Covid-19:

How organisations are adapting and preparing for the end of lockdown

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It is a truth universally acknowledged… that Covid-19 has fundamentally changed ways of working, perhaps for good. Despite (or because of) the seriousness of the health emergency and economic consequences, the 'Dunkirk spirit' means people are coming together like never before.

Initiatives that would have taken weeks and months to deliver have happened overnight. Working from home that 'couldn't be done' in some organisations or roles, is flourishing during the Coronavirus pandemic. We've all become familiar with each other's kids and pets as formality has fallen from our interactions in favour of a more human, 'we're all in this together' approach.

At People Insight we've heard some great people-centric approaches from our clients to getting through this crisis. We've talked to 30 organisations across the private, public and not for profit sectors.

This report looks at:

1. **What are organisations doing to adapt to Covid-19?**
2. **What does best practice look like?**
3. **What have we learned so far?**
4. **How are organisations preparing for 'The Great Unlock'?**
5. **What does a good Employee Experience look like now and going forwards?**

Adapting to the Covid-19 lockdown: Best practice so far

Pretty much every organisation we have spoken to so far still has a skeleton staff on site in head offices, factories or warehouses (with social distancing precautions,) and all are taking a people first approach.

Some employers are deemed essential service providers, such as Sunbelt Rentals – formerly A-Plant (plant, tool and equipment hire for infrastructure across the UK), We Are With You (The drug, alcohol and mental health charity) and Nottingham Building Society (with branches open to ensure people can access financial services).

> "We have a critical role in making sure UK infrastructure stays operational. It's our job to support the people who make sure the lights stay on and keep the wheels turning. We're continuing to supply our equipment and services that keep the UK going, from the NHS to broadband suppliers, construction sites, police, utilities, refineries and many more."
>
> *Steve Lynas, UK HR Director - Sunbelt Rentals*

Many of the organisations we spoke to have some staff on furlough, with several rounding up salary payments beyond the £2500 maximum per month.

Of course, whilst everyone has had to embrace working from home, some organisations were well set up for this, whilst others were not.

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Leadership culture has changed… forever?

> "The CEO is now the Chief Empathy Officer. And this is really happening. 63% of HR professionals believe their organisational culture has improved, 59% believe their employee wellbeing has improved, and 55% believe their employee experience has improved."
>
> *Josh Bersin*

The trend in leadership to show more **empathy**, **resilience and caring**, as we've heard about in a number of client training programmes, couldn't have come at a better time.

> "Our CEO has personally phoned members of staff to discuss their concerns. We think that being attentive and responsive in a personal way has helped us achieve broader positive employee feedback around leadership, pride and the support they have been offered."
>
> *Steve Lynas - Sunbelt Rentals*

Leaders have let down their guard and shared information more informally at this distressing time. Clients tell us there is a big difference in the way leaders are communicating with staff - much more authentic, relatable and from the heart rather than via corporate speeches.

> "Our senior leaders would normally travel regularly to our different office locations and they are keen to remain available for people during this period. They have started a series of Leadership Calls to include every employee in the organisation. The calls give people the opportunity to ask questions, request topics for discussion and hear updates directly. These calls have been a real win, with hugely positive feedback from our people."
>
> *Fiona Wallace, Head of Organisational Effectiveness - Brewin Dolphin*

Informality is popular, having kids, partners and flatmates appear on calls is breaking down barriers and is actually more engaging. A recent survey showed people hope this more human attitude to colleagues would stay for the long term.

Many of our clients have developed their culture and behaviours in the last few years, and this is paying dividends now. **Strong purpose and values** provide a framework for how to behave that is as consistent now as ever before.

"Our purpose at The Nottingham is "Doing the Right Thing" to help our members save, plan and protect their future, and as David Marlow our Chief Executive said recently; "Never has our purpose been more important." From the beginning of the pandemic we've been purpose-led, doing the right thing for our people, members and communities. This has included; keeping our building society branches open so members can access essential funds, freezing savers' interest rates for three months and helping our borrowers with payment holidays.

We also committed to tripling of our CSR investment in support of our communities with additional funds going to local food banks and AgeUK among others. In addition to ensuring colleagues working in branches have teas, coffees and lunches paid for by The Nottingham, we also supported our self-employed chef, running the café at our Head Office, to keep operating and provide meals free of charge for key workers offering central support. The response to this has been really positive and valued by the team."

Anne Leivers, Head of People & Development - Nottingham Building Society

"We only just launched our new set of values in March when we launched our new Sunbelt Rentals UK brand. Our values include Teamwork and this is already being demonstrated by the sheer amount of working together and getting things done across the whole company which has been amazing."

Steve Lynas - Sunbelt Rentals

"The wellbeing of our employees and clients has been central to all senior leadership decisions and our company values of Genuine, Expert and Ambitious have underpinned all our actions."

Fiona Wallace - Brewin Dolphin

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Leaders feel the strain and drain

Whilst the leaders that have been getting it right have earned great feedback, the pace of change and sheer number of decisions made is taking its toll. Leaders have bent over backwards to ensure their colleagues are supported, but may now be experiencing 'strain and drain', so who is supporting *them*? Coaching support should right now be high on the agenda for leadership teams – as well as paying attention to the organisation's own wellbeing messages.

Feeling under pressure?

There are some great resources over at Harvard Business Review for managers and leaders:

> **How to refuel when you are drained**

> **How to handle the pressure of managing people right now**

We can move with urgency, agility and pace when we have to

Almost all of our clients have spoken about how the move to working from home happened almost overnight and this 'test' has actually been positive. Employees who hadn't embraced WFH tech are now remarking how much easier it is than they thought. People who were told their jobs couldn't be done at home have proven otherwise. Making a successful, significant business change like working from home is giving organisations confidence that they can be more agile:

> "It's been a massive transition in a very short period of time. In two weeks, we moved all staff (except essential staff) to remote working, with a new IT platform capable of supporting this unprecedented volume of remote access from both students and staff. We've learned how agile we can be, and look to taking our learning forward to any future changes."
>
> *Rachael Rowson, Associate Director of People (Operations) - University of Bradford*

Of course, there have been learnings. Nottingham Building Society worked quickly to enable around 300 team members to work from home or remotely in addition to the rapid rollout of MS teams, Anne Leivers, Head of People & Development noted,

> "We had to establish 'rules' of communication quickly around whether to use Microsoft Teams, text messaging, WhatsApp, calls or emails for different communications.."

HR have shown tremendous agility in policy shifts

Akin to scrappy marketing and agile principles, HR is moving and responding at pace to support ways of working for line managers and broader teams. To support managers not used to managing remotely, the Society introduced principles in response to the evolving situation.

Other organisations have been quick to enhance policies around working from home, parental care, extending the period in which people can buy additional leave, and seen an increased culture of manager discretion to handle requests.

Be on the front foot if you want your people to trust you

Organisations have shared an important crisis comms principle: Being ahead of the questions. Early on, one executive team made decisions on pay and communicated them - before uncertainty could take hold. This 'on the front foot' behaviour has meant people trust their leaders, as borne out by the feedback they've received. It also makes it easier to manage questions raised, which become specific and transactional rather than anxious and strategic.

Watch out for over-working

The concern that people will 'skive' when working from home appears to have been disproven in the organisations we've spoken to. On the contrary, ensuring staff don't overwork is more of a concern. As Fiona Wallace from Brewin Dolphin put it,

> "We've had to ensure the working day doesn't overspill excessively into personal time. The absence of travel time meant that people started to book in meetings earlier and later in the day, which may work for some people but not for others, perhaps with caring responsibilities. So we have guided our managers on role modelling the right behaviours and reminding them look out for employees who are falling into this pattern of behaviour."

Communications are rapid and broad

More is more seems the successful strategy for most organisations regarding communications.

Whilst the amount and speed of change has currently stabilised, organisations have found a variety of ways to communicate successfully with staff on and offline, within and without the usual systems. There's a lot of information to manage; official safety guidance, operational and structural change, coupled with support and good news stories.

Support provided includes wellbeing, financial help, and highlighting the support available from government and other sources.

> "Communications with our people include consolidating the Government updates, with working from home and wellbeing advice from the plethora of information out there in to an easy to digest email. We're trying to help people not have their newsfeed on all the time. We're also using Slack for informal comms; including threads where people share an inspiring story then tag a person to share theirs, people are sharing playing musical instruments, it's all really positive."

Sarah Marriott, Chief People Officer - Oakbrook Finance

London South Bank University have been able to share some fantastic news to lift the spirits.

> "LSBU nursing students are working or volunteering in hospitals across the country and staff are training the thousands of doctors and nurses returning to the NHS, and our academies are 3D printing vital parts for protective visors. The LSBU community has proudly stood together to support our society!"

Whilst some organisations haven't liked using social media like Facebook or WhatsApp in the past, others have successfully mastered these channels.

> "We created a private Facebook group called 'Life at The Nottingham' which now has over 300 members. It's a way for us to mirror the content and updates that we share via system emails or our intranet with team members not connected to the network. As Facebook is a platform that many of our team members are familiar with we've also seen some fantastic levels of interactivity e.g. we shared some content to support the health and wellbeing of our team members and asked them to share some of the ways they are staying positive and well which saw lots of team member comments, pictures and videos shared."

Jo Navin, Internal Comms Manager - Nottingham Building Society

There's never been a more important time to listen to staff

As communications have ramped up, listening to our peoples' needs, sourcing ideas and assessing reactions to our changes is vital. Some organisations are doing this informally, via social channels, especially in the first weeks of lockdown. Others are running Covid-19 pulse surveys, or planning to in the next few weeks.

> "We are doing a continuous pulse survey run by People Insight, and looking at the data in waves – or periods of time – to show changes as the pandemic, and our reaction develops and to look at targeted."
>
> *Adnan Bajwa, Head of OD & Engagement -* *London South Bank University (LSBU)*

Interested in running pulse surveys at this time?

> Download our free question index

> See how our survey solutions can help

Organisations are using a range of techniques to listen, and alongside surveys, collecting powerful feedback from a range of networks.

> "The employee experience is evolving day by day and so our approach to listening has become multi-faceted so we can gauge where people are at and respond accordingly. Bringing together feedback from our Senior Leader calls, Engagement Partners, Wellbeing Champions, HR Business Partners and other sources is giving us a good understanding of the different experiences and challenges across the organisation"
>
> *Fiona Wallace -* *Brewin Dolphin*

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Quizzes, virtual pubs and wellbeing are ubiquitous

One thing that has been consistent amongst all our clients interviewed, is some form of informal social fun over video, including lunchtime quizzes, virtual pubs, bingo, recipe swaps virtual film clubs, fancy dress meetings, scavenger hunts, e-coffee meet ups, parent meet ups, learning musical instruments, virtual Pictionary and online yoga.

There's been no time like the present for sharing a variety of wellbeing resources; reminding teams of your EAP or mental health first aid support, and signposting to external wellbeing resources and creating online wellbeing workshops.

> "To provide support for our staff at this time, we've increased our online learning provision including personal resilience courses and how to lead remotely."
>
> *Sharon Neal, Assistant Director HR: OD, Culture and Inclusion - University of Sussex*

> "People living alone are finding it difficult to fill their time, whilst people juggling childcare with work struggle to fit everything in. These very different employee experiences have driven us to be even more thoughtful about our approach to wellbeing so that we can reach everyone with relevant support. We have communicated a variety of wellbeing topics e.g. videos of how our senior leaders are working differently and encouraging people to do what is right for them and step away from their workspace when they need to. Alongside our Engagement Partners, we also have an internal network of Wellbeing Champions who are mental health first aiders and they play a key role in supporting our employees and ensuring that wellbeing remains at the forefront of people's minds."
>
> *Fiona Wallace - Brewin Dolphin*

Have a look at our favourite wellbeing resources
> Click here to view

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We're learning to put Pow into Zoom

It's not just informal meetings that we're doing on Zoom, Teams, Hangouts or Skype, but more formal meetings too. We're experiencing a steep learning curve in running different video meeting types that need to be more collaborative, creative or impactful.

> "We are working on how to facilitate remote meetings that develop ideas or co-design new approaches. How do we run workshops in a way that make sure everybody has the chance to speak and all ideas are heard when there are lots of people on the call?"
>
> *Alice Dyke, Director for People and Culture - We Are With You*

Adnan Bajwa at LSBU is preparing to **facilitate** the corporate strategy in a 3-hour session virtually.

> "My challenge is to work out how to be creative and keep people engaged and make it interactive."

One suggestion about idea generation comes from Adam Grant, professor at Wharton:

> "One of the simple practices I would recommend to make sure that introverts don't get drowned out is to shift from brainstorming to brain-writing. Brain-writing is a process where you [ask] all the people in a team to come up with ideas independently, then submit them. Then you review them. That leverages individual strengths around coming up with original ideas and allows the group to do what it does best, which is to begin to evaluate and refine. That's probably one of the most effective ways to make sure that introverts are heard."

There's also a plethora of online meeting advice at the moment – you can see some here and here.

Zoomed in or Zoned out?

A common experience felt by our clients was that whilst video calling is brilliantly facilitative, it can also be exhausting if we're conducting our whole lives in a video chat room.

> "The number of video calls has become relentless, and the volume can be emotionally draining – especially as we are all doing them in the evening with family too. So keep them short, to the point, only invite who you need, use other channels when you can – such as chat, phone and email. Don't over rely on video for all your communications."

Tom Debenham, Managing Director - People Insight

At **People Insight**, we're encouraging our colleagues to have 'walking calls' on the mobile as an alternative to video, so we don't over rely on the tool. There's a great article from the BBC here about the impact of video calling on our wellbeing.

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Best practice learnings recap

The key things we've learned from our clients include:

1. **Purpose, culture and values** provide a framework for our behaviours and communications – now just as always.

2. **Empathetic leadership** - is perhaps here to last.

3. **On the front foot,** transparent, anticipatory communications **build significant trust** amongst employees. Trust us vital if we want our people to get involved in change.

4. <u>**Listening is absolutely critical during change**</u> to help people feel involved and respected, and get diverse input to solve problems.

5. Employees love the **reduced formality of communications** at this time and report they are more engaged because of it.

6. There's **room for fun** - in the corporate agenda without sacrificing productivity.

7. The mass **working from home** experiment has been a success. We can **trust** our people to perform – and we must ensure there are boundaries so they don't **burnout**.

8. Elongated planning, lengthy programme roll outs and caution may not be as necessary as we thought. **We can be confident in our ability to move at pace. Agile** is for everyone!

9. **Video calling** is fantastic technology for all kinds of meetings – **but draining if overused**.

10. Our people will **expect more work flexibility** post-lockdown. This has implications for every aspect of the employee experience; leadership, comms, culture, resources and workspaces.

How are organisations preparing for 'The Great Unlock'?

At the time of writing, industry has been told that the government will provide <u>detailed guidance on safe workplaces</u> on the 10th of May. Ministers have promised <u>specific advice</u> for seven types of workplaces, from call centres to factories and retail stores.

There's no going back to normal

Talking to our clients, one thing seems universal; there is no going 'back'. Employees used to home working, whilst looking forward to getting out of the house, expect at least some home working and flexibility to continue now it has been shown effective. Luring them out of the safety of their homes to communal buildings requires significant reassurances of safety and a great deal of trust.

> "We are not in a rush to move our employees back into offices. Whilst we did take early action to move our employees to homeworking, our stance is to take a deliberately measured and phased approach to returning to our offices. This is very much a marathon not a sprint and our Senior Leaders are very clear that their priority is to continue to protect employees and clients wellbeing as well as the future health of the organisation."
>
> *Fiona Wallace - Brewin Dolphin*

Three things are true:

- If organisations have built up trust in the way they are currently handling the lockdown, they'll be on the front foot for 'the great unlock'.

- **Leaders who have led in line with their purpose and values through Covid-19 will have reaped the benefits in terms of employee engagement. Continuing this philosophy through the next stage will help people transition to a different normal.** Yes, physically the experience will be different, but emotionally there can be positive consistencies.

- **Negating our peoples' concern and anxiety about coming back to work requires us to think through our people's unique circumstances;** there may be many different solutions for different employees.

> "We are thinking holistically about our future return to working on Campus from both a practical and a wellbeing perspective, and planning the support that our staff may need and the changes in working practices that we might need to make or consider based on the current changes to traditional working patterns."
>
> *Rachael Rowson -* *University of Bradford*

#1 Challenge: social distancing measures

Social distancing is probably here for some time, and office buildings, factories and warehouses – planned to accommodate a certain headcount, now have us scratching our heads.

Many of us have enjoyed the luxury of flexible office working spaces, communal kitchens and hot desks, designed to promote our employee experience and encourage us to be our most productive. The coming weeks will see the peace lilies and sofas removed in favour of a one-way circulation route and wipe down instructions.

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How will we react to these new environments? Time will tell; but here's a number of solutions that organisations are currently considering to manage the gradual return to work:

1. **De-densifying the office layout** - anyone who has seen a central London office will be challenged to make a space that previously squeezed in 100 people now house 30, 2 metres apart. Where can the other 60 go? Will they work from home, do we have any other spaces?

2. **Who works from home?** Asking a significant number of staff to work from home permanently, or at least, frequently will have to consider individual needs and possibly complete a risk assessment in some circumstances. Considerations may include: home working for those who rely on public transport or lift shares, have family members to shield or other increased caring responsibilities.

   "For some, home working will feature more post COVID-19 and we will need to continually adapt our workplace, technology, processes and communications to a 'hybrid system' where some people are in-office and others are working remotely."

   Ken Hayhurst, Group Training Manager - *Hexadex*

3. **Dividing staff into teams** - rotating team A and B between office and home working to minimise contact, the risk of infection and maintain business continuity should anyone show symptoms.

4. **Staggering attendance** at the canteen in 15-minute slots at spaced out tables.

5. **Establishing one in, one out** in office loos and shops.

6. **Marking out one-way systems** - in high footfall areas such as receptions and corridors.

7. **Restricting guests** on site.

8. **Intensifying cleaning regimes** from cleaning companies and providing onsite gels, sprays and wipes.

9. **Designing clean-down policies** and reduced capacity for meeting rooms.

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10. **Reducing communal kitchen resources;** dirty crockery and cutlery present potential hazards.

11. **Limiting the use of lifts** to those that need them most.

12. **Establishing guidance on and perhaps provision of masks, gloves, plastic screens or any other protective equipment.** Many are waiting for government guidance on this; however, employees may request PPE whether it is officially recommended or not.

13. **Considering wearable technology** - In Belgium, some port workers are wearing Romware social distancing bands that buzz to alert the wearer if they are getting too close to another individual. Of course, we also await the UK Covid-19 contact tracing app and digitised immunity passports in development.

14. **Developing guidance** on how to deal with non-compliance.

15. **Outlining when a temporary breach of social distancing measures may be allowed;** in the case of a fire alarm or other workplace emergencies.

16. **Ensuring equality and diversity policies are maintained.** E.g. shielding, working from home and mobility in the office may affect some groups of employees more than others.

17. **Reviewing sustainability policies;** there may be a need for more disposable materials and less shared resources to ensure hygiene.

Organisations like Work.Life, who provide co-working space across the UK, have issued guidance on how they are planning to manage social distancing when lockdown is lifted:

> Click here to see Work.Life's guidance here

Establishing working from home for the long term will require some policy considerations

Since the rapid switch to working from home, there have been a number of longer-term issues to consider:

1. **BYOD** - or bring your own device; business leaders will also have to determine whether to give employees company-owned phones and computers — accompanied by an acceptable use policy — or permit employees to use their own devices, and consider then the related security implications.

2. Post lockdown, if an employee works in a coffee shop, what happens if they have to take a phone call that contains **sensitive information**, or they log in to a public WiFi network? Is this acceptable?

3. Will the organisation deploy **employee tracking applications** such as Hubstaff or Clicktime to monitor work time and activity, and support employees with productivity challenges. Or is this too 'Big Brother' and unacceptable to employees in the current culture?

4. With more collaborative working online, policies may now need to include a position on cyber bullying and harassment.

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Rethinking the office altogether

Office space is expensive. With a proportion of our staff working from home effectively, we still may not have enough space to appropriately distance office-based workers, so will the cost of our buildings fall to meet demand, or will we just increase the proportion that work from home? We'll be seeking more lease flexibility to upscale and downsize as we need.

Rethinking the factory or warehouse

Cars can't be built at the kitchen table. We hope demand for our manufactured goods will increase, but if we can't increase staff numbers and social distance them, will replacing humans with robots further expand?

Making sure we are in shape intellectually, financially and culturally for the next disruption

> "Preparing for the next crisis (or the next phase of the current crisis) now is likely to be much more effective than an ad hoc, reactive response when the crisis actually hits".
>
> *HBR*

Well into our business continuity plans, we'll soon have time to reflect how well we were prepared for Covid-19. The only certainty is that this won't be the last event to dramatically change our organisations and our people. Organisations may have taken an intellectual and financial approach to business continuity planning, but as outlined above, the ones that also prepared their cultures for change will have had the greatest chance of bringing their people through.

What does a great Employee Experience look like in a Covid-19 world?

Aside from remote working, which must be adopted as a business as usual operating model going forward, the learnings during this period have helped us identify best price for the <u>employee experience</u> going forwards.

1. **Better communication:** Enhanced focus on timely, transparent, empathetic and less formal communication. Where communication has worked well, people have felt valued to be made privy to information about the organisation they perhaps wouldn't normally hear.

2. **Availability of online training & development:** Learning and growth opportunities are the factors most strongly correlated with employee engagement in People Insight's survey data. The present global business environment has created an opportunity to upskill employees for their existing as well as potential roles.

"We have introduced a scheme where we can temporarily redeploy employees who cannot carry out their normal role, or who have reduced workloads. It allows those employees to have meaningful work and develop new skills at the same time."

Fiona Wallace - Brewin Dolphin

Find out how organisations are having <u>virtual performance reviews</u> and <u>organising training</u> during the pandemic.

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3. **The right tech & equipment:** Was there ever anything so infuriating as a slow laptop or a system that keeps crashing? Good tech has to become a hygiene factor for productivity and performance, and will make all the difference to a candidate weighing up your job offer vs. a competitor.

4. **Facilitating collaboration:** All the fun activities we've engaged in during this time shouldn't dry up once lockdown is over. They are the human glue that helps people get to know each other and break barriers that prevent two people in an organisation picking up the phone to each other.

5. **Social responsibility:** We've given, donated and volunteered during this time – as organisations and individuals, and found this experience meaningful and rewarding. Facilitate, and expect requests for volunteering time, corporate action and giving to continue.

    "We have increased our employee volunteering days so that people can take 5 days during 2020, as well as allowing employees to draw down from our community fund. Supporting our local communities is a core part of our engagement and culture and our employees have told us that they have welcomed these additional measures."

    Fiona Wallace - Brewin Dolphin

6. **Wellbeing focus must continue:** Lockdown has been tough, and we've been ready with advice, materials, groups and calls during this time to support our people. We should continue this human approach and maintain access to two-way communication and listening to our people.

7. **Employee listening and responding** has served our people well; they have felt involved and respected, and leaders have gained diverse input to solve problems.

Want to know more about Employee Listening Programmes?

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