



workingmums.co.uk roundtable

Transition back to work

The roundtable, held on 21st May, brought together diversity and recruitment experts from nine organisations to discuss the challenges facing employers as they seek to transition back from lockdown. The aim of the roundtable was to explore shared challenges, discuss best practice and look at what works and find ways forward.

The roundtable was hosted by Gillian Nissim, founder of workingmums.co.uk, who spoke about the organisation's commitment to sharing and promoting best practice in diversity and flexible working and about the need for openness to address shared challenges, particularly in such uncharted territory.

Challenges and successes

She invited employers to give a brief overview of the main challenges they had faced since the COVID-19 outbreak and how they had tackled them.

Many said that they had only previously had an ad hoc approach to homeworking and had had to adapt quickly to a large number of employees working from home.

This meant that IT departments had had to step up to ensure people had everything they needed, such as laptops and access to online communication platforms. Older workers in particular had needed more support to adapt to video tools and employers had created guides to help employees adapt. There was a feeling that this would mean employees felt more comfortable working from home in the future.

The general view was that the response had shown the remote working, and flexible working generally, could be done and could deliver results so the usual arguments against it could no longer stand. This could have big implications for recruitment, opening up hiring to a wider geographical range and a greater diversity of people, for instance. "We have shown that agile working works. We have been going on about agile working and have done it overnight. That is a huge positive," said one speaker.

Many had allowed those with childcare responsibilities to flex their hours, for instance, working split days so could share caring responsibilities with a partner. Being understanding and realistic about what could be achieved was important and took the pressure off employees.

Creative thinking about problems was also important. Those with employees who had to go to a workplace, such as retailers, had extensively used the furlough scheme and were taking cautious steps towards reopening, with safety a big concern. Communications with head office workers were easier than with shop workers as they were less likely to have access to email. One employer had had to send letters out to staff by post. Other employers, such as education providers, had adapted to online learning.

For employers of key workers, there had been a lot of pressure on to deliver, despite many people shielding, and workers from other areas had been redeployed to cover key roles.

What came across clearly was how HR workers had risen to the challenge. Their job had changed overnight. They were often working longer hours than usual, particularly in the early days when the Government guidance on furlough changed often. "It was all hands on deck," said one HR expert. Many had young children and teams had been flexing around this. One HR officer who didn't have children spoke of how she had sought to relieve pressure on colleagues with childcare responsibilities.

Others spoke of how the whole process of adapting to such a big change had brought people closer, through more regular work-related and social video calls. Video calls were seen as a particular plus, allowing better levels of engagement than conference calls.

Communication was key, including keep in touch with furloughed workers, doing regular Pulse surveys to see how employees were getting on and using chat channels, for instance, to support working parents, and regular updates from leaders as well as information about mental health.

One employer spoke of how their mental health champions were accessible on Skype. Another said their mental health first aiders would be vital for people having to go back to a changed workplace who might be suffering from anxiety.

In terms of challenges, in addition to opening up stores and supporting parents who were homeschooling or looking after very young children, employers spoke of the need to address isolation, particularly of those living alone and working from home. Another issue was training managers to manage remote workers and engage teams working from home. Participants questioned what would happen to IT kit when things returned to normal, what changes in the labour market might mean for diversity and inclusion and how to create a sense of belonging when onboarding people remotely.

Furlough

Not everyone had furloughed staff. Some, for instance, had avoided furlough by reducing staff hours. Others employed key workers.

Most employers kept in touch with furloughed employees through meetings on Microsoft Teams or Zoom or other platforms and provided updates on what was going on. Attendance was voluntary. This was easier for staff who were used to office working. Training was required for people returning to the workplace and it was important to talk to employee representatives, such as unions, and line managers to outline what the new normal would be. Many were being cautious, but retailers, for instance, anticipated a slow return to shopping from consumers which was likely to coincide with reduced staff numbers as some people would still be shielding or have childcare issues which meant they needed to stay furloughed.

Employers said conversations to sound out where people were and what they felt comfortable with were vital to reduce worries and ease people back to work. Regular welfare calls were a way of tapping into people's concerns. Some provided managers with a framework of questions about concerns such as shielding, childcare and transport to work. Issues for managers to consider included whether jobs needed to be redesigned, PPE and ability to social distance. Employees needed to feel included in decisions and that there was a focus on health and safety. Social media platforms such as Yammer allowed people to ask questions anonymously. Some offered a 24/7 HR helpline. This level of activity had boosted some employers' employee engagement scores.

Others spoke about how they were enforcing social distancing, for instance, through spacing of desks, banning hotdesking, sending employees masks and rejigging meeting spaces so they didn't include roundtables. Most felt homeworking would remain for a while and that they would struggle to have everyone back.

Onboarding

Employers who were recruiting virtually spoke of the need to train managers about online assessments and virtual interviewing, including the candidate experience. Some had produced guides for managers and candidates, welcome packs and videos of the average day at the organisation to make people feel part of the team and to show they care about their people. Security checks had to be done in different ways, for instance, people needed to hold up their passports so screenshots could be taken.

Employers were also providing guides to logging on remotely, how to support remote staff and connect with colleagues and the need to encourage regular breaks. Some had a COVID-19 page with updates, FAQs and well being information which new starters could access.

Some employers had imposed recruitment freezes initially, but things were starting to move again. IT and e-commerce were areas which were seeing movement and frontline roles such as analytical roles around network capacity at Network Rail were increasing. But many sectors had noted cautiousness among candidates about moving at a time of great uncertainty.

Others who employed frontline workers had had to recruit and train people rapidly, speed up the usual checking process and redeploy workers from other areas. One employer was experimenting with video cvs and applications and had noted a positive impact, saying they helped employers see people's presentation skills, for instance, and could become the new norm.

One participant had only joined her employer just before lockdown and spoke of how she had up and down days as she was far from family. Her employer had made her feel okay about this and her line manager had checked in on her and asked what they could do to help. That element of care had been important.

Mental health and childcare

Employers were providing regular signposting to mental health resources, sending out support packs on mental health and resilience to furloughed staff and adapting what they normally do to remote settings. One employer was providing online resilience workshops for Head Office staff.

There were many different mental health issues, for instance, some employees had family members who were ill or who had died. Employers were keen to let members of staff who were struggling know that it was okay to have bad days and that it was good to talk to someone about it.

Mental health first aiders and champions were being deployed virtually by some employers. One had launched a mental health awareness campaign, including daily tips on resilience and a well being page where all mental health information was concentrated, including signposting to support for carers. They had a numbers system so people could let colleagues know how they were on a scale of numbers. This was a way of getting around the usual tendency for people to say they were fine even when they weren't. Global diversity and inclusion ambassadors had been given coaching skills so they could have conversations on issues such as how people are coping.

Employers said they were using flexible working to get around childcare issues, such as starting earlier or working later or blocking some time out during the day. The important thing was that they got the balance right. The message had to be transmitted that it was okay to do things differently in the difficult circumstances that COVID-19 presented.

Key takeaways

- > The lockdown experience shows agile working works, opening up greater diversity
- > Childcare issues can be addressed through greater flexibility in hours, regular conversations and being realistic about what can be achieved by individuals, given their circumstances
- > It is important to understand that people had up and down days and to check in regularly and ask how they are
- > Regular video calls could make teams feel closer
- > Communication is key and people need opportunities to talk about their worries
- > Using social media channels, such as a family chat channel, can help build resilience
- > Creating a page with mental health resources means people can find what they need easily
- > Managers need training to support home workers

- > Keeping in touch and providing regular updates to furloughed workers is important preparation for the return to work. People need to know how the workplace is changing and have an opportunity to ask questions
 - > Pulse surveys can provide a window on employees' worries as they return to work
 - > People need different ways to express their concerns. Helplines or places where they can ask anonymous questions can help
 - > Training is needed for managers in virtual interviewing and onboarding
 - > Guides and videos are a good way of introducing candidates to the workplace culture when they are onboarding remotely
 - > Video applications and CVs could be better than the normal way of doing things
 - > It is important to think creatively and to be open to new ways of doing things. They may become the new norm.
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Participants

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