



After the Pandemic

Back to work
programme

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Introduction

In common with all UK businesses, our move into the lockdown precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic – closing all branches and offices and moving all staff to working from home – happened very quickly, over a matter of days. Happily, we had the hardware and software systems in place to help us adapt without disruption and, again like many other companies, we have been pleasantly surprised at how well our teams have adjusted to the new working methods.

This report covers how we managed the move to homeworking, dealt with the difficult decision to furlough staff, and are planning our return to fully operational while protecting all our staff.



The Early Days

Technology

The first challenges were to ensure that all staff could work efficiently from their remote locations. Back in 2018 HR GO moved to use cloud-based systems for all IT and began issuing staff with laptops to enhance their mobility. The move from the office base to homeworking was relatively easy:

- Hardware was already configured for users to access files and databases and use email
- Video conferencing apps such as Skype and Teams were available to all as standard
- The intranet was universally available to share news across the company

Most staff adapted seamlessly and were able to continue with their core activities of supporting clients and candidates. For a few there was a steeper learning curve but skill levels improved very rapidly once all other face to face options for communication were removed.

Furlough decisions

It became clear very quickly that some areas of our business were going to be harder hit by lockdown than others. As businesses across the UK were forced into closing some or all their operations, their plans to hire new or replacement staff were cancelled or put on hold. This was particularly true in certain sectors, such as hospitality, and for many permanent roles.

We knew we faced a significant drop in business revenues as a result and, as soon as the Government released their support plans for businesses, we took the decision to furlough those team members that would be affected by the slowdown in recruitment activity.

One to one discussions were held with anyone identified for furlough to explain all the details and contract variation letters issued to confirm the arrangements.

Recruiting remotely

Recruitment of essential key workers, predominantly to temporary positions, increased very rapidly as demand grew in certain sectors. Our consultants had to adapt very quickly from face to face hiring processes to online registration and video interviewing. The legal requirement for carrying out compliance checks in person was relaxed and changes to our registration systems and processes were fast-tracked through our internal IT team.

Managing Remote And Furloughed Staff



Keep in touch for furlough

We recognised straight away that we could easily lose touch with people on furlough, leading to demotivation and disaffection that might cause us problems in the long run. So, we put in place some measures to ensure we kept in regular contact:

- Weekly video conference calls with senior managers to update furloughed employees on what was happening inside the company
- Encouraging individuals to keep in contact with each other and their usual team members informally
- Setting up a unique mailbox where they could raise issues with HR and senior management

A month into the programme a survey was taken among all those furloughed to see if anything more was needed. Results were very positive:

- 97% of respondents said the calls were helpful and worthwhile
- 86% reported they were staying in touch with other colleagues
- The main question asked was 'when can I come back?'



Working from home

While some of our team members were used to travelling and working from many different locations, the majority were based from a fixed address. Even with excellent IT equipment and systems access, working from home can bring other challenges such as:

- Lack of suitable workspace
- Interruption/distraction from other family members
- Poor internet connectivity
- Isolation/loneliness

Managers were advised to stay in regular communication with all team members – most of them opted to have daily catch-up calls where people could chat generally, not just about work matters, as they would if they were in the office.

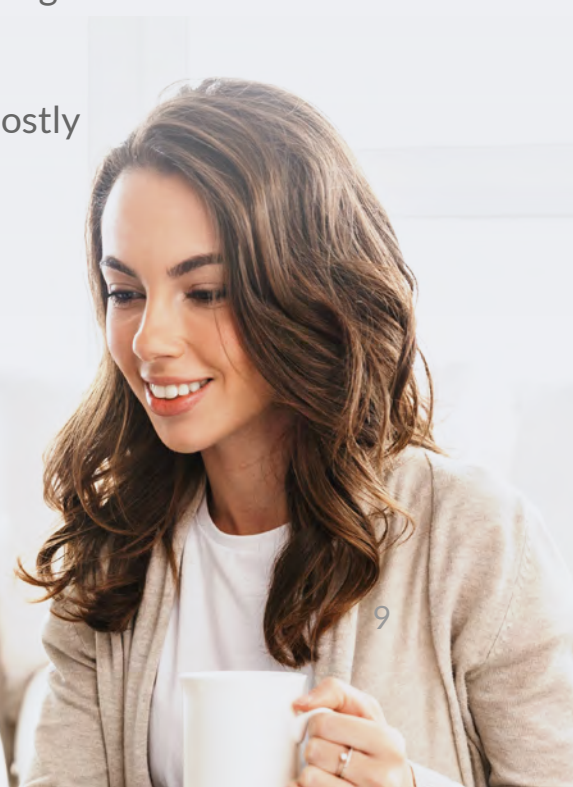
Eight weeks into the lockdown we asked all employees to take part in a survey to help us understand more about the experience of working from home and see what we could learn for the future.

All 352 employees across the UK, Poland and Australia, were invited to take part, including those currently on furlough. The response rate overall was 49.7%, although this was slightly higher (54%) among people still working.

Overall, the results were very heartening: 80% of respondents said that their experience was very or mostly positive, with only 6% saying they found it negative.

The key benefits found were:

- no commuting (48%)
- being more productive (42%)
- improvements to family life and work/life balance (15%)



Indeed, the difficulties people found they had were more to do with the circumstance of working from home in a pandemic lockdown, rather than just working from home. The biggest negative was social isolation (30%) followed by Covid-19 anxiety (21%). Some people are having to cope with children at home, so it is not surprising that childcare and other distractions came next highest at 20%.

Although 13% of respondents said their physical workspace was not ideal, and a similar number had problems with their home internet service, happily 82% of people said they had managed to set up a dedicated workspace, which really helped them to settle down to work.

And 84% said they would like to see more flexible options offered on returning to their normal office base.

Most reassuring was the news that, recognising these are not normal times, half of respondents said they could continue in their current work mode indefinitely, with less than a quarter saying they were nearing their limit.

The survey was anonymous but for anyone who identified as having problems, and gave their name, we made sure to follow up with them to find solutions where possible.





Preparing To Go Back To The Office

Much of the recruitment activity in recent months has been associated with Covid-19, but clearly that is not a sustainable business model. We have to be able to return safely to providing our clients with a full range of recruitment services.

Our sales staff are keen to return to a more lively environment, supportive of carrying out business development activities. As the Government has sanctioned the opening of some retail establishments so we have started looking at what we need to put in place for our return to work.

Welfare issues uppermost

A first step was a welfare letter sent to all staff to ask if they had any health or practical issues that we needed to take account of when planning their return to the office, along with any particular fears or concerns that we could address.

Everybody responding had a personal response from HR to address the issues raised and aggregating the responses indicated what we needed to get in place to reassure staff they are protected.

Risk assessment

All our sites have had risk assessments carried out and are being rearranged to ensure:

- Deep cleaning is carried out prior to opening and ongoing
- There is 2 metres between all employees
- PPE (anti-bacterial gels, gloves and masks) stocks are available

Video conference consultations were held to allow people to raise concerns and to participate in finding solutions that would satisfy everyone. Final arrangements have been communicated in writing to provide additional reassurance and certainty.



Phased Implementation

*Welcome
Back*



Returning to the office

From 1st June sales teams can go back into their offices following the rules set out above, but this is not mandatory. Those that have ongoing restrictions, such as health issues or caring responsibilities, can continue to work from home.

As the business activities expand it is also possible for staff on furlough to be gradually brought back into work. The discussions we have with clients now will necessarily dictate changes to our own business as we flex to meet changes in patterns of demand.

Re-opening branches

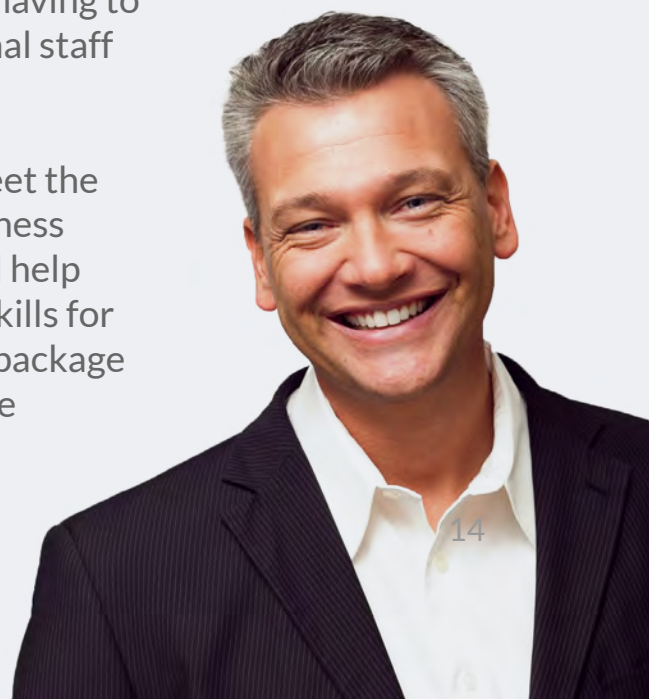
To manage risk the decision was taken that our retail sites will not be open to members of the public until July, and then only by appointment for an initial period.

Only one visitor at a time will be allowed into the branch offices and Perspex screens are being installed to provide a protective barrier, along with the provision of anti-bacterial gels, gloves and masks.

Developing services

Right now, many businesses are struggling with huge drops in demand from customers, the impossibility of re-opening economically with social distancing, having to make people redundant, or even finding additional staff with the right skills.

We are adapting our own service portfolio to meet the needs of our clients in dealing with the new business reality. Our redundancy support programme will help companies give practical help with job-seeking skills for people losing their jobs, and the remote worker package can provide an efficient way to expand call centre capacity.





Outlook

The coronavirus pandemic has provided many challenges for all of us. Alongside the economic and personal difficulties, we have also seen positive outcomes. People have proved how well they can rise to meet the challenges thrown at them, to adapt to new working environments, and to learn new skills.

Although most people are keen to return to working in their teams, our staff have certainly valued the extra time they get to spend with their families and the time saved on their daily commute. Flexible working options will be a key expectation in the new normal working environments.

Many changes that were in the pipeline have been accelerated, for example video meetings and use of online and video interviewing for remote hiring, and these will undoubtedly stay with us.

Personal service has always been a priority for HR GO Recruitment and while we have tried very hard to maintain those standards during lockdown we look forward very much to the day when we can interact fully with our clients and candidates in person.

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