

The 5 C's of lockdown

Culture, Collaboration, Communication,
Change & Coaching



The changes we've seen to how people work over the past 6 months have reshaped our relationship with the office. There have been many headlines that proclaim that office workers are reluctant to return and that home working has not had the negative impact on productivity that many have feared.

Change

And it seems to be true - our examination of people's reactions to home working seems to find it was a broadly positive experience for nearly all - with an increase in time available to spend with family, more time to exercise and prepare more healthy food rather than grabbing sandwiches on the go. There was also a feeling that corporate processes held up well to a fully remote workforce - and that the enforced WFH meant that those processes that didn't work were quickly reviewed and updated, creating a leaner and more effective business operation.

But whilst nearly all respondents to our survey found that working from home gave them a better work life balance, and that overall, the experience actually delivered improvements in business activity, there were also elements that business leaders will need to consider going forward to guarantee that remote work is a longer term success.

Whilst the results themselves showcased overall a very positive response, by looking at career stages in detail, we were able to see some clear differences in how people experienced working from home, depending on their work experience. More senior members of staff were more likely to have dedicated office spaces in their homes whilst junior members of staff might have found themselves working from a kitchen table along with several of their flatmates - making zoom calls difficult and leading to aches and pains. They were also less likely to have appropriate equipment - all of which raises questions for leaders about how they can deliver the right health and safety support remotely. Companies need to see how they can offer these staff access to ergonomic home office tools, or support them in returning to the office earlier (or appropriate co-working facilities).

The element that stood out the most however, was how entry level and junior members of staff are most likely to feel the impact of the lack of communication across a business. Whilst more experienced members of staff commented that communication was good – more junior team members felt they weren't communicated with well – which either means that communication wasn't flowing down the chain successfully or that those at the earliest stages in their career need more detailed and tailored communication approaches – perhaps because of a lack of security or knowledge about how the company works.

Interestingly – more senior members of staff commented that they felt that communication improved through the business – perhaps because they have more well developed relationships and informal networks.

A further development of the theme that earlier career colleagues might need a more nuanced and tailored approach can be seen in results that suggest that these junior members of staff felt that they weren't always checked in on personally (whilst more senior members of staff felt very comfortable with this) – they perhaps felt more isolated and alone at home, without the support systems they've developed in the office.

“I missed out on business insight by not hearing about it through hot desking with colleagues from other teams and business areas”.

We've been working with businesses recently to help them develop better ways of working with their peers and teams virtually. There are lots of well documented cases of 'zoom fatigue' - and just putting in more calls with your team members does not deliver 'better communication'. For us, there needs to be a variety of different methods - matched to the type and nature of the communication. For example, WhatsApp could be used for an informal catch up with a team first thing in the morning, slack or teams can be used for inter-team communication during the day, whilst zoom is better for more formal and structured meetings.



But it's also important that an element of face to face contact is maintained - you wouldn't go into a meeting room and sit facing the wall with other attendees behind you, so it's important to turn your camera on, and be ready to fully participate! There are a variety of different tools - but you do need to really explore them to discover all of the functionality available.

Coaching

It's also important to think about how the office environment contributes to informal learning and change acceptance. This period has shown how there is a great deal of informal learning done by listening and observing in the office - and this is very difficult to replicate.

“Being a leader I can get a good sense of how people are feeling by being in the office, listening and observing. I wasn't able to do this whilst at home and I missed being able to use that tool. It did mean I had to come up with different ways to gauge the overall feeling of my department - a video call just didn't cut it”

More of a focus needs to be placed on structured learning and communication - frequency needs to be higher, and without the visible queues like body language, business leaders and managers need to find ways to do their 'temperature checks' This will also help with the process of managing change in a fully remote environment.

Collaboration

When we looked at broader themes – we could see that more senior staff and leaders were worried about the fact that collaboration and creativity might suffer with a lack of face to face contact. One thing we have learned over this period is that there are lots of tools out there which can facilitate remote collaboration, but to truly get the 'spark' of collaboration takes considerably more effort and structure than when delivering remotely.

“One of our company values is Collaborative Creativity and despite the use of Teams I don't feel we were able to 'live' our value to the same extent during the WFH period”.

Businesses that might be used to running brainstorming sessions in a more 'off the cuff' way in the office environment now need to put in place a lot more pre-planning and preparation for remote creativity sessions. It's worth considering how these sessions can be facilitated, and how you can use the available technology fully - we've held some really good sessions via Zoom for example, making use of breakout rooms, and online whiteboards.

“I missed the random conversations with people outside of my normal circle of activity - I think this is sometimes where the magic happens!”

Culture

Some senior leaders expressed concerns about how working from home might affect the Company culture - they were worried that without regular face to face contact the culture would dissipate. Again, this can be managed by developing a clear communication strategy. Whilst there is a natural downturn in 'social' interaction, companies can build clear links between their people by having planned sessions where staff can be encouraged to interact in a more ad hoc way. Here at TICL we ran 'home working squares' where people could just turn up with a cup of tea and have a more informal catch up - those who attended found this hugely valuable and it really helped keep a sense of 'togetherness' whilst we were working remotely. These types of structured interactions are also key whilst onboarding new people – another concern voiced by our respondents. By putting in place a clear plan of structured communications sessions, you can replace the typical 'walk around the business approach' that many businesses adopt.

It's difficult to maintain culture without physical presence on site, albeit all we kept in good contact via zoom, teams, email & phone."

What other things that companies should be aware of?

The power of concentration – whilst some comments indicated that people felt that it was hard to get things done without going and finding people at their desk – others indicated that they really liked the fact that they couldn't be disturbed in that way. It allowed them to better manage their workflow and give more considered and less 'on the spot' answers to queries.

Staying on top of Zoom fatigue – respondents overwhelmingly felt that they suffered from too many Zoom calls. Businesses often tried to manage not being in the office by constantly being connected – but this meant people couldn't get their work done. So businesses need to understand that too much 'online' contact can be counterproductive.

Maintaining work/life balance – whilst the vast majority of more experienced hires felt that their work life balance improved through lockdown home working – more junior team members struggled to create a dividing line. Whether this is due to the fact that more senior team members are being paid to be more available, and may indeed work longer hours under 'normal circumstances' (and indeed think nothing of getting back on line again in the evening or at weekends), or rather that people were more 'contactable' as they were at home all the time, companies do need to think about how they encourage staff to 'log off' and get some leisure time in.