

## Employers should prepare for long-term changes to the world of work

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There are of course many negatives arising from the crisis presented by COVID-19. However, there could be real benefits for businesses and their staff if we take some of the opportunities that have been presented and do not just look to revert to the old ways of doing things.

Those businesses which take the opportunity to consider their working practices will be more likely to thrive in the post-pandemic employment market, attracting new talent and retaining existing skills and expertise. Those that can't wait to get back to the 'good old days' may find themselves left behind.

Recent changes to working practices were thrust upon us and some businesses were more prepared for the changes than others. Whether we have been ready or not, we have had to adapt. Many of those businesses that swore that jobs could only be done in the office between 9am and 5pm have been proved wrong.

Most of us are now working very differently. People who have been unwell and those with caring commitments may not always be online during their usual working hours, but they are still working and doing a very good job, despite the personal challenges they face.

Necessity really has become the mother of invention. Even those offices which have reopened have been doing so on reduced numbers, with many employees performing effectively using a mixture of both home and office working.

The managers who have thrived in this climate are those who have stepped up to adapt to new

ways of looking after their teams and their customers, as well as those who have recognised and appreciated flexibility in their team members.

### **What might the future hold?**

Businesses are very likely to see more requests for flexible working, both generally and under statute. Declining such a request will potentially be more difficult now given the statutory list of reasons that an employer might give and the recent lengthy spells of successful home working for many.

More than that, the way businesses have interacted with their employees during this period of remote working has hopefully developed and further embedded a culture of trust between employers and their employees – that the work will still get done and that just because employees are not at their desks 24/7 they can still be productive. This could be the turning point for those 'grown-up' relationships between businesses and their employees and the disruption of a culture of presenteeism.

The impact of the current crisis on the workplace is not just about remote working. There are also benefits and opportunities for those businesses that do need staff to be present in the workplace.

There are opportunities for a more diverse and inclusive workforce including carers, people with a disability or illness, part-time workers, as well as those who have other interests which they may wish to pursue during 'normal' working hours. It is clear that all people can play a productive part in an organisation and that organisations are better for it. Maybe the global pandemic has helped us to see that?

We are seeing loyalty and commitment growing between those employers and employees who are working well together during these times and there will be long-term benefits for both.

Employers have the opportunity to consider a number of potential changes to their business, including how they use their office space, their travel policies and their technology solutions. For many, the importance of communication during remote working has become very clear. This takes effort and sometimes a cost, but there are clearly rewards to be had for both employers and employees.

There is a great potential for improved well-being in the workplace. Notwithstanding the difficulties everyone is facing – employees 'bringing their whole selves to work'; speaking up about the challenges and difficulties they are facing and employees being flexible and having to turn their hand to new areas of work; partnerships between business and employees are being built that will last long into the future.

The real challenge for businesses will be to capitalise on these benefits and to think about how

some of these positive temporary measures can become long-term changes, rather than looking through rose-tinted glasses and wishing for the good old days.

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