

PRACTICUS™

# THE FUTURE OF WORK

HOW TO OPTIMISE AGILE WORKING  
POST LOCKDOWNS

2021



# THE FUTURE OF WORK

---

On Wednesday 23rd June 2021, 71 leaders and senior executives from across industries met at a virtual event hosted by Practicus. The topic for the workshop and panel discussion was how organisations can optimise the way they work as the threat of the pandemic diminishes.

**For innovators, it is an exciting period of time.** The relocation of people from traditional environments to the home and other settings over the last twelve months is widely heralded as a major triumph for digital technology and modern enterprise. What many had considered untenable at scale has now become the de facto way of working for millions of people. It has opened up new ways thinking on how we best serve customers, interact with one another and, of course, how we look after our people.

As we reach a period of relative stability – where SARS-CoV-2 is still present but becoming preventable and treatable – organisations are

grappling with what the future of work will look like. It's a hot topic of discussion everywhere and a vast variety of models are being trialled in real time right across the UK. Which work best? This event was developed to share the insights and included lessons learned from sections of industry as diverse as Media, Healthcare, Government Departments, Utilities, Oil & Gas, FinTech, Legal, Banking, Care, Charity Manufacturing, Logistics & Distribution, Transport, Charity and many others.

---

## HOST OF THE EVENT WAS PRACTICUS DIRECTOR, **DAVID WEBB**, WHO OPENED:



“This event has been organised because the move to post-pandemic working and the implementation of agile working and hybrid models is the number one topic clients are asking us about at the moment. This is an opportunity to share insights with peers from across different industries as well as to hear from our experts.”

“From my own reading, it is absolutely clear people want to spend more time working at home – I saw some stats to say 53% of people want to work from home two-to-three days per week. It also seems clear that organisations are generally supportive of this flexibility and are looking at reducing the footprint of their workspaces.”

“The question is therefore, what will the future workspace look like? How will it support future ways of working? What will it be for?”

“The format of today begins with 'hot takes' from our co-hosts Amanda, Enrique and Dan - followed by breakout discussions where we will divide into groups and share our insights and lessons learned.”

# HOT TAKES:

---

## AMANDA LENNON

AWARD-WINNING SENIOR HR AND TRANSFORMATION  
CONSULTANT AND EMPLOYMENT LAWYER



Several prominent companies have demanded that staff get vaccinated and return to the office – the ‘No jab, no job’ policy. Examples are Morgan Stanley and Pimlico Plumbers. But this is a complex landscape for employers to navigate. There is vaccine hesitancy and no mandatory policy from government around vaccines and employment. And beyond this, a lot has happened over the last 18 months.

We have got a rich source of information now to inform decision making. For example, if somebody said to me today, “Right, impromptu meeting, come into the office now for two hours,” or, “Go and fly to Stockholm to see this client,” it would be quite difficult for me. It would take a lot more planning than I am now used to around all sorts of things – childcare, transport and, of course, the dog. (I’ve got a lockdown puppy). So, there is an awful lot to consider here. Many employees have become used to working from home. They have adapted well and have arranged their working lives around flexibility with home life. Returning to an office and commute, or needing to travel, would present far more logistical challenges than before the pandemic.

I think the best employers will be the ones who show that they have got empathy and have already thought through things like changing benefits packages to keep up with this new way of working. They will quickly observe what works and what does not. In fact, it is a really good opportunity for employers if they want to attract and retain the right talent going forward – to show that they care, and they understand where we are all coming from.

“The best employers will be the ones who show that they have got empathy and have already thought through things like changing benefits packages to keep up with this new way of working.”

# HOT TAKES:

## ENRIQUE FERNANDEZ-PIPO

CHIEF DIGITAL OFFICER AND AN EXPERT IN DEVELOPING DIGITAL STRATEGIES FOR SOME OF THE BIGGEST BRANDS IN THE UK FROM HIGHSTREET RETAIL TO PASSENGER TRANSPORT



For me, what we are going to see is a bit of a blend. There are going to be trends and influences and people trying to convince us that we can do everything from home. And they will be convinced to regulate the matter without a doubt. What will drive this is not Google or the Government but our culture and proximity with the customer. And by the customer, I mean both the internal and external customer. For instance, if I am asked to go to the customer's office, I am going to have to do it – whether I can do my job from home or not. Or if I feel that the customer would think that my working from home was not working well enough for them, I'm going to change the way I work. And if I hear from chat in the office that the boss is going to deny a promotion if you are not there... what am I going to do?

So, for me, there will be people who have no choice but to go into work to do their job, like train drivers, and there will be people that will carry on working from home, like novelists – just as there have always been. But the vast majority of us will eventually end up going back to the office to some degree.

Four key cases for me. The first is that the professional has a proximity bias to the customer. The second is that to secure progression and promotion we will end up going to the office whether we want to or not. And lastly, relationship building – especially when you start a new job. Can you really, truly build a relation on zoom? I'm not sure. And the final one for me is that we have a high number of young people straining for work and trying to find their place in the world. We have all been young and we know how much you learn by osmosis by being around people in a work environment. So I think it will be blended with at least some return to the workplace for the vast majority.

“What will drive this is not Google or the Government but our culture and proximity with the customer.”

# HOT TAKES:

**DANIEL ROBINSON**

BUSINESS AND TECHNOLOGY CHANGE LEADER  
WITH SIGNIFICANT P&L EXPERIENCE



“There's actually a real danger in this transitional period of trying to bring people back into the office. Because I think you only get that benefit of co-location if you've got critical mass of people co-located.”

I guess my hot take comes from the context I work in, which is with about 8,000 people who are busy delivering cool technology solutions to lots of clients all over the UK and the world. And my observation is that when lockdown happened, I was leading a transformation programme with about 300 people in it. Because of the size of the programme, only part of that 300 strong team was co-located together with the rest effectively working as a distributed workforce. The lock down put everyone on an even footing to contribute. It actually made many aspects of delivery easier. Because people, for example, who were subject matter experts based out in a call centre were very much on the same footing as everyone else – so were no longer pushed out and left out. I think the second side of it is that working like this, we have actually demonstrated how in technology delivery that remote working like this can work. I think one of the big reasons for that is that everyone's in the same situation. So everyone is largely accessible, albeit a little bit, you know, under Zoom.

But ultimately companies are not all in the same situation and so I think there's actually a real danger in this transitional period of trying to bring people back into the office. Because I think you only get that benefit of co-location if you've got critical mass of people co-located, and you've got a mechanism for dealing with the people who are not there and coordinating all of that in a way that meets everyone's needs. It's actually a really, really quite tough challenge.

My final risk angle on this return to the workplace – and Amanda touched on this – is that many of us have gotten used to working in this way and really it kind of suits us. Transitioning back to commuting three or four times a week into London, and effectively losing four hours of my day, that personally will give me a whole host of challenges, which I don't really want to face. Lots and lots of people I think are in that similar situation. Conversely, there are lots of people who absolutely want to get back into the office. So I think we've got a real kind of contrast of, of needs and wants, finding that that that blended solution, I think he's going to be harder than it sounds.

---

## BREAKOUT INSIGHTS

Those attending were placed into different groups to discuss the topic, share insights and lessons learned. Here is a summary organised by different areas of discussion.

### OUR LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WORKPLACE

**One of the key questions at the workshop was whether the paradigm had truly changed forever, and if so by how much?**

On an individual level, it was clear that many missed the office environment or had enjoyed a recent return visit more than they would have thought. As one attending described, “When I’m talking with colleagues about returning to the office, they are all framing it as a positive. They’re missing out on the teamwork feeling and that social interaction. You don’t get nuanced information when you’re on the phone but by being around people in the office, it actually helps the project quite a bit.”

However, most did not want to give up all the benefits of home working. The common view was summed up by one attending as, “My commute takes me two hours to get to the office and two hours to come back. So I’m happy to work two extra hours a day from home because I also get two extra hours back in my life and £8,000 a year in commuting costs.”

Others pointed to the acceleration in home working lifestyles and believe it is changing the fundamental employer-employee relationship. As one attending said, “All of the organisations I have talked to over the last 12 months, they all recognise that this is now going to accelerate and intensify. People have been looking after themselves a hell of a lot more over the last 18 months than they ever have, particularly in a work situation. So if employers want to get ahead of the game in the war for talent, they’re going to have to start looking at how that impacts their culture, the processes, the policies, the whole nine yards because people want to take more control.”

Certainly, while the global shock of the pandemic enabled a very swift transition to homeworking, the same is unlikely to be true of a transition back. The easing of restrictions has been gradual and subject to setbacks, with further lockdowns remaining a possibility. Many employers have used the opportunity to save on office space. Reducing the office footprint has meant that a full-scale return to the office is no longer possible for many organisations. Others meanwhile have made drastic changes, as one attending described, “We have changed the purpose of the office. It is now for collaboration for culture and innovation. And will redesign our offices to have focus areas and collaboration areas.”

All this being said, a number of those attending sided with our panellist Enrique’s scepticism. Whatever the ambition, they believe the natural

---

BREAKOUT INSIGHTS

dynamics of human beings working together will eventually see a return of more conventional office working. The reasons included everything from career prospects and job security to basic human nature. One person attending put it like this, “What you are going to find is a little bit of say one thing and do something else. I’ll give you an example. My employer basically said to the workforce, you’ll need to be in the office one day a week from September. Other than that, you can work from home if you wish. So what line managers are now asking staff on an individual basis is how much time do you actually wish to spend in the office? Now, if you say the bare minimum, does that look like you are disinterested in the organisation? So all of a sudden, you’ve got a pressure. Add in the peer-group pressure, what is everyone else doing? What is my manager doing? What do I have to do to be part of the inner circle? You can see where it leads.”

“Certainly, while the global shock of the pandemic enabled a very swift transition to homeworking, the same is unlikely to be true of a transition back.”

It was particularly interesting how everyone described the different strains of home working compared to office working. Some recalled how stressful it had been getting to grips with Teams and Zoom for transacting meetings. This was not so much about the technology but the different interpersonal dynamics, from new conventions of how they conduct themselves to the minuscule but socially jarring reaction delay on a videoconferencing call.

On the other hand, others attending recalled how tired they felt after recent visits to the office – using skills they had not used in a long-time. This all suggests that people will want some consistency in their working life rather than yo-yo between home-working and the office environment in order to prevent fatigue. Likely this means that hybrid working will not just be a split of location but also a split of tasks – with some tending to be completed in the office and others at home.

Overwhelmingly, those attending thought that the future would be blended at least for the immediate post-pandemic period – this included both those cynical of a lasting change and those in support of it.

As one person put it, “The office is not dead but will undergo a transformation.”

---

BREAKOUT INSIGHTS

## WHAT SAY SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT HAD

**A couple of days before the event, the prime minister Boris Johnson suggested that he would make working from home the “default” option. This appears to have been “walked back” by Downing Street after it created a stir in the media but it was an interesting topic of discussion: what say should the government have over where and how people work post-pandemic?**

Our panellist Amanda Lennon is also a partner in the legal firm Spencer West and gave her view, “I was quite surprised to see Boris say that work from home should become the new default assumption. But I do think that interferes with the fundamental principles of employment law, which is that when you make an employment contract, you can regulate where the person works. Usually, I think that’s a matter between the employer and the employee – and I don’t think the government or legislation should interfere in that. I think you can put safeguards around it. You could strengthen, for example, discrimination laws to make it clear that shielding is okay. But telling employers what to do is just a nightmare.”

**“My biggest worry is actually not about overworking and the work-life balance. It’s actually that people will drift back to the way it’s always been because that’s what happens.”**

Others though thought we were on the cusp of a great improvement in the lives of working people and that the government very much needed to play a role. One person put it like this, “In a sense, I am not looking to solve the problems of the world. I just want decent working lives for the people I interact with. On the other hand, my biggest worry is actually not about overworking and the work-life balance. It’s actually that people will drift back to the way it’s always been because that’s what happens. For example, you will have bosses who are not brave enough to let people work away from their site. But this is an amazing opportunity for us all to have whatever balance you want, whether it’s one day in or five days in, it really doesn’t matter. But the leadership in this country has to be big enough and brave enough to support it, and people will find the balance that works.”

Whether government-led or industry-led, there are real dangers to society. As one attending said about compulsory vaccines, “I’m from a charity. About two-thirds of our staff are based in hospices or delivering care directly to patients in their homes and in the community. One of the challenges we have is around the issue of vaccinations and whether that will become mandated. Clearly, it’s going to be an issue as more and more people are returning to work, particularly in the care sector. Should caregivers be mandated to have injections? Is it right for an organisation to make it compulsory? And if it’s not right for organisations to determine this, should not the government step in given the risks to vulnerable service users?”

---

BREAKOUT INSIGHTS

## THE SHAPE OF A BLENDED FUTURE

**A couple of days before the event, the prime minister Boris Johnson If the future is blended, each industry and each organisation is mixing that cocktail slightly differently – different models, different rules and different management styles. Our discussion was awash with the different approaches.**

Most of the organisations present were instituting their new rules from September. Some differences were basic, such as the number of days per week to be spent in the office. A national institution, for example, had plans for employees to be one day a week in the office whereas a large Japanese pharma company will apparently be two days a week in the UK for collaboration. But more important than the specifics were the approaches that organisations were using to determine their strategy.

There were some clear parameters and tensions. For example, many believed that the most efficient and practical approach was to be employee-led. But go too far down that route and the rules can begin to become disparate or even contradictory, creating confusion and harming the overall cohesion of the organisation. It's a balancing game.

**“One size most does not fit all when it comes to flexibility. Some staff may need the office more than others.”**

Getting it right is tricky and extensive engagement is needed, as one HR leader attending said, “I work for a pharmaceutical company. We actually conducted two surveys of our employees to understand the ‘what’ and ‘how’ they would like to return to the office – including if they would like to return to the office. So we did the first survey in June last year when it was all new and the second one we did in April of this year just to be sure we were still building what everyone wanted.”

Part of the issue is that one size most does not fit all when it comes to flexibility. Some staff may need the office more than others. An excellent example was given by an interim executive in one of the breakout rooms, “I did a contract in the media sector. And a lot of employees were very young, in their twenties. They all live in flat shares in London. The home environment is very limited on space and they are used to living their life out and about – really only going home to sleep. They simply were not set up for home working. I used to do zoom calls with people sat on the end of their bed. That's tough for anyone to do and be productive for any length of time.”

Equally, there are those for whom going into the office on anything other than an ad hoc basis makes little sense. One person attending had been working successfully from home for several years before the pandemic – only visiting

---

BREAKOUT INSIGHTS

the office for specific meetings – but has now been told that the new flexible working policy covering all staff means that he must now be in three days each week, which he believes is a considerable disruption to his job and his family responsibilities.

All approaches then need to provide some flexibility for individual circumstances – employees need to be able to do the right thing to be productive in the context – but a lack of prescribed behaviours or rules can lead to poor implementation, significant variation across the organisation and challenges for line management. This was highlighted by someone with a public sector background:

“I worked for a big government department before COVID. Due to rapid expansion, they ran out of office space and desk space and mandated that everyone had to work from home three days a week. But it's up to you when you work from home. So, of course, everybody was in on Tuesday and Wednesday, and there was nowhere to sit, and you had to squat in corridors. Friday meanwhile was a ghost town. And then they tried different kinds of rota and booking systems. Ultimately, it reverted to some really poor behaviours, with people saying, “My name is on this desk” and I’m doing this and that, as well out-and-out favouritism from line managers. I think organisations will need to be quite deliberate. Otherwise, the pressures and the subtext and the culture and the individual psychology will be much, much more imposing.”

“It’s really interesting listening to all the rules that people are putting in place. As I sit here, I have a lead architect who works in Barbados, three of my project managers live abroad and one of them has just moved to Rhodes for six weeks. We have only one simple rule, which is we know what we’ve got to do.”

Others agreed and one pointed to lessons learned from the Oil & Gas industry where unconventional working patterns have been the norm for many years, “They often work very different models to the traditional office environment pre-pandemic. For example, many of them have a 3-4-5 initiative where, essentially, by working longer hours you can take every other Friday off. That works well but you have to put parameters around it, otherwise it becomes very non-productive.”

The solution for several of the organisations attending was to put in place a values-based framework for hybrid working. The framework provides flexibility with rigidity, individual decision making with clear codes of behaviour cohering around the organisation’s values. One person attending described it this way:

---

BREAKOUT INSIGHTS

“So a large part of our workforce is engineers but we do have a very significant office space that is now home-based employees. Rather than have mandatory rules and say, ‘you should not do this’ etc., what we are putting in place is what we call, ‘freedom in a framework’. There are cultural parameters that we agree right across the company, not around about where you are based but how we interact and how we collaborate. So, for example, when you choose to have a meeting, you operate in a respectful way, arranging a time that is suitable for everybody, not just biased by a group of people. So giving them choice in a framework is what we are going with.”

Others believe that the issue is being overthought. One attending suggested that is about striking reasonable agreements with managers and treating everyone like an adult, “We have a lot of parents who will choose to work evenings or at night because of home schooling. It’s got to work for the team and the business but they can choose to do this. They work it out with their manager and establish a pattern of working. And it does not have to be written in stone – so there is some flex within that for things that come up.”

Another said, “It’s really interesting listening to all the rules that people are putting in place. As I sit here, I have a lead architect who works in Barbados, three of my project managers live abroad and one of them has just moved to Rhodes for six weeks. We have only one simple rule, which is we know what we’ve got to do. We have regular team meetings on Zoom. Everybody knows what the objectives and goals are that we have got to do and we have a plan that is regularly reviewed. Outside of that, people work when they want to work.”

Who is right? September will tell.

---

BREAKOUT INSIGHTS

## MANAGING AND LEADING IN A BLENDED FUTURE

**A new environment means new leadership tools and thinking. Discussion revealed challenges and new solutions.**

Technology has made vast improvements to the way we manage but leaders need to adjust with the times. A global change leader with a long career summed it up nicely, “I have worked in the pharmaceutical and financial services for the last 35 years. I remember in the early 80s that I was travelling around 100 countries a year. It was very uncomfortable trying to meet everybody and get projects going. The last major programme I ran was at Lloyds, it was a five-year programme, all done remotely and it worked incredibly well. But the one thing I would say is the style of management that you have to adopt is radically different.”

The same executive gave his view on how his approach had changed, “I do not care if you want to walk the dog for an hour but I do care that you get the job done on time and you say you will. It’s a mindset shift away from command and control – from ‘you’re only working when I see you’ to a more holistic view of people’s lives: delivering by results, not delivering by time spent and sweat coming off your brow.”

**“The problem is that the real value of people working together on a video call only comes from a shared basis of knowledge of the company and the experience of a workplace.”**

Others shared tips included:

- “You’ve got to spend time getting to know them and building the relationship. Simple things like knowing someone’s contact preferences. Do they want email? Do they want a Team’s call, what works for them? I find one of my challenges is just trying to juggle. I’ve got different clients and I’ve got different people, people with different styles in my team and no one size fits all. This makes it harder getting that right but the results are also that much more powerful.”
- “I think that using five minutes at the beginning of meetings for relationship building, sitting down with them by themselves, can I help? What can I do? Is more important that the big group of 100 people on a call? You know, people don’t like talking on Zoom calls with 100 people on it. They like interaction and personal relationships. So the closer you get to that, the better, even though it’s over a different media.”
- “Often new remote workers are hesitant to ask questions for fear they may seem obvious or not relevant. There need to be strategies in place to support remote workers. At the same time, those workers also need to

---

BREAKOUT INSIGHTS

develop their skills around personal awareness to overcome the lack of Water cooler discussions.”

- “The old way of absorbing how to do a job by sitting next to someone who is doing it, needs to be transformed. Processes need to be simplified and streamlined as part of how people are trained and developed.”
- “I am not allowing people to book one-hour meetings. I’ve had the settings changed to 15 minutes and 45 minutes. This avoids the danger that everyone is back-to-back on calls.”
- “In this environment, pulse checks are more important than ever. I do them weekly and they are more open... slightly less formal in style to get over the stiffness of a video call. I’ve taken that style into my emails as well.”

**“I do not care if you want to walk the dog for an hour but I do care that you get the job done on time and you say you will. It’s a mindset shift away from command and control.”**

There was a lot of concern around starting new talent in the organisation in particular. This appears to be an area where home working and hybrid working has considerable weaknesses. One person attending put his concerns this way, “My issue currently is onboarding new people – specifically graduate or first jobbers, if you will. The graduate on their first job can be... they really want to be digital nomads. The problem is that the real value of people working together on a video call only comes from a shared basis of knowledge of the company and the experience of a workplace. It’s some hard skills and a lot of soft skills and nuance. There’s also an expectation gap. If you remember what it’s like being in that position as a graduate or first jobber, you think you know the game but really you do not and you only learn it by simply being there with people, in the office, picking up on everything.”

One attending described the issues from the perspective of a new starter, albeit as someone inheriting a large team, “I’ve been lucky enough to start a new role during the pandemic and I’m taking on a fairly large team, including some of the organisation’s other companies as well, and it’s been incredibly hard. While I spend every day on Zoom with the team members, I do not know them. I don’t know the interactions they have between each other, the people dynamics, all those extra things that go on, and it’s making it slower for me to be able to get to where I need to be. I’m certain that if I’d started this role in 2019, I would be much further along than I am now. But instead, I’m still trying to get to grips with how everyone is interacting. So it’s not just the new starters and the new people to the industry.”

Plenty agreed that technology had its limits. “Remote working fails on the behavioural front in two key areas,” explained one of those attending, “creative

---

## BREAKOUT INSIGHTS

pursuits that build team culture – zoom meetings are too sterile and often too diarised – and change management programmes. Projects can be delivered remotely but real change often fails because a large part of change is getting people comfortable with doing things differently. People don't like having change done to them, they need to be part of an agenda."

However, there were a number who disagreed. Comments ranged from, "The answers are often in the tools themselves and how they are used" to pointing out how well people had adapted to homeworking in the pandemic. In fact, a number attending said they had led successful change programmes during the lockdowns. There were even a number who said that the programmes had been all the better for it.

---

BREAKOUT INSIGHTS

## THE RISKS AROUND THE WIDER WORKFORCE

**The media is awash with discussion of home working and hybrid solutions. But most people do not work office-based jobs. It's easy to become tone deaf to the situation faced by the wider workforce. Initiatives perceived to focus on creating further privileges for the already better off can have a profoundly negative impact.**

A Rewards consultant with a blue-collar background in large organisations, hit the nail on the head, “The ones that really feel excluded are those outside this room. I get it if you are the sort of business where everyone works in an office but the vast majority of people who work in the country have jobs that cannot be done remotely. The more remote their office and management people are, they more disengaged they are. So just pull back a bit, there are people who feel disengaged, and to use the Anglo-Saxon expression “pissed off”. In the county I live in [Cornwall], there are 100,000 vacancies. There are people available to work but they won't because they've been ignored for the last year. And the more emphasis we put on the lucky few and finding solutions for them will only aggravate the situation. It will spread across industries. We have to look towards a way of hybrid working that actually still engages those people than cannot work in any other way than be in a set location.”

“There are people available to work but they won't because they've been ignored for the last year. And the more emphasis we put on the lucky few [who can work from home] and finding solutions for them will only aggravate the situation. It will spread across industries. We have to look towards a way of hybrid working that actually still engages those people than cannot work in any other way than be in a set location.”

Amanda Lennon, one of our panellists, agrees, “You have to think about the whole workforce. So if you work in manufacturing, where most of your team are working in a factory or a warehouse or somewhere like that, you have got a small back office relative to the size of the overall workforce. That small group of people get all the focus around home working and it is becoming the default position according to Boris. That has a disproportionate effect on the overall workforce. So what do you do to maintain morale of the people working in the factories, all those people who cannot work from home?”

---

BREAKOUT INSIGHTS

A number of people present discussed the situation in their organisation. An interesting view came from a company in the energy sector where non-office workers were a minority but still an important component of the business:

“I work for a power company. We have probably got around a third of our workforce that is field based. These are the guys who come and read your meters, install new ones, boilers etc. They have worked on and off throughout this period and have had to change and flex around the changing rules, which are different in different places in the UK. It's been difficult for them. Then we have a load of people who work in call centres and we have set them up with the technology to work from home – and they have gotten very used to that now. If we told these 2,000 people that they have got to go into the office next week, we would have uproar. You can see the dynamic between these two groups. So we are certainly a company that is looking at how we provide for the needs of both these groups and we do not have a full answer yet. We want to offer choice but we need to bear in mind the whole workforce.”

In response, someone offered this advice, “We also recognise that our field-based employees are not benefitting from the new flexibility for office-based professionals so we spoke to them about what flexibility for them might look like. So we now have some principles around choosing the way you work for them. It's obviously not the same flexibility but it's an improvement and gives them greater say in when and how they work.”

---

BREAKOUT INSIGHTS

## WAR FOR TALENT VERSUS WHAT THE BUSINESS NEEDS

**One of the reasons for the focus on flexibility for office workers is the war for talent that exists for skills that are either new or otherwise in high demand. Even so however, there is a balance to be struck between competition for talent and the tail wagging the dog.**

Discussion around flexibility and additional perks can sometimes feel disconnected to the reality faced by many businesses in these hard times, often to the point of seeming frivolous. However, there is very real reason that needs to be understood. As one attending summed it up, “We have to get the new rules right or else people will vote with their feet. It’s no longer going to be just about money and location. It’s going to be about how my employer meets my needs overall and treats me around the flexibility I need in my life. So it’s quite a high-risk issue actually.”

Understandably though, some felt that much of the debate and perceived wisdom around home working was too employee-centric and that the needs of the business were often an after-thought. One said that there had not been enough discussion around the reality that the company exists to service customers and make money. Inevitably, that is paramount. So the real questions should be: what does the company need? The answer may well be a diverse way of working where employees can choose to ensure they are most productive. What is the work and what does it actually require? And how can it be optimised for remote working? It is well known that some jobs such as digital technology jobs can be done remotely, such as Twitter’s “WFH 4ever”, but others cannot change, such as bus driver.

One executive who attended put it this way, “One of the things that I find interesting is that dynamic between the organisation and the individual. Many businesses are saying to their people, do whatever suits you. Home work if you like, that’s fine. If you do not want to do that then come in. But of course, the individual wants total freedom to do whatever they want. It’s finding that balance between how much freedom a business gives the individual that I think it quite interesting.”

Another executive concluded it, “The reality is that the demographic of workers is changing and things such as life-work balance are becoming more important, especially for the young. If companies wish to attract and retain good talent they need to adapt and step up to meet the needs of their more junior employees and the talent they wish to attract and cultivate.

“The reality is that the demographic of workers is changing and things such as life-work balance are becoming more important, especially for the young. If companies wish to attract and retain good talent they need to adapt and step up to meet the needs...”

---

BREAKOUT INSIGHTS

## THE GREAT EQUALIZER

**For some attending, home working for their organisation had not been so much something to contend with but a revelation around how to do things better. There were immediate noticeable improvements to productivity and customer service.**

For the longest time in business, co-locating was the only efficient and effective way to work – colleagues and partners based off-site faced a more difficult and strained relationship that was invariably more transactional. Anyone teleconferencing into a physical meeting knows that dynamic. One attending described the traditional workplace as having a colonial attitude, dictating from a far and not properly engaging with people outside of the organisation's centre.

Daniel Robinson, one of our panellists, described the pandemic as a great equalizer. He believes that for some businesses, it won't just be the employees who wish to continue working flexibly from home on parity grounds but also customers. Giving the example of a B2B business where the customer is used to monthly or even weekly catch-up meetings at their offices, he explained how during covid many have become integrated into the digital workspaces of the supplier – able to raise questions and work more closely with the team delivering into their organisation. "Clients may not wish that to stop, particularly when the alternative is face-to-face meetings that have a considerable time sacrifice and often bring unwelcome travel and associated logistics."

**"Many organisations and many people have experienced a more level playing field as a result of the pandemic."**

Others pointed to additional benefits to the organisation, such as part-time workers – many of whom are time-limited because of commitments that need them to be in particular places at particular times. The ability to flex their role around different needs means they can be more efficient and can often work more hours than they could previously. One attending described it this way, "I think what is helping, particularly around the diversity agenda, is to have that flexibility to work wherever and when it works for you. It is actually allowing a lot more people to be productive."

While it may not have been experienced universally, many organisations and many people have experienced a more level playing field as a result of the pandemic. This shows enormous potential for the future and creating win-win situations for employers and employees alike.

---

BREAKOUT INSIGHTS**WELL-BEING, MENTAL HEALTH AND THE PANDEMIC**

**Mental health is a much-overlooked issue but one that began to gain more traction in the workplace in 2019. As employers look towards what is hopefully the end of the pandemic – or a least its emergency period – many wish to focus on the mental health of their employees as the world moves to a new normal.**

Flexible working has become synonymous with work-life balance. However, for many in the pandemic, homeworking has been far from stress free. One attending described the impact she had seen over 2020:

“My background is change and transformation but for the last year I’ve been defining a service for banking and financial services professionals and mental health. There are a lot of pros to the remote working model but there are lots of cons as well. With mental health, alcohol issues are at a 20-year high. There’s a 20% increase in suicide. Domestic abuse is up. I have friends right across the banking industry and they all report the same thing: they are working longer hours remotely and they have lost that balance between their work life and their family life. We need to be aware of what new waves of mental issues are actually going to be coming into the workforce.”

Others saw a generational issue in attitudes around mental health, with one person commenting, “The stigmas around mental health still exist – and unfortunately do exist in the older generation. I can say that because I am actually, you know, in the older generation. They don’t like talking about mental health and the stigma attached and that’s what we’re trying to overcome. Younger people are much more attuned to their emotions in terms of what impact lockdown has had on them. So when they come back to work, and they come back to the new models, they are going to want to be much more supportive being able to talk about it. So that gap between the older style of leadership and the new, a new generation of thinking that has to be addressed. I’m not sure what the answers are but we have to find the capability to bridge that gap.”

“There are a lot of pros to the remote working model but there are lots of cons as well. With mental health, alcohol issues are at a 20-year high. There’s a 20% increase in suicide. Domestic abuse is up. I have friends right across the banking industry and they all report the same thing: they are working longer hours remotely and they have lost that balance between their work life and their family life. We need to be aware of what new waves of mental issues are actually going to be coming into the workforce.”

---

BREAKOUT INSIGHTS

Others had some simple advice to follow that would help if not solve the issues presented:

- “Noise cancelling headphones for those returning to the office – so they can be on a call and the background noise that they are not used to is not overwhelming. We’re also looking at giving everyone lockers, or a bag for storing their own keyboards and mouse to make hygiene easier.”
- “Well-being is not directly related to a return to the office. But culturally, it feels like because everyone has been working from home, they are expected to be at their screen for however many hours a day. So we are running an initiative called “Time for you” – no meetings allowed between 12.30pm and 1.30pm. Nobody is allowed to send emails after 6.30pm or before 8am etc. It is something we have to continue to pay attention to.”
- “It’s interesting hearing you say that about the timings and parameters. Someone earlier mentioned about the number of people working in the evenings or at night because of home schooling and childcare needs. You can see the conflict there around restricting meetings and emails to between certain times of day. We ended up avoiding timing rules and focussed more in terms of core hours for meetings, so not about when you work but when you meet. We also shifted the emphasis from do not send emails outside of these hours to ‘permission to not respond immediately’ so you could leave it until you were working again.”
- “We adopted the practice of everyone booking a 2 hours per day of non-meeting time.”
- “We established a network of mental health first aiders – it has been so invaluable. Having that human infrastructure has been really worthwhile.”
- “We have introduced wellbeing meetings with managers and senior leaders. 30 minutes each week team get together where anything can be aired. They are informal and do not have to be work-related. It’s also good to get an understanding of colleagues across all levels.”
- “We have introduced Microsoft VIVO; it monitors how you are feeling today and encourages you to book focus time. It’s built situations for employers and employees alike.



# PRACTICUS™

We support individuals and organisations as they journey through change.

As a business, we provide a range of services from consulting on business change to resourcing key programmes and initiatives.

As a community, we bring together senior leaders and professionals to solve business challenges. We go beyond traditional networking to nurture relationships between people and organisations as they journey through change. Built on reciprocity, our community is passionate about knowledge-sharing. Together, we deliver invaluable advice and support.

Our aim is to become the leading – and most trusted – change partner for organisations undergoing transformation.