-COVID, prioritising soft skills for the future of work. In the study, soft skills such as adaptability to change, resilience, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, empathy and inclusion were all ranked higher in importance than data analysis, data science and coding.

Worldwide, Salesforce and its ecosystem are expected to enable the creation of 4.2 million jobs between 2018 and 2024, according to IDC, while over the same period, the use of cloud computing by Salesforce customers will add \$1.2 trillion in new business revenues to their local economies.

Many people think they are barred from these opportunities because they have no formal digital education. This is driven by a lack of understanding of just how accessible digital skills can be. Salesforce technology, for example, isn't only for the digitally educated. Rather than just selling technology, the company is committed to making digital skills learning and opportunities accessible for everyone, whatever their background and wherever they live.

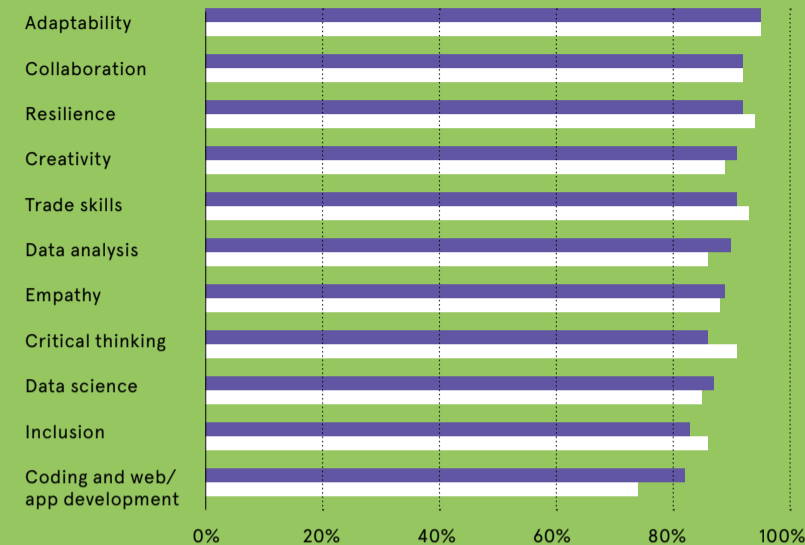
"There are large parts of society that companies are ignoring as potential talent of the future. They have to broaden the funnel of who they consider as potential employees," says

Commercial feature

SOFT SKILLS WILL BE KEY TO THE FUTURE OF WORK, YET MANY EMPLOYEES ARE LACKING

Most important skills over the next six months

● Global ● UK

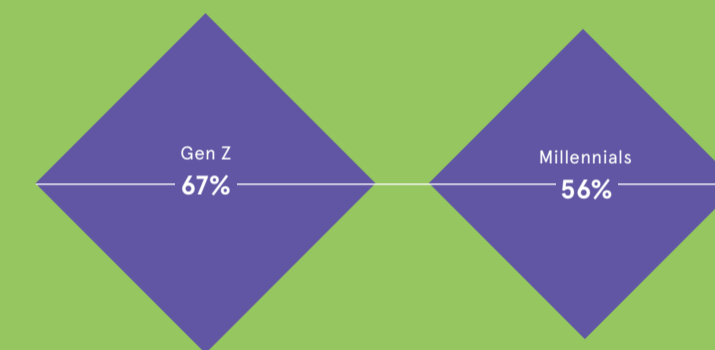


31%
of UK&I employees feel they do not have the necessary in-demand soft skills

49%
wish they had a better or more up-to-date skillset

THE YOUNGER WORKFORCE ARE INCREASINGLY EAGER TO UPSKILL, AND MOST EMPLOYEES THINK BUSINESSES SHOULD LEAD ON THIS

Workers who are more interested in online learning and training since the COVID-19 crisis hit



All data from Salesforce 2020

63%
think workforce development should be a priority for businesses

Spearing. "Most organisations have always been pretty rigorous in saying these are the hours you work, you've got to be in this specific location and you've got to work in this way. But now there's a great opportunity for us to adapt the way we work to people's lives.

"We know, and it's evidenced everywhere, companies that embrace the different aspects of diversity are richer, stronger, more robust and successful. If we can empower everybody with digital skills, it means they can work to suit their own lifestyle. That could mean geographically, in terms of where they live, or if they have young children or other commitments. By reinventing the workplace around flexibility, we are able to give people opportunities they wouldn't have had otherwise, ultimately increasing equality."

Digital reskilling needs to be at the heart of that workplace reinvention. Recognising this, Salesforce provides free access globally to Trailhead, a digital learning environment it originally built for its own workforce. Anybody with access to the internet can utilise the platform to learn deep technical or soft skills, or domain knowledge on a range of subjects.

Being able to learn in a self-paced way allows people to build it into their own lifestyle. The learning tool opens up a career in technology to anybody who wants to join it, which is vital at a time when, for reasons relating to COVID-19, automation or other disruptors, people are being displaced from their jobs. Though they may feel excluded from technology, Salesforce is keen to remove the barriers and the uncertainties of digital by making technology accessible.

Companies have a responsibility to upskill the current and future workforce to ensure no one is left behind. If they commit to digital upskilling, they can future-proof their business and create opportunity for every person who wants to participate in the digital economy.

"This pandemic has been horrendous, but it has presented an opportunity to create a better society for everyone," says Spearing. "If

we gravitate back to how we used to work, we'll lose this chance. Yes, companies need to be profitable and create value for shareholders, but if they prioritise purpose too, they will build a far stronger company in the long run.

"The companies that return to growth will be those embracing this opportunity to bring other people into their organisation and broaden their appeal to customers. It's a chance of a lifetime to enhance social inclusion and our planet, improve the diversity of companies, make them stronger, and bring more of society along with us. There's no logic to not doing it; it's just about whether we're bold enough to take the step."

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“We need to be careful we don't create a two-tier society in the digital economy



Getty Images/Klaus Vedfelt

DEVELOPMENT

The changing face of workplace learning

As businesses grapple with the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, companies are looking at ways to reduce costs and improve outcomes through innovative, interactive training

Natasha Serafimovska

A year into the pandemic, businesses find themselves with decimated budgets, reduced manpower and facing some of their biggest challenges yet. Many rely on the input of every employee to recover and remain competitive in an increasingly unpredictable market. Investment in human capital, therefore, has never been more important.

New technologies have made innovation in this area not only possible, but desirable. Lockdown and remote working have accelerated business digitalisation by several years. Businesses now look at solutions that will work well with a distributed

workforce, while keeping interactivity, collaboration and engagement high.

Still, this comes with its own risks. Technology adoption should always be a means to an end and not the end-goal in itself. Too much automation and businesses risk introducing conformism at the expense of innovative thinking. A balance between human interaction and technology-assisted training can be the perfect blend businesses need to see their workforce flourish.

Bringing interactivity to the virtual classroom
The World Economic Forum estimates that 44 per cent of

employees' current skills will need to be replaced by 2025. That's a lot of retraining that needs to be done in a short amount of time.

When L'Oréal found themselves with a distributed team at the beginning of the pandemic, they knew they couldn't just pause their training efforts. They needed to act fast to keep their workforce engaged and prepared to face the new reality. That's when they really started to look at virtual classroom training.

"COVID-19 has forced us into the future. In the UK and Ireland we have gone from 5,000 hours of virtual learning in 2019 to over 30,000 hours in 2020, of which 19,000 are from virtual classroom hours," says Vanessa Palmer, learning, culture and engagement director at L'Oréal UK and Ireland.

However, virtual training in itself wasn't going to be enough to keep engagement high, so the business looked at ways to keep employees interacting and communicating with each other.

"We were very aware from the start of our move to virtual learning that full-day courses were not engaging; someone is not going to learn effectively through spending a whole day in front of their laptop at home. Effective learning needs interactivity and a change in the format of the courses, whether that is break-out rooms, whiteboards, or polling or quiz elements," says Palmer.

While virtual classes have made their corporate training far more accessible, it's the human element of interaction and exchange of ideas that really made the difference in how employees responded.

"The total number of hours our UK and Ireland employees spent learning in 2020 increased by more than 20 per cent in comparison to 2019 and the average hours of learning per employee has also increased by over 20 per cent," she says.

A new landscape of soft-skills development

Interactivity and collaboration are particularly important in the world of soft-skills training where employees often have to rely on subtle cues and signals to interpret behaviours. Thousands of people who are just entering the workforce are transitioning from a world of



L'Oréal's approach to learning and development in the UK and Ireland will not be going back to what it was

social media into a world of remote work and missing out on key in-person interactions that can help them hone their soft skills.

Now employers need to come up with innovative ways in which their workforce can continue to develop these intangible, yet crucial, skills for business success.

"People used to think they had to be engaging and creative when talking to their consumers, but dull, dry and grey when communicating with their workforce. Businesses are finally realising their first audience, and the one that can have the biggest impact on their ambitions, is their own employees," says Tom Hall, chief executive at Contented Brothers, a content innovation company based in London.

One unsuspecting technology that has made soft-skills training not only engaging, but also possible in the world of remote work is virtual reality (VR).

"VR is able to deliver the kind of learning that makes your brain feel like it's been through the experience you're learning about rather than something you've observed or watched," says Hall. "People think of VR as something to be done on your own, something that can be very isolating, which is absolutely not true."

Contented Brothers recently worked on implementing VR-assisted soft-skills training where one employee wore a VR headset and another held clues to a puzzle that could be resolved only through collaboration. While VR training does require additional equipment, solutions like Google Cardboard have made it accessible and a viable option for remote training.

World of AI: risks and opportunities

Looking beyond interactivity, businesses often turn to artificial intelligence (AI) as a panacea for all their corporate inefficiencies. We're already seeing some progress in this realm with adaptive technologies that take specific job-role competencies and match them up against individual skill levels of the employee.

The technology works very well in scenarios where large groups of people need to acquire a very specific skillset. Statistical data analysis can look at patterns and anomalies which then tell the student where their knowledge is lacking. Yet, the technology doesn't come without its own flaws and AI experts warn businesses to use this technology with caution.

"The notion of intelligence is quite wrong in this context, because what we talk about here is repetitive data extrapolation. Intelligence is about innovation of thinking, the ability to discover hidden things in what is visible, which you don't get in machine learning. It is in a way creating subordination to existing knowledge," says Dr Cyrille Mathis, neurology and psychiatry specialist, and chief scientific officer at ThinkTankMaths, a mathematics research company based in Edinburgh.

Angela Mathis, chief executive at ThinkTankMaths, adds: "Current AI is good when you're looking for

THE SKILLS GAP

1bn

people need reskilling by 2030

42%

of core skills required to perform jobs are expected to change

\$11.5tn

hit to GDP growth if companies fail to close the skills gap

World Economic forum 2020

statistical patterns, things that match, but not looking for outliers. However, in these outliers there's a universe of information; that's where you'd go if you'd like to invent and create."

Since AI relies on pre-existing sets of data, there's a heightened risk of introducing unconscious biases in the algorithm, causing more damage than good. Amazon's AI-driven recruitment tool is a perfect example of this. The technology used data sets based on successful male applicants, making the system discriminate against female candidates. The technology was instantly shut down once its bias was discovered, but the risk always remains that more subtle biases can go unnoticed for a long time.

Regardless of the approach they take, businesses are aware things will never go back to how they were, nor should they. Some changes were long overdue and are making a big positive impact, while others need to be introduced with more caution.

"Our approach to learning and development in the UK & Ireland will not be going back to what it was. There will be two main changes. Firstly, the future will be a greater blend between virtual and in-person than before and secondly, our longer courses will be spread out over weeks not compressed into days. Seventy per cent of information taken in is lost within 24 hours; this is a stat that the learning and development community previously accepted, but COVID has given us a chance to change this," says Palmer at L'Oréal.

And maybe that's exactly what the workforce of tomorrow needs. Rather than delivering training faster, better, smarter, all we need is a bit of a break. A bit of time to engage in a quality peer-to-peer or teacher-to-student interaction that encourages us to think critically, challenge the status quo and use our imagination. It's these skills that will eventually help businesses weather the storm and come out stronger at the other end. ●



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RACONTEUR

Storytelling helps leaders navigate choppy waters of constant change

A collaboratively constructed and authentic company narrative engages, motivates and inspires colleagues and customers alike, says **Alison Esse**, co-founder and director of The Storytellers

The turbulent, traumatic and epochal events of last year forced every leader to begin a new chapter in their career. For the vast majority of those at the helm, presented with choppy waters in uncharted territory, 2020 precipitated seismic transformation, both personally and for their business.

The leaders who have best navigated the waves of change collaborated, connected and communicated with their people, displaying empathy and authenticity.

For millennia, sharing experiences through storytelling has been central to the human understanding of life's workings and has guided the way for billions of people. In the post-coronavirus wash-up – a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous business environment – storytelling has never been more critical for leaders to build organisational resilience in the face of constant change.

Indeed, a carefully constructed, authentic change narrative can be highly effective in engaging, motivating

and inspiring colleagues, customers, investors and other stakeholders.

Unlike the binary response typically produced by sharing data, the telling of a story lights up several areas of the listener's brain, releasing chemicals such as oxytocin and dopamine, which heighten feelings of empathy and a sense of involvement, as if we are participating in the story ourselves. This emotional response can help leaders build trust with their teams and enhance the positive sense of "being in this together".

Harnessing such emotions to communicate a business's strategy and vision enables the workforce to open up their minds to be receptive, feel empowered and understand the valuable part they can play in the journey.

You might have a winning strategy, but if you can't articulate the proposed direction of travel, and therefore bring your people along, then it counts for nothing. It is now imperative for leaders to win hearts and minds, build trust, and craft meaning and purpose for their workforce, many of whom now work remotely.



Science behind a story

The way in which a story is told has an immediate effect on the limbic side of the brain, the area that control emotions, memories and arousal. In business we tend to communicate in a way that lacks humanity, sharing data and abstract information through corporate jargon, which is often uninspiring, difficult to remember, dry and abstract.

When told, a story, however, lights up several areas of the brain. These areas control movement, language processing, imagination and colour. The empathy-inducing chemicals dopamine and oxytocin are released, and the listener is paying attention and therefore far more likely to remember what they've heard. Further, they are far more likely to be receptive to the call to action and be influenced by the outcome of endeavours of fellow humans.

Humans crave meaning to help us make sense of the world. This meaning is produced through language, human interaction and agreed understandings, connections between important events and circumstances that shape our perceptions.

Evolution of leadership

Winning hearts and minds is notoriously challenging, though. Expert storytelling makes the process significantly easier. The chaos wrought by coronavirus necessitated the acceleration of several trends, many of them catapulting both people and businesses into the digital era. Initially, almost everyone was shunted out of their comfort zone. But progressive and enlightened leaders, who were already embracing agile working and collaborative decision-making, were able to better cope with the speed of change.

Understandably, a collaborative approach is trickier with a dispersed workforce. However, a leader's shift in mindset, democratising decisions and admitting "I don't have all the answers", all driven by a cohesive narrative in the business, will catalyse a thriving workplace culture.

Ultimately, a good business story is about shared ownership. The more engaged employees are from the outset, the more they will want to shape how the narrative lives and breathes within an organisation. They are more likely to want to drive that change and influence the outcome, and it will unleash an energy and passion across the business. A happier, motivated workforce equals increased productivity.

If people can't empathise with the change demanded of them, and they can't see the role they are going to play in that journey, they feel victims

of change. A business story provides an opportunity for the workforce to feel heroic. Once the story's framework has been established, all those little successes can, and should, be celebrated to enrich the narrative.

Unique opportunity to rethink your story

In 2021, inspirational leadership is a core requirement for high-performing businesses. Moreover, storytelling has become a recognised skill for leaders in organisations worldwide and every industry sector.

To attract and retain talent, and customers, leaders must be authentic, empowering, collaborative, involving, open to ideas and encouraging dialogue within their teams to solve complex problems and share best practice. They must be willing to change and go the extra mile to achieve key business objectives.

While storytelling has been an essential part of human development for thousands of years, the ways in which stories are told has multiplied. The Storytellers have enjoyed superb results, for example

from their visual storytelling and in-person immersive events and innovative virtual sessions.

Whatever way the story is presented, the events of 2020 have provided a unique opportunity for businesses to rework or even completely rethink their story and refocus their purpose. Determining the narrative that will glue everything and everyone

in the organisation together should be a top priority for all leaders to help navigate the choppy waters of constant change.

For more information please visit www.thestorytellers.com

theStorytellers

Power of a story: case studies

The Storytellers, London-based storytelling and business transformation specialists operating globally, have helped more than 180 major organisations all over the world accelerate change and transformation through narrative.

Demand for story-driven change programmes has significantly increased during the last year and the impact on business performance has been profound. Here are two recent case studies:

Phoenix Group's chief executive, Andy Briggs, knew Phoenix Group needed to shift from being seen as mainly a closed life and pension funds consolidator to being recognised as a leading, purpose-driven, open business in the retirement and savings sector, helping people secure a lifetime of

possibilities. The Storytellers co-created an overarching strategic narrative to articulate the new vision, and this has triggered a 20 per cent increase in employee advocacy and engagement for Phoenix Group. Briggs says The Storytellers' culture change project is "one of the best pieces of work of its kind".

ADP UK's managing director, Jeff Phipps, was similarly glowing in his verdict of The Storytellers, who worked with him to build a simple, clear and compelling narrative that provided a meaningful context and rationale for the business strategy and how every employee could make a difference. One year on from the launch event, ADP reported a 11 per cent increase in employee engagement, while the organisation saw a 48 per cent increase in its net promoter score, reversing a declining trend.

LEADERSHIP

Tackling the tyranny of narcissistic bosses

The corporate ecosystem teems with narcissists in leadership roles, putting businesses at risk and stressing employees. It has been called an epidemic but is there a cure?

Richard Pallardy

Despite reams of academic research and a deluge of anecdotal reports that catalogue the harm done by narcissists, they are encouraged and sometimes even sought after in the workplace. Some of the attributes that define a narcissist practically read like a job advertisement.

"What company would not want a hard-working, ambitious, confident, charismatic and charming top performer?" asks Marie-Line Germain, professor of human resources and leadership at Western Carolina University and author of *Narcissism at Work: Personality Disorders of Corporate Leaders*.

In narcissists though, these seemingly positive qualities are accompanied by a suite of more obviously toxic ones. Not all narcissistic business leaders are as over-the-top and depraved as the financiers and moguls of the big screen. But even less-dramatic manifestations of narcissism can seriously damage companies and their employees.

Negative narcissistic traits such as grandiosity, constant need for approval and attention, lack of empathy, extreme risk-taking, failure to abide by ethical norms and rage when confronted with criticism or dissent, while rarely evidence of true narcissistic personality disorder, make for a stressful and unstable workplace.

Why narcissism thrives

It is probable that the roots of narcissistic behaviour lie in our early evolution as a species. "In alpha animals, you'll see some of those traits. If you rise to the top, you're the first one to get to eat," explains Dr Cynthia Mathieu, professor of organisational behaviour at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières and author of *Dark Personalities in the Workplace*. "If you link that to the workplace, these individuals are often

preferred in terms of promotion because they make grandiose promises and they show almost no signs of stress or anxiety."

Narcissists are also often able to exploit ambiguous rules to their advantage and in the short term to the advantage of their employer as well.

Their self-aggrandisement may thus be rewarded due to the perception that these qualities make for natural leaders. This tendency has been amplified by the wider culture. Fawning profile pieces regale readers with tales of the remarkable personalities who have succeeded in business. In an ever-increasingly individualistic society, this has massive appeal.

Many wish to emulate the unique characteristics that account for extraordinary career success. This in turn creates a supercharged supply of the admiration that narcissists crave and further incentive for less-successful narcissists to pursue similar renown at all costs.

The downside of dynamism

While narcissistic inclinations may indeed help individuals succeed, and thus confer short-term success on the organisations that employ them, problems soon arise when they are promoted to positions of authority.

"One of these problems is highly risky decision-making," notes Dr W. Keith Campbell, social psychologist at the University of Georgia and author of *The New Science of Narcissism*. "Companies with narcissistic CEOs tend to take bigger risks. The other problems are more interpersonal. Dishonesty, poor ethics, sexual assault and abuse are the most toxic examples in corporate settings."

The histrionics and sexually predatory impulses of figures like Harvey Weinstein and Donald Trump almost certainly stem at least in part from deep-seated narcissism, for example. Narcissists also frequently lash out at subordinates, whom they



“It's the human trait that differentiates good leaders from bad. You can have self-confidence but also have empathy towards others

view as inferior or as threats to their delusional self-concept.

Entrepreneur Joanne Woo witnessed the latter first-hand during her time as a catering and conference services manager at a hotel. "He seemed like a very bubbly person," she recalls of her initial interview with the director of sales and marketing. "He put on a great façade."

On the job, it was a different story. The director would sidetrack meetings with stories of his past achievements and regularly berated staff for perceived infractions. Woo finally confronted him when he publicly called her out for using Excel instead of Word to format a document. As it turned out, he simply didn't understand the technology. Tantrums like the one he directed at Woo are typical of narcissists when attention is drawn to their failings.

Dealing with a narcissistic boss

Dealing with a narcissistic boss is almost always difficult. Experts advise scrupulously documenting any abusive behaviour and ensuring

there are multiple witnesses in case disciplinary or legal action becomes necessary. Criticism of less problematic, but still undesirable, tendencies should be framed in a way that highlights the person's strengths and the direct benefits they may reap by altering their behaviour.

Ideally, of course, organisations should work to exclude narcissists from being hired in the first place. "Add competencies that they are not likely to score high on, like humility, integrity, empathy and conscientiousness, to the selection process," advises Mathieu. "If candidates do have behaviours that are contrary to your company's positive values, they won't be attracted. They don't think these are actually leadership traits."

Although many strong leadership traits may technically fall on the narcissistic spectrum, Mathieu urges employers to think in different terms.

"Some of these traits may be shared with narcissistic individuals. But it's a completely different profile," she says. "It's the human trait that differentiates good leaders from bad leaders. You can have self-confidence and be extroverted, but at the same time be able to listen to others and have empathy towards others."

In the meantime, those faced with narcissistic leadership may ultimately find they have no choice but to leave an organisation. Still, the experience can have its benefits. Woo didn't learn much from her boss, but working under him taught her something about herself. "I know what kind of work I can do," she says. "And I don't need praise." ●

THE FIVE SIGNS OF A NARCISSISTIC LEADER

01
Grandiose

02
Entitled

03
Manipulative and lacking integrity

04
Hostile and aggressive

05
Excessively self-confident and risk seeking

TECHNOLOGY

AI and wearables: the tech coming soon to an office near you

An exciting array of next-generation technology could soon be making working lives easier, but companies need to be wary of running before they can walk

Mark Hillsdon

While the personal computer transformed the office of the 1970s, the fax machine smoothed communications in the 1980s and Microsoft had become ubiquitous by the end of the last century, artificial intelligence (AI) looks set to spark the latest office revolution. Gartner has predicted that 2021 will see AI create almost \$3 trillion of business value. But, says Tim El-Sheikh, chief executive of technology development studio Nebuli: "It's about how we can make technology and AI work alongside humans as opposed to replacing them."

AI will take over a lot of the heavy lifting in the office, he says, such as preparing and dispatching reports, managing and updating customer relationship management systems and mining data for patterns. But while El-Sheikh is adamant "AI is the future, it's inevitable", he is also at pains to "destroy the myth that AI is a solution for everything".

It is essential companies can walk before they start to run, he insists. It's about being AI ready, and robust digital and data strategies need to come first, because if the foundations aren't in place, projects will fail.

Futureproofing business

Digital entrepreneur Felipe Polo believes that to get the most from the new generation of office tech, businesses will need to adopt a culture of risk-taking and pilot new

software. However, they must be sure it "enhances process and can future-proof the business, rather than complicating it further", he says.

One of the biggest impacts of this new wave of tech will come from virtual reality (VR) and it's ability to enliven the duller of training sessions. "Even before the pandemic, the million-dollar question for businesses thinking about their learning and development was 'how do you engage your employees when it comes to training?'" says Justin Parry, chief operating officer of VR training company Immerse.

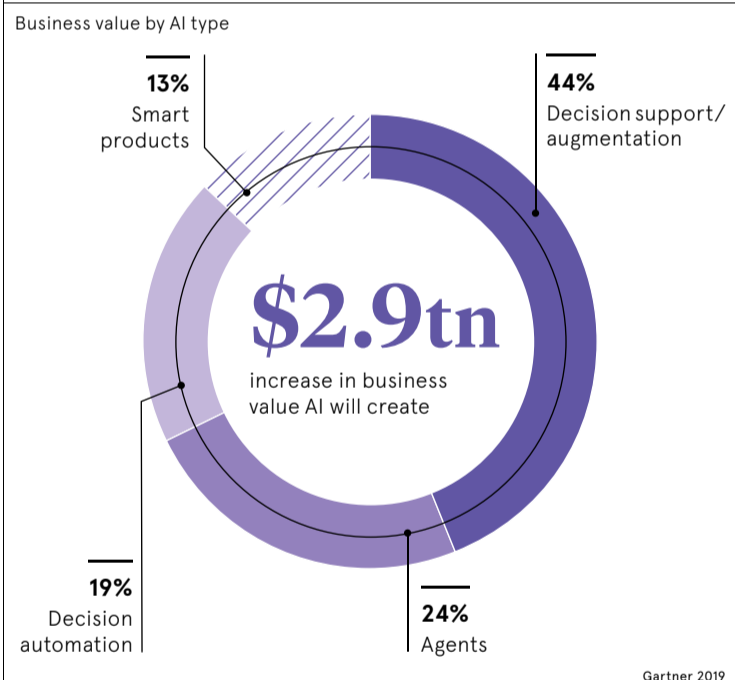
According to Ofgem's *Technology Futures* report, in a traditional setting with PowerPoints and handouts, participants remember just 30 per cent of what they hear and 20 per cent of what they see. Put on a VR headset and recall jumps to 90 per cent.

Richard Hess, immersive experience lead at Nestlé, works with Immerse on VR-content ranging from teaching consumers about sustainable sourcing, to safety training for employees. "It gives employees an environment to learn and the ability to 'fail' that is more impactful than in a traditional training environment," he explains.

"For safety training, this could be a dangerous situation where a worker needs to apply correct personal protective equipment or follow steps to safely turn off a machine. When learning in this type of environment, VR can provide a visceral and emotional



AI IS PREDICTED TO DRIVE TRILLIONS IN BUSINESS VALUE IN 2021



response to what they are experiencing. This leads to greater retention of the material and greater advocacy for working in a safe manner," says Hess.

VR could also support remote job interviews. "We've seen how quickly new technologies can be adopted thanks to the pandemic, so if VR follows suit, it won't be too long before the dreaded back-to-back Zoom becomes a bit more engaging," says Polo.

Playing Big Brother

A more controversial area for new tech is the role it is starting to play in monitoring employees and the concept of surveillance capitalism. In 2017, Barclays was criticised for installing motion sensors on staff computers that could track how long employees were at their desk. Last year, the bank

he says. "It provides managers with real-time data about how someone in their team is feeling, so they know if they need to pick up the phone or have a cup of tea and a chat with someone today not next week."

The office of the future

Other innovations coming to an office near you soon include products such as augmented reality (AR) smart glasses, which will overlay digital information on top of the real world. Parry at Immerse talks about AR as "one device to rule them all" and "a technology that can subsume all other technologies". He says: "The target here is a lightweight head-mounted display that can turn any surface into a keyboard or drawing board."

The idea of identity and access management, or IAM, is also likely to focus minds, as companies come to terms with employees logging on remotely or bringing their own devices into the office.

Deception technology is an exciting new form of cyber-defence that sets traps and decoys for hackers and can be backed with new passwordless technology. While biometric systems using fingerprint and face recognition are already common, they could soon be superseded by proximity-based authentication, when users carry a wireless key that allows them to log on to different devices simply by being near them.

Even ordering stationery could change thanks to Epson's PaperLab, which is capable of producing new paper in-office from securely shredded waste paper.

For Nebuli's El-Sheikh, however, less is more and he predicts a future office that's based in the cloud, with perhaps the odd tablet thrown in. But if the vast power of hosted quantum computing becomes more mainstream and accessible, he says, the minimalist office of the future could feature little more than a smartphone. ●

OPINION

'The rush to move employees to remote working often came at the expense of security'

The four-step roadmap to "freedom day" on June 21 has now been laid out by the UK government. Despite a clear, data-driven end in sight for the social restrictions coronavirus has inflicted upon us, there is no doubt in leadership discussions worldwide that there will be long-lasting changes in workplace and workforce trends.

Remote working will remain in place even when vaccination programmes enter the annual booster phase. A survey conducted by Omdia found that at least one third of the global workforce will work remotely at any one time and hybrid working environments will become commonplace.

Although the initial scramble was to ensure employees could remain productive and connected when the pandemic first began, longer term IT and human resources teams must ensure security is an important consideration in an ongoing remote environment and that employees understand the risks. The rush to move employees to remote working often came at the expense of security, which was understandable given the speed and scale of change.

Cybersecurity is one of the largest threats to global business and, with targeted attacks on the rise, resilience is paramount. With remote working practices a new normality, employees are increasingly working with a mixture of corporate-owned and personal devices. In addition, they are accessing company and customer data and applications in the cloud beyond the traditional enterprise perimeter.

Omdia's Future of Work Survey indicated respondents believe the most challenging aspect of remote working is ensuring employees can work securely and in compliance with industry requirements across multiple sectors. Moving the same security approach from the office to remote working is not enough and employees must be educated on security from home.

In the same survey, of approximately 5,000 organisations, fewer than 43 per cent have a fully developed or well-advanced proactive approach to cybersecurity and digital risk, which is alarming.

Businesses need to evolve their approaches to security and invest in new and more advanced mobile security capabilities. Mobile security presents a diverse set of associated threats that businesses must mitigate and should manage as part of a broader approach and strategy for cybersecurity, especially if organisations are to ensure they can sustain

current levels of remote working. A business-wide and unified view is important as approaches to security and the solutions that underpin these should not be adopted in a siloed fashion to be truly effective.

Employees will need to be empowered with new technologies that can help them work in new ways, but in a fashion that doesn't expose the organisation to a level of risk that's unmanageable. VPN systems and pre-existing security approaches were not designed to support a large remote workforce. Many organisations are still using a mishmash of security controls that are not fit for remote working. They also need regular review to make them more robust and sustainable.

It is important organisations consider not just the technologies that can help, but also changes to people and process practices. Individuals and employees are equally as responsible for security and need to adopt a security mindset that will only come with improving the awareness and education of risks associated with remote working and solutions. This needs to happen regularly and at frequent intervals.

Increasing employee engagement generally, and not limiting it to education, will also help employees. As we continue to work remotely, an increase in organisational support for mental health is critical in building and sustaining engagement for remote workers. This should include regular health and wellbeing support and manager check-ins as just a few examples. It is natural people who feel engaged will play a better part in secure remote working for any organisation.

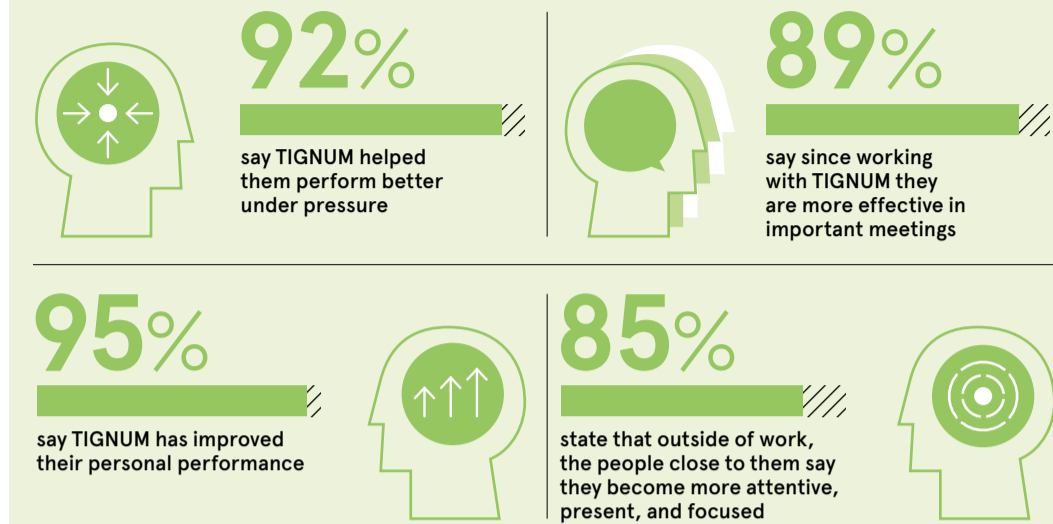
People and technology solutions combined will play the most pivotal part in protecting an organisation from potential security threats. ●



Carolyn Dawson
Managing director, industry verticals and festivals
Informa Tech

THE FUTURE OF WORK

Personal readiness is the new strategic edge for business professionals



Upgrading performance and resetting personal readiness for the new now

To accomplish sustainable human performance in a new world of work, organisations require agile tools that deal with the specific demands in people's day-to-day lives

The companies that succeed in the future of work will be those that upgrade their performance culture and equip teams with the tools to tackle daily challenges. In this tough business environment, only employees with a new level of personal readiness can succeed and create the massive positive impact required.

There is no doubt the shift to remote working has been a long time coming, but the coronavirus pandemic accelerated it in a brute-force way that exposed the cracks in the system. Productivity in many companies may have increased, yet forced remote working has revealed cultural and collaborative weaknesses within teams and placed new kinds of strains on our lives.

When the pandemic first sent countries into lockdown, energy levels went up, according to analysis by international human performance firm TIGNUM. However, it soon became apparent that people were running on adrenaline, buoyed by the natural energising effect caused by rallying around a common crisis.

After the long-term reality of the pandemic hit home, TIGNUM found fatigue started accumulating. Although people were not travelling, had no jet lag, slept in their own beds and for an average of 45 minutes more each day, they felt exhausted and more fatigued.

"We have seen a huge redistribution of fatigue from mostly physical to predominantly emotional and cognitive," says Scott Peltin, founder and chief performance officer at TIGNUM. "People have been dealing

with uncertainty and fear. They are trying to be perfect at both home and work, while forced to be only at home and fully on at all times, transfixed to their camera in video conference meetings. All of this while trying to be collaborative, empathetic, creative problem-solvers."

From a brain science perspective, the shift has had a huge toll on performance. Fatigue has caused people to double down on their biases, seek quick fixes to complex problems and default back to some of the most disruptive parts of their behavioural style. Competitive people become pushy, extroverted people become overly chatty and analytical people become paralysed without data, according to TIGNUM.

In a remote environment, it is more difficult for leaders to show they authentically care for their teams. Initially, this was done through virtual coffee breaks, an onslaught of video meetings and emotional micro-managing. Though a well-intended natural response by leaders, it contributed to the already high levels of cognitive fatigue, feelings of guilt for not being perfect and a sense of unfairness due to discrepancies around how the pandemic has impacted people.

From 15 years of working with prominent C-suite and other leadership teams, TIGNUM has developed a unique understanding of the business professional's body and brain. "Great leaders, great teams and great companies know great work requires energy, mental agility, resilience and adaptability. Our research indicates these

critical elements are deficient in too many teams," says Peltin.

TIGNUM's data points to the need for different types of mindset and recovery strategies at different times to match the specific daily demands. To prepare clients for their different challenges, TIGNUM built TIGNUM X, an effective and cutting-edge Sustainable Human Performance ToolBox. With more than 55 science-based strategies, TIGNUM X shifts leaders and their teams from being exhausted to energised, overwhelmed to in control, and fragile to resilient.

The pace at which companies need to adapt to challenges will not slow down in the years ahead, amplifying the need for sustainable human performance. If the future of work is hybrid, as many companies are planning for, an agile toolbox is essential.

"We're living in a world of constant change, high load and extreme uncertainty," says Peltin. "Without the right tools, it's easy to feel out of control, overwhelmed, fatigued, scattered and brain fogged. People can come out of this crisis stronger, more skilled and better toolled to deal with complexity and challenges."

For more information please visit tignum.com

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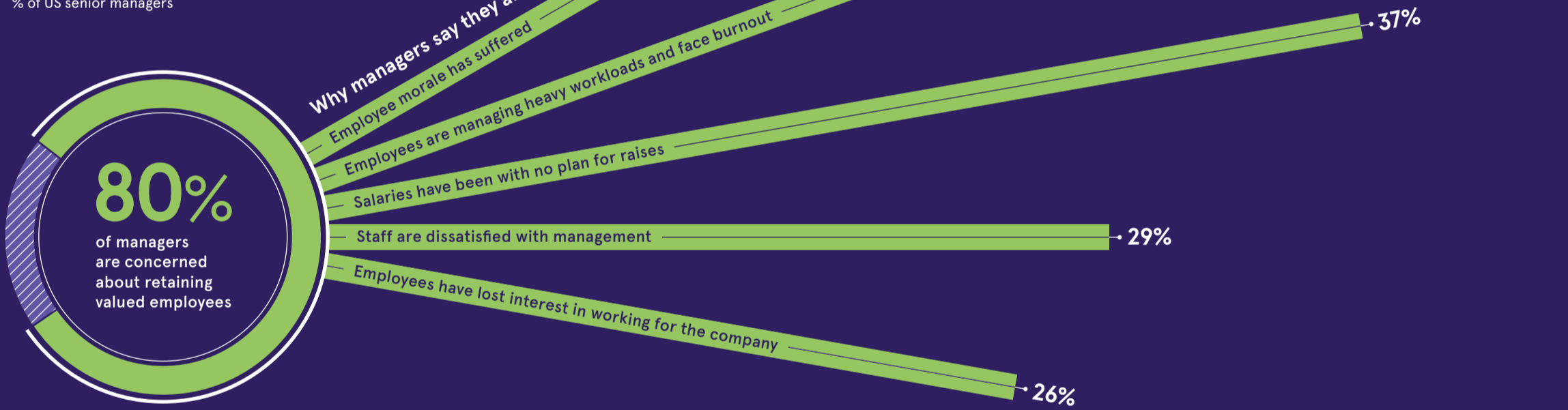
THE CHANGING WORLD OF WORK

Job retention is a growing concern among employers as staff increasingly look for more from their work than a way to pay the bills. Offering the right benefits is key, as is upskilling staff for a future world of work that will put new pressures and requirements on staff

THE ISSUE OF STAFF RETENTION

Robert Half 2020

% of US senior managers



OFFERING THE RIGHT BENEFITS IS KEY TO RETAINING STAFF

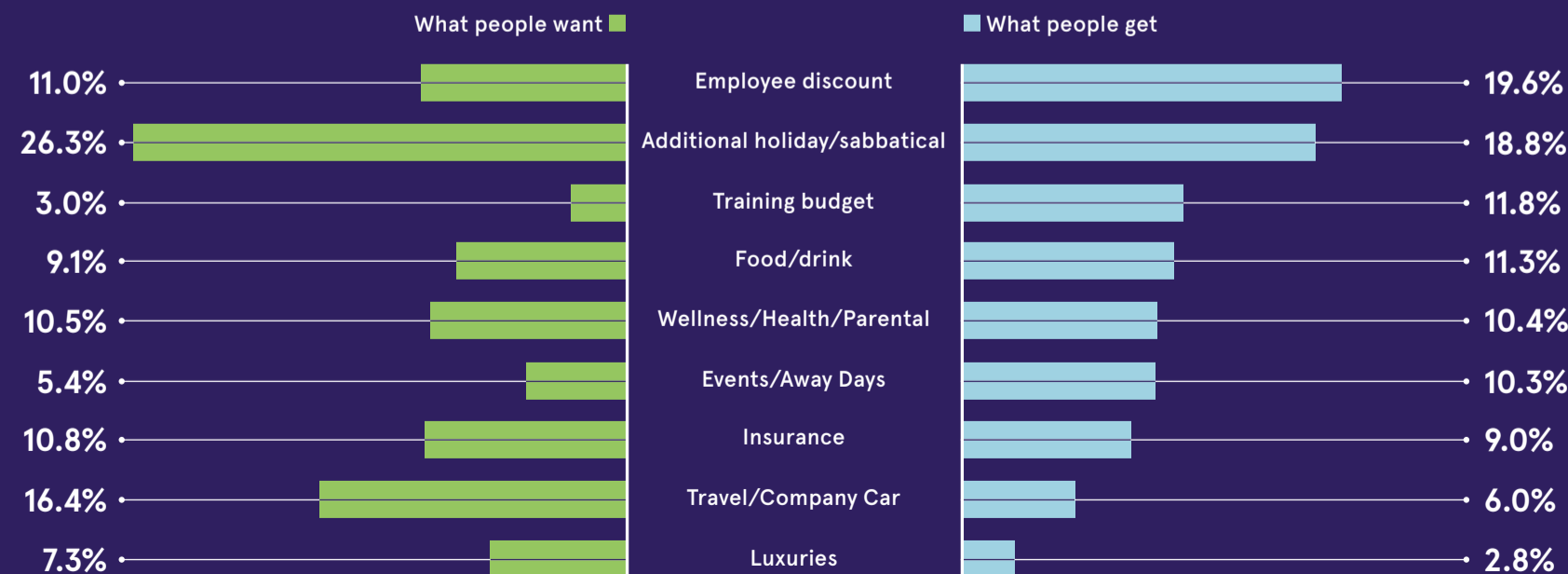
% saying the following are the most important objective for their benefits program



THERE IS A MISMATCH BETWEEN THE BENEFITS EMPLOYEES WANT AND WHAT THEY RECEIVE

% of UK workers

SmallBusinessPrices.co.uk 2021



SHIFTING CAREERS

Adzuna 2020

% of British workers

1 in 4



workers are considering a career change in 2021

Of which

6.8%



definitely looking to change career

7.2%



considering changing career

11.0%

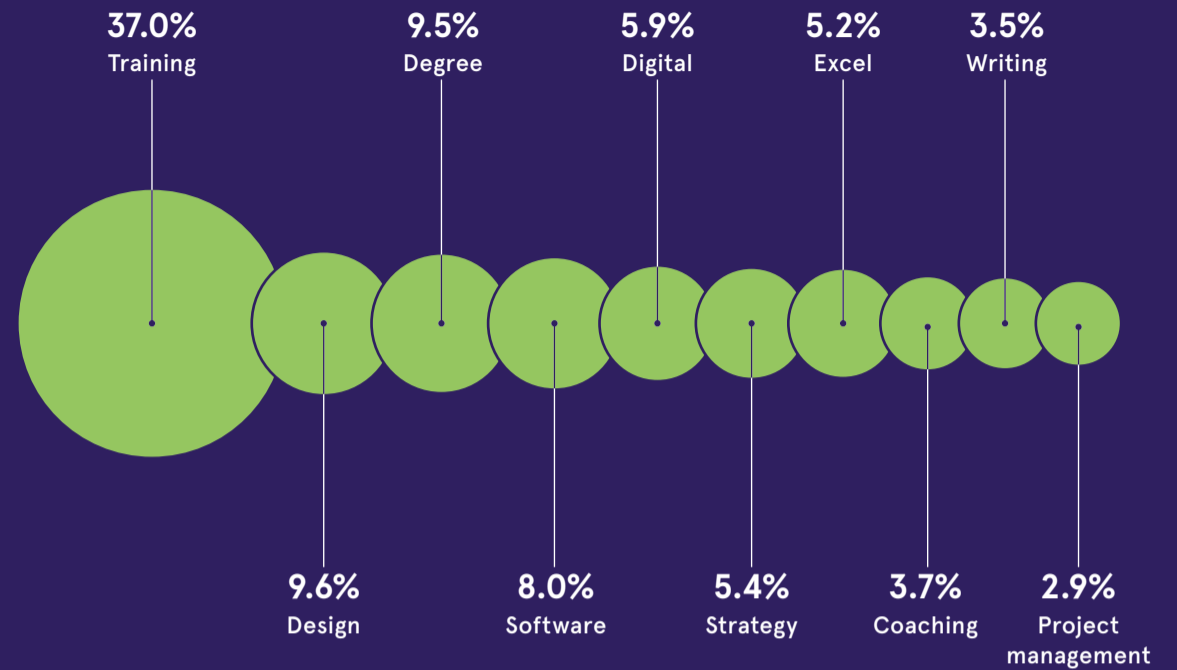


wouldn't rule it out

TRAINING IS EASILY THE TOP 'HARD' SKILL EMPLOYERS ARE AFTER

Adzuna 2020

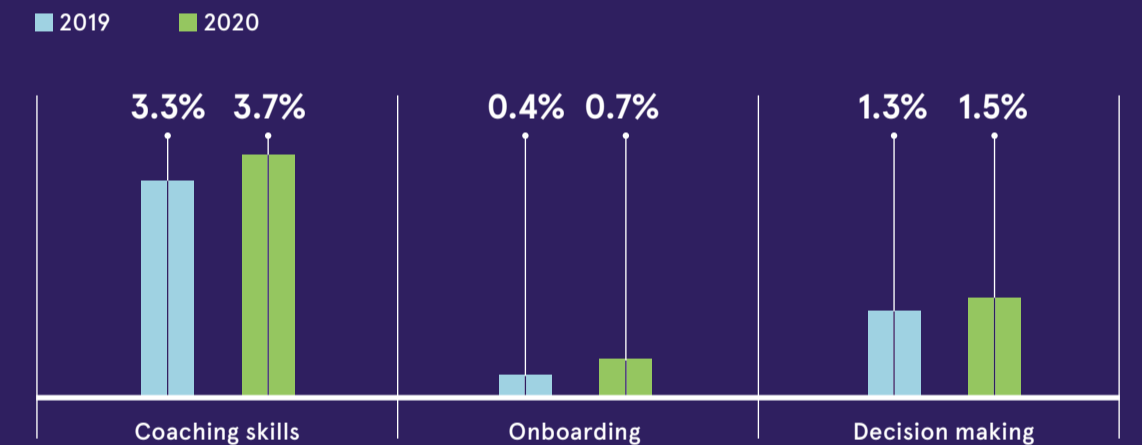
The proportion of UK job ads that mentioned this skill in 2020



EMPLOYERS INCREASINGLY WANT COACHING AND ONBOARDING SKILLS

Adzuna 2020

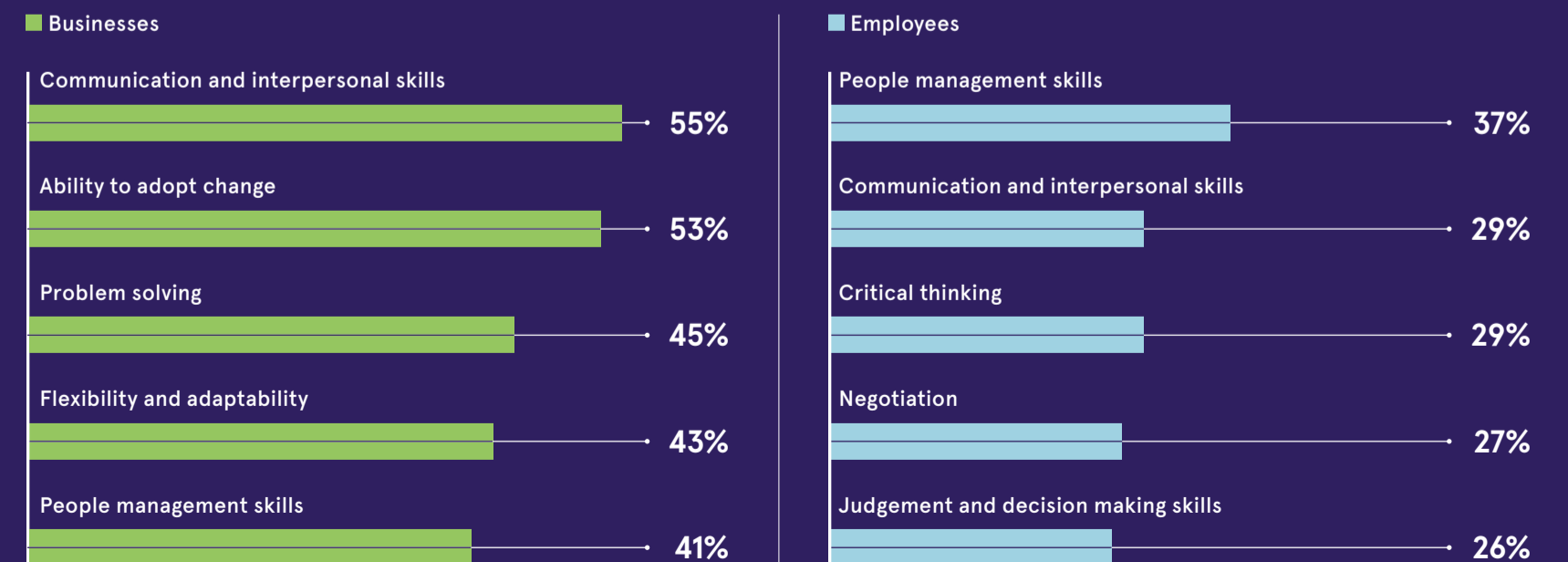
The following skills have seen the biggest % increase in mentions in job ads



THE SKILLS ORGANISATIONS ARE IN NEED OF ARE DIFFERENT TO THE SKILLS EMPLOYEES SAY THEY WANT TO DEVELOP TO PROGRESS

% of businesses and staff wanting the following skills

Hays 2020



PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

The pros and cons of peer review

With the annual performance review criticised as unfit for purpose, peer reviews are becoming more popular as part of a wider shift to a continual feedback culture

Cath Everett

The traditional yearly performance appraisal process has long been criticised for its slow feedback loop in an increasingly fast-moving working world. It fails, as well, because all too often the process ends up being a negotiation around promotion and pay, rather than a discussion about performance and development. Plus it is all too easy for bias to come in, with discussions typically by just one person, someone's manager.

Yet the yearly review remains a core part of many companies' performance management, in part because a better alternative is hard to find.

But with the coronavirus pandemic leading to large numbers of people working remotely, resulting in less daily interaction with managers, it has become increasingly important to introduce change and create

a more democratic feedback process.

The likes of Google and Netflix have already made moves in this direction, with the aim of understanding employees' performance and behavioural attitude from the viewpoint of people they work with regularly, which might include colleagues, peers and other managers.

The role of line managers becomes one of aggregating and summarising this feedback – 50 or more inputs per employee a year – as part of an ongoing performance evaluation process, which is focused purely on personal and professional development.

So does this approach have legs beyond the world of Big Tech? Iain Thomson, director of incentive and recognition at employee and consumer engagement specialists Sodexo Engage, believes it does. While peer reviews have to date taken



“When done well, if you get broad feedback from different types of people you can learn far more about yourself than from manager-to-subordinate input

place predominantly at the management level in the form of 360-degree appraisals, there is a case to be made for introducing feedback more widely across all levels of the organisation.

“When done well, if you get broad feedback from different types of people you can learn far more about yourself than you would from just manager-to-subordinate input,” says Thomson. “And from a manager’s viewpoint, it can help to give a more accurate picture of an employee’s performance, enabling you to identify patterns that indicate an issue you could manage and steer them through.”

Evaluating the peer review process

Jason Lauritsen, people management adviser and author of *Unlocking High Performance*, likewise believes a well-designed peer review process can be beneficial.

“Peers who frequently work together have a much better vantage point to observe an individual’s true contributions and impact than their manager,” he points out. “They also feel the

impact of performance or skills gaps more directly and better quality feedback, in theory, should lead to improved future performance.”

But there are downsides to this kind of approach too. A key challenge involves obtaining constructive feedback that is honest rather than polite, but is not so direct and personal it could damage relationships between colleagues.

Neuroscience suggests the human brain responds to “social” threats in a similar way to physical ones. Lauritsen explains this means people tend to “react defensively to

critical feedback”, particularly if they consider it unjust or a threat to their social status at work, a situation that can result in “lasting damage to our ability to trust one another and work effectively together in future”.

Another concern, according to Jo Taylor, managing director of human resources consultancy Let’s Talk Talent, is ensuring input is objective and fair, and that people do not end up being discriminated against, bullied or “harassed through feedback”, particularly in the case of a continual feedback culture.

A further consideration, meanwhile, is simply the time and effort it takes for managers to deal with high volumes of data coming in regularly from numerous sources.

“I don’t see how it could work unless you make it very app-driven and base it on tick boxes and smiley faces, but how much value does that kind of response offer?” posits Taylor. “So it’s about going back to basics, understanding what the end-game is and asking for feedback on that basis. Is it about being honest and transparent, is it about engagement and motivation? What’s the question?”

How to get the process right

Karen Plum, director of research and development at consultancy Advanced Workplace Associates, says: “It all comes back to objectives and vision, so what’s the aim behind doing it or is it simply putting lipstick on a pig?” she asks. “There’s not much point if you haven’t the right culture and management practices in the first place to help people grow and develop.”

Just what such an environment might look like, Nathalie Cousseau, HR director at IT consultancy Avanade, believes it is one based on “trust, honesty and openness”, a scenario that for most employers “takes time to embed”.

In this context, providing both managers and employees with training on how to give and receive feedback using a constructive, development-focused

How Avanade revamped its approach to performance management

By decoupling learning and development conversations from pay and progression decisions, and shifting to a continual feedback approach that includes peers, Avanade has revamped its performance management approach.

The IT consultancy started its Forward Together programme some 18 months ago, with the aim of shifting the power and responsibility for personal career development from managers to employees.

Nathalie Cousseau, human resources director, explains: “To be a true growth organisation and for people to effectively develop their careers, feedback has to take place on a just-in-time, ongoing basis rather than as an annual review. So the aim is to foster the kind of environment where it feels safe for real-time feedback to happen as it’s being done with the right intentions.”

As a result, development meetings are now expected to take place at least once a quarter, while employees are encouraged to request peer feedback at key moments, such as the end of a project or after

giving a presentation. To make this process easier, the organisation has created a plug-in to Microsoft Outlook, which enables them to email designated colleagues a choice of template-based feedback forms. It is then up to the employee if they wish to discuss this feedback with their manager or not.

As Cousseau says: “The aim is to allow individuals and the people writing feedback to give and receive it in a way that is truly developmental by removing the worry about how it might ultimately be used by managers.”

Managers themselves, meanwhile, are also encouraged to solicit feedback on the performance of team members before holding reviews to obtain a more rounded view of their strengths and possible areas for development.

“To be a true growth organisation with a development focus, you have to create the right environment to give and receive feedback, so you can adjust and learn and continue to improve. It’s part of a cultural shift and it takes time, but it is worth it,” Cousseau concludes.

approach can help. But Cousseau also advises against swamping people with “feedback-itus”.

“There’s no point asking everyone for feedback on every single interaction as it just builds fatigue, so it’s important to identify those moments where it’ll be of benefit, for example after a presentation or a project has been completed,” she says. “It’s not a numbers game; it’s about obtaining feedback at the right time for learning and growth.”

Lauritsen agrees. While he expects ongoing performance conversations to increasingly become

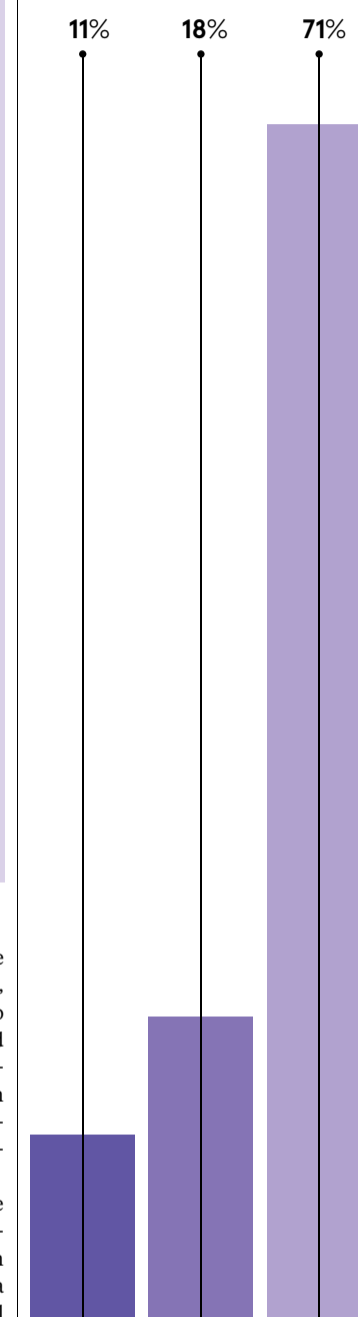
the norm, he does not anticipate formal peer review processes, socially based or otherwise, to become common practice. Instead he predicts there will be a continued focus among employers on “fostering more frequent peer-to-peer feedback, particularly feedback and recognition”.

“It will be about posting positive accolades to the company’s recognition platform or participating in a structured debrief at the end of a project,” says Lauritsen. “So it will be peer feedback in the flow of work rather than as a formal process.”

USE OF PEER FEEDBACK

% of HR professionals working in companies that use it

- Yes, ongoing
- Yes, at certain times
- No



Gartner 2018

BUSINESSES THAT CONSISTENTLY USE PEER FEEDBACK SEE A MORE POSITIVE IMPACT THAN THOSE THAT DIP IN AND OUT

% of HR professionals

- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- No impact
- ▨ Somewhat negative

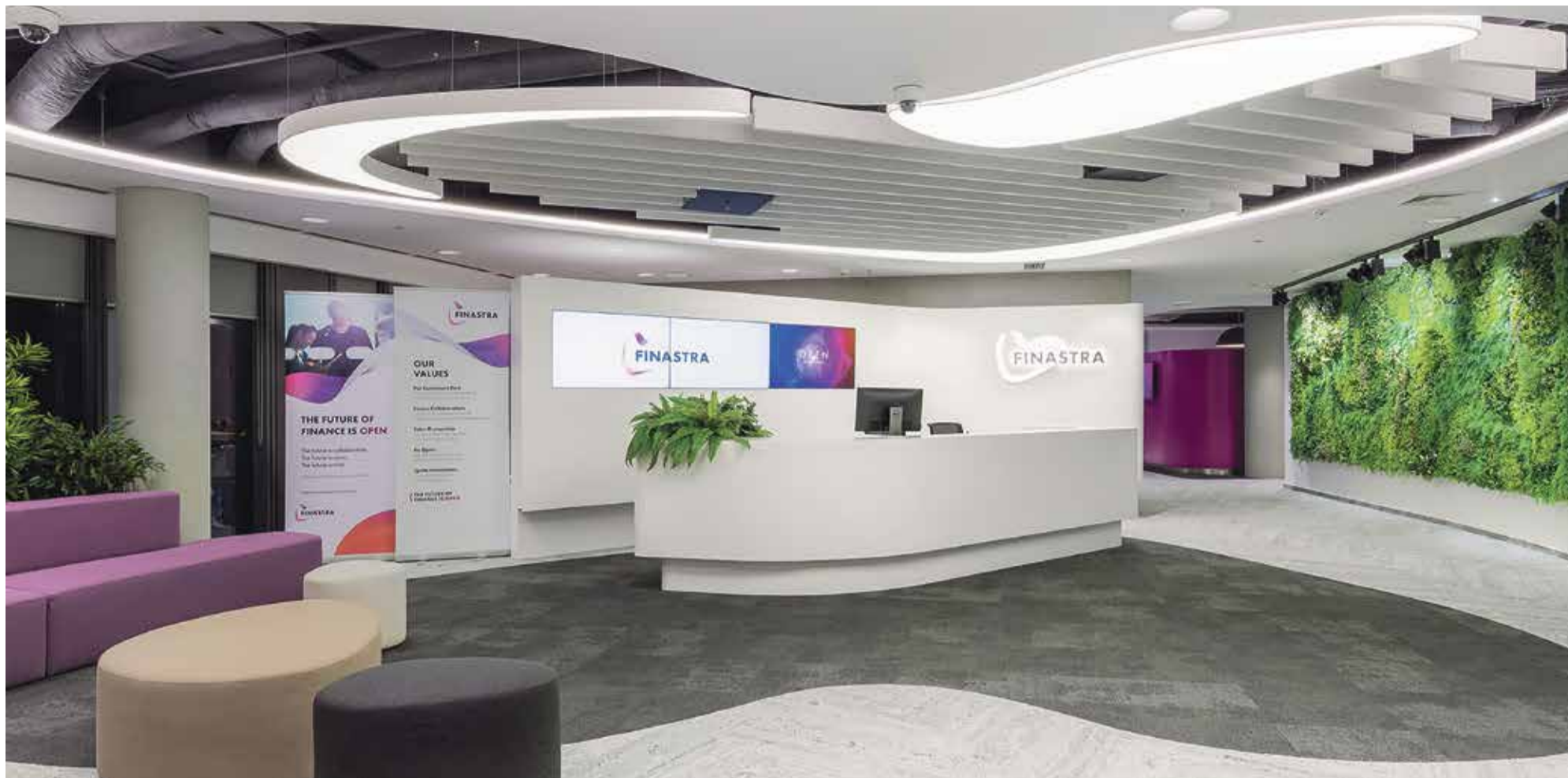
Ongoing use



At certain times



Society for Human Resource Management 2018



Finastra leads the way in the future of work

While organisations still dither about how they want their people to work after the pandemic, fintech firm Finastra committed early to its vision and is well on the way to executing it

The coronavirus pandemic brought the future of work forward many years. Besides the way it forced organisations to embrace remote working in a matter of days, and banished many long-held, archaic views around the impact on productivity, it has also presented companies with a unique opportunity to reimagine their workplace models.

A business that has leapt at the opportunity is Finastra, one of the world's largest fintechs. While the majority of organisations accept, even when the pandemic has long passed, they will not go back to the old office-dominated ways of working, they are yet to decide and communicate to their people how they expect them to work in the future.

Momentum is mounting behind a hybrid model. Indeed, 77 per cent of UK employees told an Adecco survey that a mix of office-based and remote working is the best way forward after COVID-19. But defining exactly what that looks like, and how office working will differ from home working, is something most firms are yet to commit to.

Finastra, on the other hand, set out its stall early and boldly. Aware

its employees were living through enough confusion and lack of clarity as it was in the middle of a pandemic, it put in additional effort to build a new way of working that gives people back control.

"We took big decisions quickly and we communicated them early, telling our people in December what the future of work will look like," says Sharon Doherty, chief people and places officer at Finastra. "In an uncertain world, we wanted to give them some things they were in control of and commit to our vision of work, so they could think about where they want to live, childcare and so on, way ahead of the return to some normality."

"Our people really liked and appreciated that we were clear on this, as clear as we could be about anything during the pandemic, and we passed it on so there was always total transparency. Our mindset, from the beginning, was that we would emerge a stronger company by taking the chance to look at how we serve our people and customers, and reinvent ourselves."

To build a workplace model that worked best for its people, Finastra

new digital backbone to give staff the best support when working remotely. However, while its people had demonstrated they could work effectively remotely, Finastra also knew it had to bring people physically back together to innovate, problem solve and collaborate on a deeper level.

"We are an agile tech company, but we realise you don't get the best out of people unless you have some physical time together," says Doherty. "We have adopted the two-plus model and committed to a 50 per cent reduction in travel compared to pre-pandemic norms. Inclusion for all is also a really important principle, so we design our policies to work for all the different communities that make up our workforce and on a global level."

Finastra has implemented the new policies, which also include uncapped holidays and bereavement and domestic abuse policies, around the world. Meanwhile, it is in the process of designing all its buildings to set them up as hubs that get the most out of the time their people will commit to being in the office. The emphasis is on collaboration-focused spaces with a lot of whiteboards and hot-desking.

Recognising the strain remote-only working has put on its workforce, Finastra also worked with its employees to create a charter that commits to shorter meetings, time for focus and reflection, and consideration for different regions and cultures.

"When we stood back, we saw work and life were really integrating, so our new way of working is about empowering people to make decisions about how they balance that," Doherty adds. "There is a whole raft of things that really set a tone of trust and helping people to control their work-life balance, and when they need us most we're here for them. That includes trusting people to decide

when they need to have time off."

While there is a lot Finastra can do as a company to set a tone and influence culture, it also relies on its leaders to reflect this in the ways they manage, support and interact with their teams. As a result, Finastra has put its leaders through workshops and training sessions on how leadership should evolve in the new normal. At the centre is an overarching focus on wellbeing and ensuring a healthy balance between work and life.

"Leadership can no longer be just about work on its own," says Doherty. "It's about health and people dealing with schooling and difficult life circumstances. Our role as leaders of more remote teams is to look through the screen, see the person and try to help them with their wellbeing. Connect as a human first and then think about the work that needs to be done. It's down to individual leaders to ensure they get that right."

"We've also had a massive focus on corporate social responsibility and wellbeing, organising tons of really fun activities like cooking lessons, dancing, exercise classes, talent competitions, and coding for our kids and our customers' kids. We even did a Christmas Eve party for people who live on their own. It has all been about trying to keep people feeling positive and connected on a human level, wherever they are based."

For more information please visit finastra.com



REGULATION

Is IR35 set to deliver a workforce headache come April?

With the delayed introduction of so-called IR35 regulations, which govern taxation of self-employed consultants, looming for the private sector, senior executives must ensure they are clear on their obligations and take steps to prepare

Jonathan Weinberg

A year after UK chancellor Rishi Sunak delayed controversial IR35 reforms for the private sector, they are set to be introduced in April. But is the C-suite ready for this extra burden?

The change puts the onus on medium and large-sized companies to assess whether work done by contractors, and how they carry it out, classes them as employees. If it does, this would move them to PAYE, paying the same income tax and national insurance as the rest of the employed workforce and potentially having benefits such as holiday or sick pay and a pension.

Many claim IR35 will damage the consultancy economy, leading to a

brain drain overseas. Its supporters cite illogical differences in the tax take from employees when the working environment and rules contractors must adhere to are often the same.

Josh Mathias, managing director of engineering company Hythe Group, explains the complexities: "In engineering, it's natural to have surges and dips in work demand. We've been monitoring this and preparing for the inevitable migration all year."

"We will employ those who sit within the IR35 requirements and we will use umbrella services to support those who still come under contractor status. This is a tough

distinction because those who fit under 'contractor status' with our definition are often working for other companies that have a blanket rule for being inside IR35. Therefore, we have to increase the amount we pay to the 'umbrella workers' to help them contribute to the National Insurance they have to pay as a result.

"We are having to restructure our contracts, payroll and management to suit a PAYE structure, over contractor structure. It will change the way we operate significantly. The additional costs to the business are huge and the changes to the workers' way of life will also be altered, their flexibility, the day-to-day

expectations of them, their freedom to choose places to work and contracts to work on. There will also be short-term effects, leaving lots of people in limbo while companies restructure to ensure they are 100 per cent compliant."

Why blanket bans are not the answer

Clarke Bowles, head of key accounts at Parasol, a so-called umbrella company, suggests the blanket bans Mathias refers to could prove bad for the businesses adopting them. He says: "It effectively puts everybody in a tax position similar to that of being inside IR35, regardless of their working practices. In this situation, there are no winners as contractors will move contracts to find higher rates outside IR35, and companies and agencies may need to increase rates or lower margins to keep hold of valuable contractors respectively."

"HM Revenue & Customs pushed forward with IR35 reforms because one third of limited company contractors were reported to be working non-compliantly. However, this leaves two thirds of contractors working compliantly. Companies that blanket ban rather than deal with IR35 through accurate assessment and compliance will inevitably lose out on top talent in the long run."

James Poyser, founder of offpayroll.org.uk, a site where contractors can anonymously rate end-clients on their approach to IR35, backs this up with feedback.

He says: "Fair assessments and sound working practices are helping some brands pull away from their competitors. They are continuing to use short-term talent to deliver strategic projects when others are struggling, simply because they haven't taken the approach to ban flexible skill from the supply chain. By taking a compliant and fair approach, they can compete for the very best talent."

"The feedback really points to the fact that brands banning contractors are alienating self-employed professionals. The contingent workforce is actively seeking out the fair-end clients and won't entertain contracts that fall inside IR35."

"Many end-clients think it's a buyers' market for contingent workers and in many areas this is true. However, there continues to be critical skills shortages, mainly in tech, and the self-employed professionals in these areas know it."

The steps businesses need to make to avoid IR35 repercussions
Caroline Colliston, corporate tax partner at global legal business DWF, suggests more education is still needed as there are "large swathes of the contractor and business population that do not understand the new rules well enough or how these may impact their businesses".

However, Colliston points to opportunities for some businesses as IR35 offers the chance to simplify their approach to engaging contingent labour, while regulating relationships with contractors that continued over years without sufficient review. Preparation should also include having processes to deal with any disagreements.

“Companies that blanket ban rather than deal with IR35 through accurate assessment and compliance will inevitably lose out on top talent in the long run

She adds: "This will require understanding who is in the contingent labour population in a business, reviewing the contracts in place and any statements of work in the context of what is happening on the ground. Training everyone in the business engaging and hiring contingent labour will be key too from legal and HR to procurement and facilities management. This legislation can permeate every aspect of a business."

But while, according to HMRC, there will be no penalties for inaccuracies in the first 12 months, unless there's deliberate non-compliance, taking appropriate steps right away is key.

Debbie Sadler, senior associate in the employment team at Blaser Mills Law, concludes: "Businesses must be aware that if the new IR35 tax rules apply to them, they can expect to pay around 25 per cent more in tax a year. They should take time over the next few months to understand how the legislation works, apply best practices to remove the risks and prepare defence in case of an investigation by HMRC. We are likely to see some serious repercussions for hirers and contractors who fail to prepare for compliance." ●

THE IMPACT OF IR35

170,000

number of people that could pay more tax

60,000

medium and large organisations impacted that

20,000

recruitment agencies and other intermediaries impacted

£3.1bn

amount of additional tax revenue it will generate 2020-2024

CEOs tap into talent transformation to gain strategic advantage

Transformation begins with better data and insight into current and future required skills, as leaders build a more modern and agile workforce

Data and intelligence have long been powerful sources of strategic advantage for businesses. Primarily, efforts in these areas have focused on attaining granular information on customers, analysed in depth to improve sales, services and responsiveness. Most companies, however, don't have this same level of data infrastructure, insights and intelligence on hand to create an agile and strategic talent function.

In fact, business leaders often know very little about their most important asset: their people. Whether current employees or future hires, little is known about their skills, backgrounds and potential.

"A company's talent function is often the least well informed by data, and it is stuck in an old-fashioned staffing model instead of looking at how to manage, develop and maximise people's growing skills," says Abakar Saidov, chief executive at talent platform Beamery. "The most common question we hear from chief human resource executives is 'What skills do my people have?'. It's amazing they don't know the answer."

Even though approximately 60 per cent of Fortune 500 company budgets are allocated to human resources costs, "companies have significant gaps when it comes to truly understanding their people", he adds. "Compare this to the 10 per cent spent on marketing, which is constantly assessed for results."

To safeguard their future and ensure they consistently deliver against high-priority targets, whether around

existing business growth, diversity or expansion into new markets and product lines, the modern enterprise needs a new "operating system" for its talent. Such a system gives them the intelligence they need to make the right decisions about their people, hit company goals around diversity recruitment, engage potential high performers and build the workforce of the future.

Technology gaps create barriers to transformation

More than six in ten chief executives recognise technology gaps are the main barriers to a successful talent strategy, according to a Beamery survey of over 400 senior decision-makers globally. Improving resource utilisation and efficiency has become the top business priority, with many planning to increase the role of data in decision-making.

Critical information gaps are currently one of the principal impediments; at the moment, many firms fail to record up-to-date, informative data that enables judgments on available skills and potential. Most accessible information on talent is "surface level and outdated", Saidov notes, taken from CVs and online job application forms or HR systems that simply hold administrative data instead of tracking changing capabilities. "People are treated as employment objects rather than seen for their skills trajectory and what they will contribute," he says.

Identifying in-house skills and capabilities, and understanding any gaps, can enable companies to better meet their strategic aims and adapt more quickly to change and disrupt markets. Saidov says: "It also allows organisations to ensure candidates have a relevant, positive experience with their brand, similar to what they may offer as part of their customer experience. Lacking this awareness, by contrast, can mean organisations stagnate and suffer negative consequences to their brand image."

Building an agile workforce with technology

Many organisations, including three of Fortune magazine's top ten most valuable brands, already rely on Beamery's Talent Operating System to help future-proof their workforce, consistently bring the right skills and capabilities into their company, and grow the careers of their employees in a way that aligns with business strategy.

The system helps organisations transform how they hire and retain a global, diverse workforce, using artificial intelligence and deep learning to give



“The C-suite has high expectations from talent management and it's becoming a core operation

Top 3 Talent Priorities for C-Level Executives for next two years

54%

Improve efficiency and resource utilisation

49%

Increase data-driven decision making

44%

Improve candidate experience

strategic insights and identify potential skills gaps that might put future business efforts at risk. Equally, it drives more effective and less biased recruiting practices, and helps organisations power their next phase of growth.

62%

of VPs of Talent say AI (Artificial Intelligence) is core to talent transformation

62%

of CEOs and

59%

CHROs say technology gaps impact the organization's talent strategy the most

"At a time when business agility has never been more important, the Talent Operating System has the crucial capability of analysing companies' talent gaps and areas of underinvestment, from billions of datapoints, taking into account realistic skills progression rates, market shortages and likely future requirements," says Saidov. "In many industries, these skills needs are changing faster than ever. Companies must understand what will be required and how to get there through hiring, reskilling and upskilling."

Global 2000 leaders make a strategic impact

A number of leaders of the world's largest businesses are making significant advances in this regard, harnessing sophisticated talent management to deliver on business strategies. Among them is the world's largest ecommerce company, whose talent function comprises thousands of staff and is positioned as a key competitive advantage. It uses Beamery to focus on resource allocation and prioritisation, the engagement of candidates and managing skills in line with strategic plans.

Meanwhile, pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca uses Beamery to develop its skills base, engaging more effectively with the more than 300,000 job applicants it connects with each year, improving both efficiency and hiring success rates. Similarly, one of the world's largest construction companies uses Beamery to centralise data on

thousands of third-party contractors, effectively resourcing projects with fast-changing priorities and timelines.

It analyses current talent and skills trajectories to automate identification, attraction and engagement for all candidates. Even the National Basketball Association in North America now runs its talent operation on Beamery, using it to scout its next basketball stars.

"Across sectors, the C-suite has high expectations from talent management and it's becoming a core operation. When empowered by advanced technology, businesses can secure and keep the skills needed to meet their strategic objectives," Saidov concludes.

In today's state of constant change, leaders need a better way to respond and adapt their workforces to remain competitive, and to be ready for more change at a moment's notice. Those armed with the right data and insights will thrive, be best prepared to build the agile workforce of the future and achieve the success needed to disrupt their industry.

To learn more please visit beamery.com



Getting dressed up to work from home

Remote working and Zoom are bringing untidiness to the table, according to growing numbers of employers. It is time, they say, for staff to smarten up

Peter Crush

In less than a year, remote working and Zoom calls have borne witness to a transformation in the way business is conducted. Convention is out, convenience is in. Meetings take place on the sofa, at the kitchen table or even in the bedroom. But according to growing numbers of professionals, it's also coming at a cost to sartorial standards of business attire.

"Breaking down barriers is one thing, but we've started to notice a creep towards lowering standards," observes Lynne Lister, managing director of X-Press Legal Services, a network of 26 offices servicing hundreds of legal firms. "I've seen people in meetings still in their PJs and it's reached a point where we're going to be doing something about it."

David Jones, partner at Glaisyers Solicitors and who confesses to regularly being the only person still wearing a suit and tie, says: "Now is when we need to nip things in the bud. Things have slipped. Our view going forward will be, it's better to be too smartly dressed rather than under-dressed."

"The novelty of the cool lawyer wearing jeans and a T-shirt is wearing off. If we're going to stay remote, we need to up our game."

What they're both opining is a sense of loss of professionalism; that expectation still remains, but thanks to Zoom casual clothes risk breeding casual minds too.

“The novelty of the cool lawyer wearing jeans and a T-shirt is wearing off. We need to up our game



"Recently, it was a joy to get out a shirt and tie for an AGM I was hosting," says Maurice Helfgott, chairman of retail management platform Brightpearl and former director at Marks & Spencer. "It made me feel more disciplined, and formal, and that I was raising my game. What you wear can definitely make you feel more professional."

Certainly, attitudes to dress are changing. Recent research by Mantel found two thirds of workers admit they no longer change their clothes to look smart ahead of video calls. Some 17 per cent claim they tumble out of bed just minutes before an early-morning Zoom call starts. Meanwhile, just 6 per cent of staff now say they plan to buy a traditional business suit this year, according to a poll by Brightpearl.

But are firms right to insist on smartness? "Perception is everything," says public relations consultant Sara Tye. "We risk casualisation becoming normalised, when really it means you can't be bothered. When all we now see is the top half of a person, it's almost incumbent to work harder to convey confidence. And it's about showing respect. We seem to be forgetting we need to present ourselves just as we would face to face."

If nothing else, Jones says dressing more akin to being in the office gives staff an opportunity to change out of their "work clothes" and recreate a sense they're leaving the day job behind. It's particularly important, he says, at a time when there is very little home-work distinction.

Other organisations lining up to enforce stricter home-working standards include those in sectors that have historically espoused dress code conformity, such as Sleeping Giant Media, a digital marketing firm. "If you wouldn't do it in the real world, going casual because you're

on Zoom isn't acceptable," says managing director Anthony Klokou.

But are we all getting our smart shirts and blouses in a twist? Doesn't Zoom encourage recognising staff for their output rather than their image. Isn't it the long yearned for emancipation workers have needed? Some agree. "It's hard to pretend you're not in a domestic setting, even if you have a different background on," says Jason Cobbold, chief executive of creative agency BMB. "For me, naturalness and authenticity matters. The more we airbrush ourselves, the less real we are. Video calls are

already harder to transmit energy, so worrying about what you wear is a distraction."

But for Lister at X-Press Legal Services this simply won't do: "We want people to be in work mode and we are, I'm afraid, still judged on our appearance," she says. "If we think attire is inappropriate, we will now be mentioning it. People can be individual, but still be smart."

What's clear is many organisations need to consciously think about standards and decide their course of action. At outsourced receptionist company Moneypenny, staff used to be able to hide behind the anonymity of a phone. But recently, the business has moved into video reception calls. "Our culture has always been about being yourself, which means we've been fine about people wearing sneakers and T-shirts," says chief executive Joanna Swash. "But we will seek to represent the brands we work for. What someone wears for a Magic Circle [law firm] client should be different to another, perhaps younger, digital brand."

While it remains to be seen just how far other employers will push back on their employees' dress code, Sabrina Panizza co-founder of image consultancy PL Studio, argues the tide will turn and embrace more formality.

She says: "Yes, it's important we are seen for who we are, but more businesses will realise that being on a video call actually magnifies a 'first impression'. There's not the wider body language cues we typically rely on when we see someone face to face. The first thing someone will see is literally if a person looks scruffy or smart."

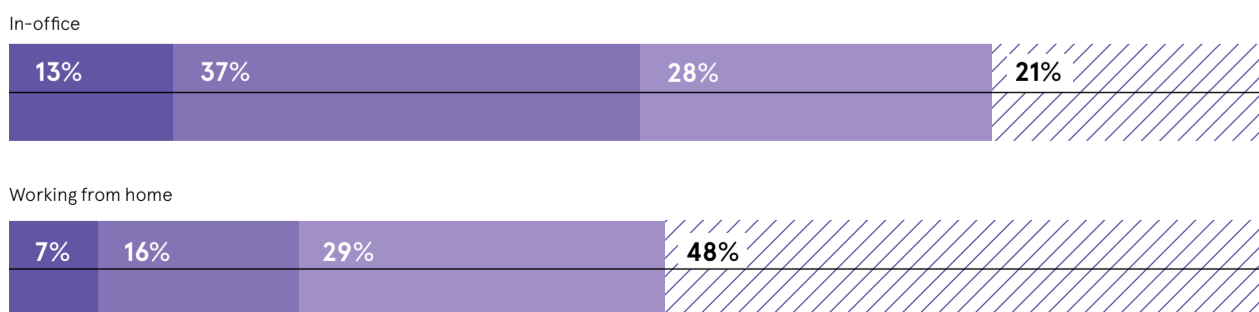
At Glaisyers Solicitors, Jones says staff will get a polite ticking off for being too casual. But according to Joanna Dai, founder of women's work-wear brand Dai, which has seen a 50 per cent drop in demand for "office" jackets and dresses, the office-wear market was already changing. Like so many things, she thinks coronavirus has just accelerated the trend.

"We're seeing the emergence of a new type of wardrobe, the flexible hybrid wardrobe," she says. "It's where comfort reigns, because people are at home, but it's where being smart can be comfortable too." ●

BUSINESS DRESS HAS SHIFTED FROM BUSINESS CASUAL TO FULLY CASUAL DURING THE PANDEMIC

% of employees observing each dress code before and during COVID-19

● Business professional ● Business casual ● Smart casual / Casual dress





TECHNOLOGY

How AI is changing the way we work

The long-term impact of the robot revolution on the human workforce may have been overstated, with artificial intelligence changing jobs, not stealing them

Rebecca Stewart

The coronavirus crisis has given rise to fresh concerns about automation in labour markets. With people locked down and social distancing still in place, many businesses around the world have scaled up their investment in artificial intelligence (AI).

AI's ability to identify and learn from data patterns, and translate them into useful technologies, has proven to be indispensable for many organisations, from healthcare providers to delivery subscription services, for example, in responding to the pandemic.

Business applications of AI over the past 12 months have ranged from those designed to increase productivity and yield, through to customer-service functions.

Robots have been rolling in to sanitise UK and US hospital corridors and deliver crucial supplies such as blood samples. Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport has enlisted mechanical floor scrubber Neo to whizz around and clean its floors every night, freeing up staff to make sure high-touch areas of the

terminal are spotless. Following its \$300-million acquisition of so-called decision engine Dynamic Yield in 2020, McDonald's has also got in on the AI action, trailing drive-through systems chaired by smart speakers.

Goldman Sachs, L'Oréal and Procter & Gamble are among those that have bet big on less-robotic looking AI tools to meet the challenges posed by a move away from physical consumerism to digital, including technology that predicts people's financial outlook and "try-before-you-buy" product-matching systems.

However, AI's business impact will outlast COVID-19. Recent data from Grand View predicts the market will be worth \$390 billion by 2025, marking 46.2 per cent growth since 2019. McKinsey is showing an appetite to invest in machine learning, with C-suite leaders who are seeing strong results from AI adoption gearing up to boost their spend over the next three years and develop their own solutions in-house.

There are implications for humans, though. According to a World Economic Forum forecast, in a shift

likely to worsen inequality, half of all work tasks will be handled by machines by 2025. A separate report from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology projects AI could replace as many as two million more workers in manufacturing alone by 2025.

This shift, coupled with an economic downturn, is paving the way for fresh concerns from employees about how many jobs will be lost to automation, especially for those in the services, electronic and manufacturing industries. In the United States alone, a little over a quarter (27 per cent) of all workers say they are worried the job they have now will be eliminated within the next five years as a result of new technology, robots or AI.

However, AI's automation effect may well be overstated. Analysis using data from the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training reveals that, in the European Union, the share of jobs facing a very high risk of being automated by new digital technologies is close to 14 per cent. However, what two in five EU jobs do face is a high probability of "substantial transformation".

So, while AI might change how humans work, the reality is it's unlikely to replace most jobs entirely. And, although "robophobia" is on the up, there are several examples of how machine learning is already positively impacting employees across a host of industries.

AI's role in supporting the workforce

Dr Samer Al Moubayed, chief executive at Furhat Robotics, a conversational-AI social robotics startup that builds tech designed to interact with humans in a natural, fluid way, has overseen the conception of the firm's namesake robot that can speak, show emotions and maintain eye contact.

The past few years have seen Moubayed work with the likes of human resources company Tengai to develop a robot that autonomously performs job interviews, scores the interview according to an established framework and summarises the output for a human recruiter.

Furhat Robotics is also collaborating with Deutsche Bahn to place intuitive travel assistants in train stations that can answer questions related to departure times, delays and more in over 35 languages.

Moubayed is firm in his belief that such AI investments can support humans in their day-to-day jobs, working in harmony with the workforce instead of against it. Robotics, he argues, will open up more job opportunities.

"Looking at innovations like Tengai, though the solution might reduce the need for recruiters, it won't remove them from the process entirely," he explains. "It will also increase the need for robot operators."

The same applies to Deutsche Bahn travel assistants. "Long term, it might lessen the need for hiring multiple customer service agents to cover a broad range of languages, but it will require developers and translators to a higher extent," says Moubayed.

The AI expert cautions that no one is in a position to understand the lasting net effect automation will have on the workforce. But, done right, many of the risks associated with automation can be mitigated in a similar fashion to previous industrial revolutions, through upskilling staff and also upholding a sense of social welfare.

"Businesses should focus their AI investments on increasing the average quality of life for workers and customers, rather than simply relying on automation as a tool to cut costs," he says.

Identifying human gaps, instead of filling them

Marketing giant Publicis Groupe credits the use of its internal AI application Marcel for helping it save 2,000 jobs during the pandemic. As a result, it plans to spend more heavily on the tool, having seen an encouraging impact on its workforce.

The smart intranet works by assigning relevant briefs and projects to Publicis' 80,000 staff. As ad execs everywhere from Tokyo to Toronto shifted to remote working at the outset of 2020, Marcel hosted an internal job mobility platform that allowed people to change agencies, move to different markets and stretch their skillset.

Suddenly, as some Publicis-owned agencies and markets found themselves working harder and faster to respond to COVID, others were experiencing a slowdown as clients in the hardest-hit sectors, like travel, were incapacitated.

Marcel enabled those overstretched agencies to post jobs and requests, making use of talent that had time on their hands.

Dan Murray, Marcel's chief executive, says as well as automating the mundane, the tech is enabling the business to identify human gaps for things robots can't do, like think creatively or communicate effectively.

"It's allowed our staff to focus on things that might take a higher-level thought process or more creative mind. It's also opened opportunities we might not otherwise have had," he says.

The business is now plotting a lot more additional uses for Marcel's future, based on AI and machine learning, that will connect people and allow staff to better flex their creative muscle.

Improving the working experience

Tech behemoth Cisco is leveraging AI, machine learning and smart data to enhance the quality of remote working for its 75,000 staff, from engineers to sales reps.

With 96 per cent of employees currently working away from the office and a hybrid working model here to stay for the long-term, it has been using deep-learning algorithms to power an "empathetic, inclusive, secure, work-from-anywhere" experience, says senior director of people and communities Gianpaolo Barozzi.

Solutions include use of intelligent video so people can move around freely in their workspace and still be available in meetings,

as well as real-time meeting transcription and automated debriefs.

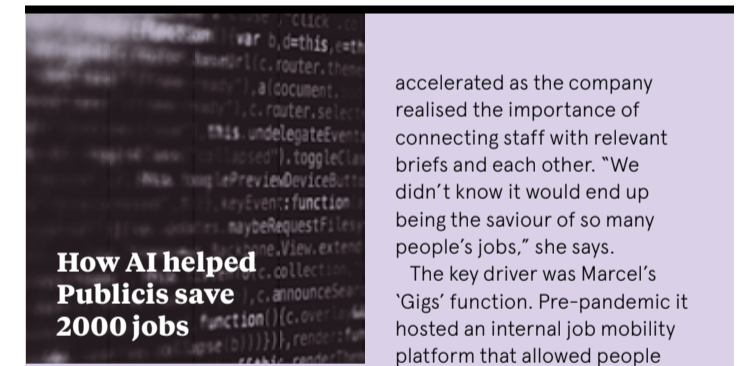
An AI tool, dubbed People Insights, is also providing individuals and teams with analytics around personal and collective work practices.

"This means staff can make better use of their time and take care of their peers," says Barozzi. "The 21st-century world of work is about connecting people to people, wherever they are, safely and securely. Productivity is no longer a sole matter of efficiency, it's increasingly achieved through inclusive collaboration, adaptability to unforeseen change and the effective leverage of collective strengths. AI is helping our teams in all these regards."

With most jobs set to involve some form of AI by 2025, he stresses education is key to ensuring staff are comfortable with these types of technologies, rather than fearful of them.

Cisco's standing as a tech firm means its people are largely open to being early adopters, but his advice to other businesses is clear. "Fears are real, so first of all we have to treat them with empathy. We need to be transparent and clear about the opportunities, while not underestimating the risks and challenges," says Barozzi.

"It's time to move beyond the paralysing utopia-dystopia dichotomy: as always the future is ours to shape. Digital has already turned from a tool to the environment where our lives happen. Humans and artificial agents will increasingly work together, enhancing and amplifying each other's capabilities." ●



In the immediate months after Covid-19, Publicis Groupe's revenues declined by 13%. The French advertising network, which owns agencies such as Saatchi&Saatchi, quickly implemented a €500m cost-cutting drive that included a recruitment freeze, elimination of freelance work and cuts to general expenses.

As the business considered the impact of the pandemic on its workforce, however, AI emerged as an unlikely saviour. Its Marcel management tool, aimed at reinventing how the agency communicates internally, was launched in 2018, but in the crisis has truly come into its own.

"We woke up one day and instead of having 80,000 employees we had 80,000 offices," says Carla Serrano, chief strategy officer of Publicis Groupe. She reveals that Marcel's global roll-out was

accelerated as the company realised the importance of connecting staff with relevant briefs and each other. "We didn't know it would end up being the saviour of so many people's jobs," she says. The key driver was Marcel's 'Gigs' function. Pre-pandemic it hosted an internal job mobility platform that allowed people to change agencies, move to different markets and stretch their skillset. Amid the crisis, Gigs pivoted to use algorithms to match individuals with briefs based on their skillset and allocating resource to clients where it was most needed.

Key to its success has been educating staff on the platform and ensuring the digital experience runs smoothly. Publicis design teams have focused on making the platform as "digestible and personalised" as possible, with work ongoing around the user experience.

Prior to 2020, Serrano admits she had reservations about AI's impact on the workforce, but is now "bullish" about the benefits it can bring. "It's immensely benefited our people and culture, as well as learning and discovery. We can use AI for good. There are things we need to be cautious of – like privacy or bias – but we're certainly learning a lot more about it."



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HUMAN RESOURCES

Stitching the world of work back together



The coronavirus pandemic, remote working and digital revolution have all turned work on its head, leaving Unilever's chief human resources officer **Leena Nair** with plenty to do

Oliver Balch

When Leena Nair told her father about her plan to switch from electronics and telecoms engineering to human resources, he made no attempt to hide his disappointment. "Who the hell cares about human resources?" he asked. Fast forward nearly three decades and 51-year-old Nair has her answer: millions of us care, if not billions. The effects of the coronavirus pandemic, layered with the impact of digital revolution, have turned the world of work upside down and it is HR professionals

like Nair who are tasked with stitching it back together.

Helping staff thrive

Despite the huge uncertainties ahead – Nair isn't even sure when she'll return to the office – Unilever's London-based chief human resources officer remains remarkably upbeat. The company's market dominance definitely helps. Unilever's portfolio of global household brands – think Persil, Domestos, Hellmann's, Dove and PG Tips, to name but a few – has shielded it from the worst of the pandemic's woes.

The stride in Nair's step also owes to Unilever's new corporate strategy. Unveiled last May, the ten-year plan commits the Anglo-Dutch consumer goods giant to a three-pronged "purpose", one of which is helping its 155,000 employees "thrive".

Talk of thriving runs counter to the general sense of doom hanging over the future of work. After four years in the top job, Nair knows the spiel as well as anyone: "robots taking over your job", "only data matters", "your livelihood is going", as she herself puts it.

Where she differs is her aversion to pessimism. Her philosophy in a nutshell: "You don't have to have change done to you; you can embrace the change and feel in control of your own story."

It's not just idle chatter either. In late-January, Unilever unveiled a slew of work-related commitments aimed at making good such talk. The list includes a pledge to skill up its entire workforce, pioneer new employment models and provide skills training for ten million young people worldwide.

Commenting on the targets, Nair observes that big business remains decidedly quiet about its social role, especially when compared to the

buzz around the green agenda. A rebalancing is needed. She says: "I'm really hoping that the social side also has its Greta Thunberg moment."

Pushing purpose

Most projections for global employment are pretty bleak, so is Nair's upbeat optimism misplaced? Possibly. But she believes Unilever's focus on purpose will be important to attracting and retaining top talent.

Nair is by no means the first to trumpet the P-word and its virtues. Businesses nowadays are tripping over themselves to breathe purpose into who they are and what they do. Yet the current buzzword has no more vocal fan than this one-time engineer.

“You don't have to have change done to you; you can embrace the change and feel in control of your own story”

Her zeal derives, in part, from her earlier point about change. As she elaborates: "If you work in the areas that you are fully passionate and purposeful about, you feel more in control of the change that's happening to you."

Rare among enthusiasts, Nair also has a profoundly pragmatic streak. Leaving people to stumble on their purpose is, she judges, ill-advised. Naturally, she has her own purpose nailed – "igniting the human spark" – but she knows most of us are happy just to muddle through.

To that end, Unilever is rolling out workshops across its global operations to help employees pinpoint their personal purpose and map out a plan for delivering it. The intention is to cover everyone on the company's payroll over the next four years, from the C-suite to the factory floor.

If it sounds all very hippy-dippy, then Nair has hard numbers to suggest otherwise. More than nine in ten (92 per cent) of workshop participants, for example, say they now expend greater "discretionary effort" at work and are less likely to jump ship.

Layer this on top of Unilever's strong sense of corporate purpose, namely "to make sustainable living commonplace", and you have a powerful mix. Enough, at any rate, to make it the top employer of choice in 54 of the 75 markets where it operates.

"In truth, I don't have to work very hard at attracting people to Unilever because they believe this is a force-for-good company," says Nair.

Skilling up: battling the robots

Purpose is all well and good, but it won't stop you losing your job to a robot. This salient truth is not lost on Nair, who returns to Unilever's pledge to upskill its entire workforce by 2025.

Much of this training will be offered online. The company's own elearning platform has in excess of two million curated courses covering "every subject under the sun". Under a recently introduced flexible-working scheme, employees also have the option to take career breaks for further study.

Interestingly, Unilever's "future-fit" vision for the world of work extends beyond its own immediate ranks. Without a major skills upgrade, Nair argues, a huge cohort of tomorrow's workforce face exclusion from our evermore digitalised economy.

Benevolent as such actions may be, there's also a hard-edged logic to them. Ten million well-paid workers equals ten million more consumers who are ready and able to buy a multipack of Signal toothpaste, say, or a tub of Wall's ice cream.

The same twin reasons underlie Unilever's recent call for a global living wage, which it expects all its suppliers to be paying by 2030 at the latest. For its part, Nair says Unilever is committed to spending €2 billion a year on firms owned by women and other diverse suppliers to support better-paid work for all.

Like so many companies, Unilever finds itself in the curious position of using digital tech to resolve problems of digitalisation's own making. Its youth training pledge, for instance, will be met in

large part through a web platform packed with webinars, elearning courses and links to internships.

Flexibility with security

So what kind of working patterns await the swathes of purpose-driven, upskilled workers Nair hopes soon to have in her employ?

One thing is for sure, they won't be heading into the office for five days a week, 52 weeks a year. Working from home may be starting to wear thin, but that doesn't mean office workers want a complete return to the way things were.

Again, the disruptions of COVID-19 are serving to accelerate pre-existing trends, says Nair: "COVID has shown us that we have to reinvent the way we work; every single one of us has yearned to break some of the traditional norms."

Unilever's package of solutions goes a step beyond the usual flexi-work arrangement of a day or two at home. It's not just the shape of the working week that's up for grabs – Unilever's operations in New Zealand are piloting a four-day week, for instance – but contract models are also in line for an overhaul.

“COVID-19 has shown us that we have to reinvent the way we work; every single one of us has yearned to break some of the traditional norms”

Take its Flex platform. Pitched as an "internal marketplace" for short-term projects, the service alerts employees to temporary tasks across the business. Nair imagined uptake might hit 2,000 placements a year; current numbers are running at five times that figure.

More radical is U-Work, a recently introduced model that allows employees and contractors to work on a retainer basis. Unilever guarantees between six weeks and six months work a year, with the remaining time left to the individual to fill as they please.

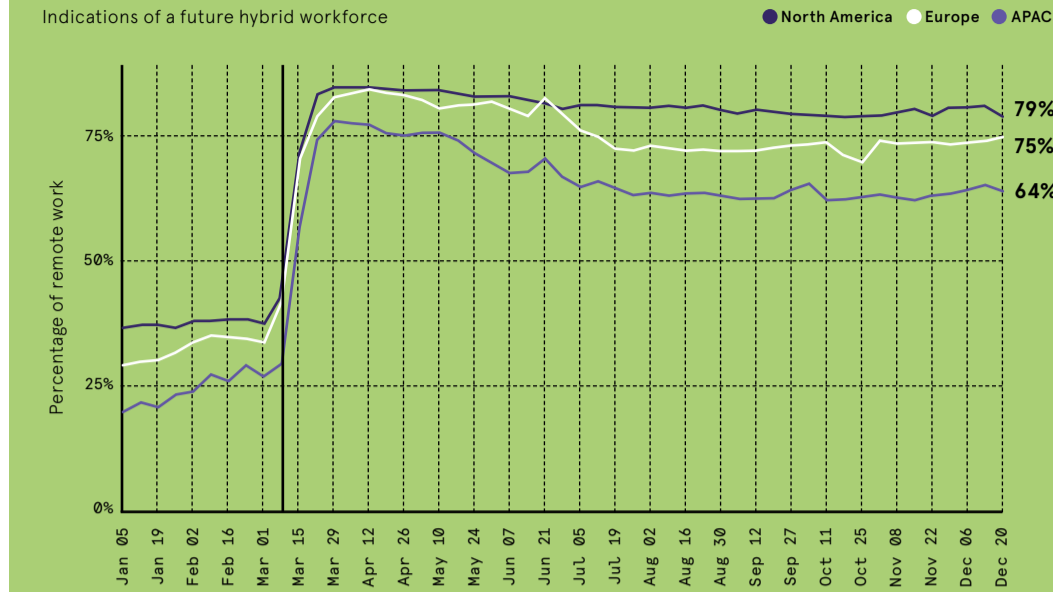
Nair is quick to rebut the comparison to gig-economy contracts, insisting that payment terms and benefits are proportionally equivalent to those of full-time workers.

"In all the options we are creating, we are combining flexibility with security, so people are able to balance their life and work in a way that's meaningful to them," she says.

Flexibility, security, balance, meaning: think you don't care about human resources, then think again. ●

Commercial feature

MOST EMPLOYEES STILL WORKING REMOTELY



Q&A Preparing for a hybrid workforce

Aternity chief information officer and chief customer officer **Fernando Castanheira** on how companies can make the crucial shift to a hybrid workforce as seamless as possible

Q As companies make their post-pandemic plans, what are the different hybrid working scenarios you foresee?

A I spend a lot of time talking to customers, both large and small. One thing has been a constant, whenever offices open back up, it's clear we will have a hybrid workforce with some people in the office and some continuing to work remotely. Offices will be transformed into more collaborative and flexible spaces while the digital employee experience becomes essential. But this won't be a case of "one size fits all" – it will vary and evolve as time goes by.

Q What should businesses prioritise when it comes to hybrid working?

A The digital employee experience should be seamless for all employees working from everywhere. People now expect a certain level of functionality and to do their job in an easy and frictionless way regardless of location.

The forced shift to remote work led to a drastic acceleration of cloud adoption over the past 12 months, which in some ways makes it easier for IT teams to manage a workforce that will soon have much more flexibility in terms of where they work.

For example, a lot of our customers have increased the usage of virtual desktops which are designed to provide employees with a seamless digital experience. I could be in the office

then go home with just a simple device and maintain my same digital experience because the desktop is actually based in the cloud.

This type of application also gives IT teams more flexibility as they don't have to depend on managing laptops remotely, because everything is in the cloud. Instead of managing devices, IT teams are managing the digital experience. This is a huge transformation that requires more visibility into more moving parts than ever and tasks IT teams with management over infrastructure they may not control.

IT teams now need visibility into all aspects of the digital employee experience in order to understand performance issues, identify bottlenecks, and maintain employee productivity. We work with our customers to provide insight into the digital experience, because many of them lost that visibility and control when their employees left the office.

Q What needs to be considered around employee experience?

A The way we onboard employees is going to have to change. I think there will be a lot more focus on how we welcome people into our companies in a hybrid workforce, by providing automated on-demand training resources. A lot of companies are also going to have to look at whether their employees have sufficient network bandwidth and WiFi capacity at home.

Company culture is another area that will be impacted by a hybrid workforce. How can we maintain or build a strong company culture with people working from all sorts of locations only in the digital office? How will we help reduce employee burnout related to technology fatigue?

Q What are the key considerations for a business developing hybrid-working policies?

A Finding the right balance across culture, communication and productivity will all be important. That begins with understanding what's happening in your business and with your people based on digital experience data, not the occasional survey. This insight can help you identify which roles are best suited for working remotely, which would be better in the office, and the tools needed to ensure your entire team is set up for success. The data you collect now will serve as the baseline for continuous improvement as we adjust to the future hybrid workforce.

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UNILEVER BY THE NUMBERS

2.5bn

people use Unilever products every day

400+

Unilever brands are used by consumers worldwide

190

Countries in which Unilever brands are sold

155,500

Unilever employees

€52bn

turnover in 2019

Unilever 2021

TEAMWORK

The future of workplace collaboration

Remote working has changed the nature of collaboration from something typically done in-person to a virtual exchange. But will this stick post-pandemic?

Rose Stokes

Until relatively recently, the word “teamwork” for most people would have conjured up an image of a group of people physically assembled working together towards a common goal. Like it or not, the world has changed dramatically over the past 12 months, forcing shifts in how we live, exercise, socialise and work.

When it comes to the latter, the multitude of logistical challenges thrown up by the coronavirus pandemic for many businesses has given way to rapid innovation. Teams that had previously relied on physical spaces to bring together the skills and knowledge of their members suddenly found themselves thrust into a new normal, where Zoom calls and instant messenger services have become conduits for almost every type of work interaction.

For better or worse, we’ve had to adapt and a return to the past in terms of office-based work seems inconceivable at this point, as more and more businesses weigh up the cost-savings that can be made if they deprioritise the need for physical office space.

As lockdown restrictions begin to ease in the UK, it is therefore a prescient time to consider what aspects of digital collaboration that have been developed over the past year are worth holding on to and which we’re happy to leave behind. Which new skills have been highlighted as necessary to surviving in such an environment? What new technologies are proving most useful? And what will this all mean for the future of work more generally?

“COVID-19 has undoubtedly accelerated processes of how teams now collaborate and many businesses have been reviewing and upgrading their communications systems and processes,” says Nicole

Alvino, co-founder and chief strategy officer at SocialChorus, a collaboration platform.

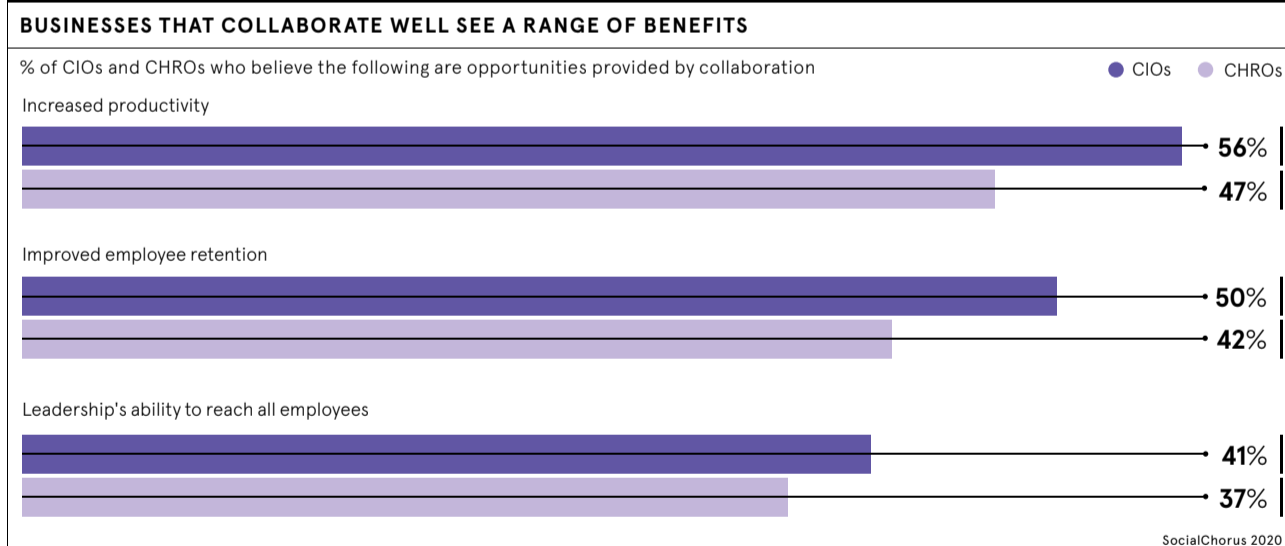
“The successful implementation of this often depends on harmony between the tech expertise of chief information officers and their IT teams, and the human input of human resources and internal communications departments.”

This experience certainly rings true for the software company Dropbox. “At the start of the pandemic, we moved quickly to mandatory work from home,” says Andy Wilson, director of new product initiatives. “We needed to ensure we had the right tools to enable our employees to collaborate as effectively as normal.”

Having the right tools of course makes a huge difference. Whether that’s project management tools, such as Asana or Basecamp, instant messaging via Slack or a company Zoom account, access to a diverse set of software makes a huge difference. And new tools are being developed all the time, as more problems crop up that kickstart innovative solutions-focused missions.

According to Alvino, having an open mind to new technological developments, as well as an open ear to what staff say works best, is critical.

“Successful IT implementation often depends on harmony between the tech expertise of CIOs and their teams, and the human input of HR



Recent research by SocialChorus supports this notion, with more than four in ten respondents worrying that “centralising employee engagement through a single platform, rather than using a blend of technologies their workers prefer, will needlessly complicate matters”.

For Dropbox, beyond the adoption of new tools, harmonisation of widespread remote-working practices necessitated some out-of-the-box thinking. “We believe that this level of collaboration goes beyond just the use of video calls,” says Wilson.

In Dropbox’s case, they were able to use their own products to give them a head start on collaborating

effectively from home. The shift has not been without its challenges, but Wilson credits a strong culture of communication with enabling the business to continue to thrive in such an uncertain operating environment. “Giving employees the right space and time to communicate and be creative with their colleagues is essential,” he says.

Aside from the more logistical side of adjusting to collaborating remotely, and the tools required to do this effectively, the shift to working from home has had an impact on the behavioural habits of businesses. For many people, particularly parents, working in solid blocks from 9am to

5pm every day has been incompatible with other responsibilities.

According to Jess Baker, business psychologist and women’s leadership coach, it is the “climate” of an organisation that tends to determine how successfully they have adjusted. “Businesses with employees who feel trusted and respected are more likely to cope better than organisations whose employees feel undervalued and micro-managed,” she says.

“The ones who are doing best at the moment are those with elements of the teal organisational structure – think concentric circles instead of a layered pyramid that you’d find in a traditional structure – which

allows for self-management, a fluid approach to workload and faster, leaner decision-making.”

There are a number of ways to enhance the ability of a team to collaborate. At Dropbox, they introduced “core collaboration hours”, when employees from across the world are all online at the same time, to ensure teams can communicate regularly. Wilson says the successful implementation of this has gone hand in hand with an acceptance of what he calls “non-linear working days”, when work is measured by tasks completed rather than hours sitting at the desk.

For Baker, these changes have had an impact on the types of skills a manager will need to exhibit to make the most of the opportunities presented by an increase in remote working. “The compassionate leader who builds trust, respect and takes a personal authentic interest in an employee’s wellbeing is going to have a more productive and engaged workforce than the task-focused manager whose sole interest is in the output,” she explains.

Self-awareness will also become a critical skill, Baker believes. “Managers have to look after themselves and seek support when they need it,” she says. The good news is Baker believes these skills are learnt rather than innate.

“Every individual has the capacity to develop the four components of the compassionate leader,” she says.

“Balancing flexibility and freedom, while maintaining one-to-one working, offers the best of both worlds

“They are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. As a leader they help you to better influence others, manage conflict, improve your team-working skills and enable you to be a more engaging and motivational leader.”

When it comes to more practical advice, Baker suggests using communication platforms that enable real-time chat and project-focused channels so colleagues can check in and update each other as often as they need to. She also recommends “ditching lengthy ‘information-dump’ meetings”. When you do meet, she says, “only include the people who need to know or are responsible for taking action”.

Alongside this focus on developing new skills, many companies are focusing on innovative ways to approach a return to in-person work. At Dropbox, this means introducing studios specifically designed for in-person collaboration, such as team meetings or large events, which aren’t intended for everyday use or solo work.

“There will be no individual desks in our studios,” says Wilson. “We believe that balancing flexibility and freedom, while maintaining one-to-one working, offers the best of both worlds.”

Other firms are looking at ways to make remote working feel more personal. Nigel Cannings, chief technology officer at Intelligent Voice, an artificial intelligence company, hopes to do this via the development of augmented reality (AR), and eventually virtual reality (VR), meeting software.

“You just don’t build the same rapport over Zoom as you do in person. The way we work post-lockdown will change fundamentally,” he says, “and most people won’t have a choice in what their new work set-up looks like, with many companies deciding against returning to an office-based structure.”

This is where technology can help, Cannings believes, although he is quick to clarify that much of this software development hinges on AR and VR hardware being more affordable and readily available in the near future.

The concept of planning ahead may seem futile after a year in which the only constant has been change. What is clear, though, is those companies that establish cultures fostering clear and open communications, while listening to the needs of employees, will be best placed to seize opportunities in a post-pandemic business environment. ●

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