

Shaping the new vision for HR

Living with Covid-related restrictions of one kind or another has become so wearily familiar since March last year, that it's hard to remember how little time we all had back then to adjust to full-on lockdown. Almost overnight, we had to find ways of making our businesses work with many, if not all, of our people working remotely.

Aside from the central challenge of keeping up something as close as possible to business as usual, we had countless others to contend with. Not least, from an HR point of view, was making sure we supported the wellbeing of employees forced to work in unfamiliar ways. We'd been talking for years about how technology has made remote and flexible working possible. Then, suddenly, almost all of us were putting that theory into practice, whether we liked it or not.



The good news is that most firms found ways to make things work. Given the improvised nature of that adaptation, however, solutions to the challenge of working off site took many different forms. It will take some time to filter best practice from cobbled-together muddling-through. But, to a greater or lesser extent, we've all learned things of value along the way. Those who learned fastest did best through the pandemic. Those same companies should also emerge best placed to thrive in the coming new normal, whatever that looks like.

In a sense, Covid-19 simply turbocharged a tendency already implicit in the twenty-first century workplace towards more varied, flexible and location-neutral ways of working. Many businesses have found that aspects of this new way of doing things have worked well for them. But, while some have been pleasantly surprised, others have come up against the limitations of having staff working separately from one another. Employees too have had the chance to find out whether remote or flexible working works for them.

Now businesses have crucial decisions to make about how they want to work in future. In doing so, it's essential they consult adequately with staff on how they want to work. Enforcing a blanket return to the office risks creating resistance or resentment and conflicting with employees' legal right to ask for flexible working. There's a real danger that decisions taken now around new working arrangements could be seen as discriminating against certain types of employee.

Some businesses have already refreshed their policies to reflect the need to treat all employees equally and fairly and to act transparently as we move towards 'new normal' ways of working. If you're not one of them, it would certainly be wise to consider how your own policies might need updating. Moving to a hybrid office-based/home-working model might work brilliantly for your business - but you'll need to ensure it works for all your people too.

By physically separating business leaders and managers from the people they count on to keep their businesses operating profitably, Covid-19 has shone a valuable spotlight on just how important human relationships are to any business. In an increasingly technology-reliant business world, it's an easy thing to lose sight of, but ultimately every business is a people business. Manage your human resources right, and the rest falls much more easily into place.

Among the biggest challenges presented by having large numbers of staff working off site are communication and engagement. Keeping remote working staff motivated and working productively asks something more and different of those who manage them. Providing dedicated training for managers and team leaders can help them learn and apply effective techniques for keeping in touch with employees working remotely. That, in turn, can help them sustain the crucial combination of trust, integrity and two-way commitment that underpins effective engagement.

Ironically, many managers have learned more about the members of their teams during lockdown than they ever did while sharing an office 9 to 5. Everyone's work-life balance came a little more clearly into focus, as managers learned - with more or less success - how to help employees juggle home-schooling, caring, and accomplishing the basic tasks of everyday life - while also maintaining productivity.

By throwing the human dimension into sharper focus, pandemic-inspired workplace restrictions helped underline the value HR can generate for employees as well as employers. Flexibility, imagination and resourcefulness in creating the conditions workers need to carry on functioning purposefully and effectively has illustrated the true value high-quality HR input contributes. Its ability to play a central role in supporting employee wellbeing through a stressful time, has reminded us of HR's potential to add value by driving enhanced engagement and trust.

With growing skills shortages in many fields, making sure employees feel valued and supported is increasingly important. Former assumptions about how to achieve this stand in urgent need of reassessment. For example, some traditional benefits, like season ticket loans, look less compelling in a post-pandemic world. A number of insurance firms have recently reported positive results from reimagining their HR offering in a more holistic light. Taking advantage of mobile-enabled technology to move away from a piecemeal approach to HR to a joined-up one-stop hub that keeps employees in constant touch with support, assistance, information, recognition and rewards is something we expect a growing number of organisations to explore.

Transitioning into the emerging new world of work presents both challenges and opportunities. Decisions taken now could have long-lasting consequences for your firm's future success. If you would like to know more about how you and your people can move forward safely and successfully in the months and years ahead, please contact us at Insurance HR Solutions (IHRS) and we'll be happy to help. Contact us for help in making your return-to-work policies realistic, flexible and compliant.

Contact our team today and take the worry out of your day. Email the team at HRhelp@ihrsolutions.co.uk or call our helpline on **01604 709509** or visit our [website](#).

About the Author

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Katherine has over 20 years' international experience working in HR, across various sectors, including financial services, insurance, and regulated environments. Over the years, she has collaborated with some exceptionally talented HR professionals, with whom she has joined forces on special projects. Her network of HR professionals provides advice and training to companies and other HR teams.

In her role with UKGI Group, Katherine heads up the Human Resources Consultancy and provides objective support to firms on employment law and HR issues. She uses her extensive skills and knowledge to work with firms to help them develop strong and resilient HR strategies and establish healthy organisational cultures.

Katherine holds a degree in Business Administration and Management from the University of Northampton and a Postgraduate Diploma in Human Resource Strategies from London Metropolitan University. She is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (FCIPD).

