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Post COVID-19: The end of the office as we know it?

Will things go back to pre-pandemic normality when it comes to physical offices?

Business analysts and talking heads often discuss and debate disruption in the workplace. But few could have predicted the monumental changes that occurred back in March, when UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson placed the country in lockdown due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) crisis, forcing firms across the country to shut their offices and move to total remote working where possible.

Such a dramatic shift is a rare thing – the last notable example was the move of women from the home to the workplace during the Second World War – and the effects are long-lasting.

“The speed with which COVID-19 has forced companies into universal remote working has moved us forward to a place that, in my view, we will

never return from,” says Harvey Nash CEO of Bev White.

“Attitudes towards remote working from business leaders and their employees have shifted significantly and I don’t believe that this will just melt away post-crisis.”

Thanks for the desks

While it may not have been a plan that was initially in their company roadmap, some organisations have found the so-called distributed workforce suits them more than they realised it would.

“Since last year, we have offered flexible working, including working from home two days per week, to most employees. Having this as a ‘perk’ helped us to attract and retain key staff, including some parents,” explains Katya Linossi, CEO of software

and services firm ClearPeople.

“Since the lockdown took place, our HR team has been speaking with the team daily and the feedback has been so positive that we decided earlier this month to continue as an entirely remote workforce going forward,” Linossi adds.

In addition to delivering on what Linossi says was an already present desire for more flexible working, there are also more material benefits. ClearPeople will be ending the leases it has on its two offices, meaning it will no longer be sinking money into rent.

This is one of the common benefits across the board for organisations moving to full or partial remote working. Martin Sorrell, head of marketing firm S4 Capital, told the Financial Times he had found the home working experience engendered by lockdown to be “energising” and would lead to “permanent change”, adding: “I spend around £35m on property in a year. I’d much rather invest that in people than expensive offices,” he said.

Normal is normal

Some organisations haven't seen the benefits of remote working.

Brighton-based ISMS.online is one such business. CEO Mark Darby says the office brings a cultural and economic value that shouldn't be overlooked when trying to work out what the 'new normal' means.

"We were very proactive and actually started working remotely nearly two weeks before government lockdown. We already had some tech staff working remotely so we had the information security policies and controls set up as part of our ISO 27001 certification," he says.

Some firms have been furloughing or laying off staff, but ISMS.online has almost doubled its headcount during the lockdown period.

"As we have a global customer base, we have remote workers in key geographies, but our ambition is to have a fully office-based team as our primary hub in Brighton," Darby says.

"The benefits of having everyone in the same location as we continue to scale up cannot be underestimated: it's so much quicker to appreciate each other's strengths and diversity, to collaborate more effectively and execute more rapidly when working in the same location."

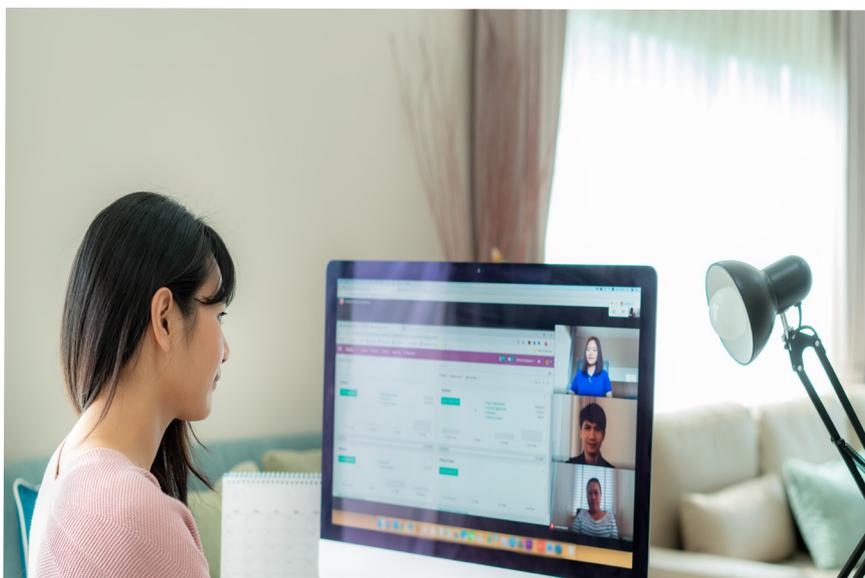
A hybrid approach

In the UK, the desire among employees to continue working remotely is evident.

According to Okta, 55% of people say they are more productive while working from home, while 62% feel the additional flexibility that remote working offers has allowed them to focus more on their work than they would under normal circumstance. But that's not necessarily the case for everyone.

"The fact is that not everyone loves working from home," explains Andrew Hewitt, an analyst at Forrester. "Some actively hate it and can't wait to get back. Companies will provide space for those people."

Support.com CEO Rick Bloom agrees, saying: "Employees often feel isolated; there is an enormous sense of disconnection in not being able to see each other and have those 'water-cooler' chats. We have mechanisms,



virtual chat rooms, and other tools to mitigate this, but if you haven't been doing this on a regular basis and you're not set up to manage a remote workforce on this scale, then the culture aspect isn't there, and it's going to be an issue."

For this reason, a flexible, hybrid approach seems most likely to be the model of the future for most industries, allowing organisations to maintain the benefits that home-working offers while still taking advantage of what the office provides.

One business implementing such a strategy is Tata Consultancy Services (TCS). The company employs more than 400,000 people and has drawn on its experiences during the COVID-19 outbreak to develop its 25x25 strategy.

"Within the space of a few weeks, we went from 100% of our staff working from approved facilities, to 95% working remotely and securely," says Amit Kapur, TCS' UK managing director.

"Our employees have adapted with impressive resilience and are collaborating more with increased productivity. Clients are comfortable and want us to take on more work; associates are happy that they have flexible hours and are saving one to two hours of daily commuting time that can now be spent working, learning, keeping fit and pursuing hobbies."

Explaining the 25x25 strategy, Kapur says: "By 2025 we will only need 25% of our employees in the office at any one time to ensure 100% are productive. Employees will only need

to spend 25% of their time at the office, only 25% of a project team will need to physically be in one location and we expect a 25% improvement in productivity and results."

The enforced lockdown period has undoubtedly been challenging, but it has also given many time to think and, as a result, the very idea of what an office is may also likely change.

"We are clearly entering a world of low-density working. But the office will take a new form," says Alastair Woods, a partner in consultancy PwC's People and Organisation practice.

"Rather than thousands of people working set hours, it will become a space for collaboration, brainstorming and meetings with purpose. I am hearing about organisations looking at different personas - and individuals will spend time in the office - but it will be a time for connection and creativity. And we might see more localised hub models emerge in the regions."

While the economy is starting to open up and our lives gradually return to normal, many offices expect to remain closed for months to come. Ultimately, for most firms, the decisions on whether or not to return to an office-based environment will be down to individuals depending on the needs and nature of each business and job role.

One thing is certain, though. With the remote work genie now out of the bottle, it will be difficult for organisations wanting to return to 100% office working to do so without a watertight business case as to why it really needs to be so.