

## HOW HAVE MANAGERS EXPERIENCED LOCKDOWN?

Almost every aspect of life throughout the world has been profoundly altered either by the pandemic or the responses to it. Almost instantaneous changes in the business environment meant that organisations had to adapt quickly with very little chance to prepare. Whatever other changes were being planned, implemented or avoided, they were overtaken by changes that were being imposed.

TICL wanted to find out how these changes had been experienced by managers in organisations so we interviewed 10 managers from a variety of businesses to find out. This article summarises what they said. It represents a majority opinion: not everyone said everything but there were enough overlaps to give a good representative opinion; the occasional dissenting voice has also been recorded. It doesn't attempt to be exhaustive and is not intended to be definitive or a master-plan for coping with COVID-19. It is a snapshot of what is happening, what is working (or not) and what might be useful to think about for the future.

### What was the impact on managers themselves?

All interviewees missed the ability to have face-to-face meetings, not only with their teams, but with their peers and their own managers. Some also missed the chance to meet customers and their wider professional community, for example at conventions or exhibitions. Even introverts, who might have quite enjoyed lockdown to start with, found that they missed having at least some face-to-face contact. Other losses that were also felt keenly were lack of choice and change. Every working day was now spent either working alone or on some communications platform. Several had started by having fancy dress days or quizzes to try to introduce some variation but these mostly faded as they tended to become routine and forced.

*It is useful to remember that we all tend to value a sense of 'agency', of having some control over our lives. Losing that sense can be debilitating. Organisations might give some thought to how they can allow people to regain that sense, something we return to when we discuss working patterns later.*

Most maintained good relationships with their own manager. Realising that their boss was also busier than usual, they didn't want to appear needy but did value some quality one-to-one time. They became more conscious of how they were to be managed, which made them more aware of their own various management styles. One had had a poor relationship with their manager before lockdown and things did not improve. They felt forgotten and went weeks without feedback, wondering "Am I doing the right thing?" It didn't help that their boss was not skilled in the virtual platform and appeared to use this as an additional excuse not to engage. On the plus side, it inspired this interviewee to not forget their own team.

*Managers need managing too. Individuals might have to be managing relationships with their team, their peers and their boss simultaneously. One of the common responses to the lockdowns was to roll out IT equipment, software and training across the organisation. Most of the emphasis seemed to be on those at the 'worker-bee' level but the example above brings in to focus the need for senior*

*management to be competent online. Was the missing boss equipped to fulfil their role online? Had they completed (or avoided) any training? Would their attitude to technology and their managerial responsibilities have been acceptable in their subordinates? The behaviours modelled by a boss will, one way or another, affect the behaviours of their direct reports.*

### What was the impact on teams?

Several managers reported that their teams were working more closely together as a result of the lockdown. It had encouraged them to communicate expectations more precisely to their teams. It had also increased the collective review of both challenges and achievements. Additionally, communications about problems were more open; there was a sense that a crisis gives permission to be more honest.

*A sense of collectively overcoming adversity can build a strong sense of belonging in a team. However, this can be eroded if there is no sense that the team is making progress, winning. Clear and consistent communication of expectations is the foundation of performance management. You cannot give feedback about performance unless there is a clear and shared awareness of exactly what that performance was supposed to be.*

New joiners to a team presented a number of challenges. These were different for someone joining with previous office experience compared to, for example, someone on a graduate scheme. Some of the challenges were logistical, such as providing them with IT equipment. Some of them were procedural, such as getting them logged on to systems and trained to use them. Perhaps the most difficult were organisational. Companies struggled with instilling corporate culture more than with teaching procedures. It is also much more difficult to network online so the opportunities to learn what is not written down, which are almost taken for granted in a real office, are not there. One way this was overcome was by instituting a virtual mentoring/buddying scheme.

*Virtual mentoring schemes need proper design and resourcing to be effective. The right people have to be chosen as mentors and then told what it is they need to achieve. They might need some training. Having told someone that they are now a mentor, there is a tendency for organisations to think that that is all they need to do. It isn't. What in an office might have been absorbed in day-to-day business needs specific time allocated to it, so a mentor's other tasks need to be reduced. Senior management needs to be involved. Mentors need permission to book themselves and their mentee into senior management's diaries. Mentors' appraisals should specifically include how well they have done this.*

### What was the impact on organisations?

Some organisations were already partly working from home and so had to cope with less least amount of change. Whatever their starting point, those organisations with good management structures and abilities found it easier to manage the change to remote working. Those

without, or who did not take them seriously, found the transition more challenging. Few companies seemed likely either to return to their pre-lockdown arrangements or to keep working completely remotely. There will therefore be a change to the 'next normal' which will present new challenges to managers.

Several organisations had effective systems for measuring productivity in place before lockdown. Applied intelligently, these were useful so that managers at least had something to measure against rather than 'shooting in the dark'.

Training and development activities slowed down, which in turn slowed down organisational development. Some planned organisational changes relied on training in specific skillsets. Not all training providers had made remote delivery engaging, which lowered participation in training opportunities.

Performance management and reviews generally continued effectively. Appraisal processes tended to become more formal when online, which is in keeping with the observations on communications outlined below.

One manager reported that working remotely they found it more difficult to react quickly to sudden when things started going wrong. It is more difficult to generate momentum virtually.

*Having made the sudden, unplanned change to remote working, the resulting organisational structures appear to be less adaptable. The virtual structures that have emerged appear to be good for steady-state, not for development or reacting to disruptors. There will be challenges in developing them intentionally to meet the demands of the next normal. In keeping with the observations about the organisations that coped most effectively with lockdown, those that invest in developing robust systems now seem likelier to make the next change more effectively. Decisions about office spaces, technology, work patterns and management will be more effective if integrated.*

#### What emerged about communications?

Virtual communication is never as easy nor as effective as face-to-face and so you have to do more of it to achieve the same effect. This takes more time. There was less "just chat", either across desks or on the way to coffee or lunch or a meeting. You notice when you have headphones on or are "on a call". Because all communication needed to be scheduled there could be an implication that there had to be some formal output or record.

*In an office, communication is constant, spontaneous and immediate. As a result, a lot of it goes unnoticed. In remote working, communication is intermittent and has to be planned - you can't diarise spontaneity.*

There were no hard and fast rules about the frequency/length/ content of online meetings but, generally, every team met online at least once a day. When one manager suggested reducing this, they faced push-back even from their least social team members, those they had expected to welcome this. Several managers said that they now held two types of meetings, work and

social. Online meetings about work were generally more structured than the face-to-face ones they replaced. (Although one manager reported that their meetings had become less structured.) Social meetings were less structured. There tended to be lots of one-to-ones early in lockdown. The frequency and duration of these was driven by personalities of both the manager and managed. One of the purposes of one-to-ones is simply checking people are ok

*Communication in organisations plays two overlapping roles: content and context. Content is the work role (data-transmission, activity-coordination), context is the social role (group dynamics). Both are essential for an organisation to function properly and every communication contains some of each. Given the constraints of virtual communications, it can be more effective to emphasise one or the other at any particular time. Content communications are more effective if they are structured. Context communications are more effective if they are unstructured. One challenge in the virtual environment is that the contextual opportunities have to be scheduled. This distinction between the factual and the emotional recurs in several different contexts in this piece.*

Virtual meetings were useful, as far as they went, for business communications, ie those along the “wiring diagram” of an organisation. These included team meetings, whether business or social. All the managers reported that these were augmented by “virtual water-cooler” chats. These were primarily by text and WhatsApp appeared to be the favourite channel. There tended to be a multitude of these, linking within teams, parts of teams or across teams. They were self-organising and fluid.

*Chat groups help to fill in some of the shortcomings of communicating remotely. There is a paradox here for organisations: these kinds of communications need to be encouraged but not regulated, widely used but private, safe but not secretive. They can be vulnerable to toxic ‘banter’ with especially dire consequences if they become public and have been run on ‘company’ IT equipment. The principle source of control should be corporate culture, which can be expected to extend even into such private communications. There also needs to be whistle-blower channels available and suitable sanctions for transgressions.*

There were many different virtual platforms used. Some companies had strict policies about using one particular channel, others used a mixture. Video calls were generally preferred, especially if there were more than two people on the call. If there were only two then voice-calls were sometimes preferred. On video calls, it was awkward if some members of a meeting chose not to share video so there was a general “one-on, all-on” policy. There was clear understanding of the difference between people being unable to share their video (usually due to bandwidth issues) and being unwilling to do so. Unwillingness to connect to video could be another trigger for the manager to follow up with a one-to-one meeting to find out if there were any issues they need to be aware of. Some managers thought that, as lockdown continued, they became better at picking up emotional cues from their teams online. They became more consciously aware of peoples’ body language and tone of voice, and could follow up with one-to-ones if they thought this necessary. Some found this more difficult and this highlighted a perception that they needed to develop their skills in this area.

*Soft skills are different online. If someone came to a real meeting and sat under the table or wore a balaclava back to front it would be easy to spot that something was up. Online, it is easier to avoid eye contact or hide emotions.*

Virtual whiteboards helped, producing feelings “more as if you are in a room together”.

*Apart from the advantages usually associated with using whiteboards, ie the visual representation of information and relationships, there are some psychological reasons why a virtual whiteboard is particularly useful. Video-conferencing tends to put everyone directly face-to-face and, quite often, face-to-face with everyone at the same time. This could be interpreted as confrontational. A whiteboard produces the effect of everyone looking together at the same thing, which is more collaborative. A whiteboard works better than a presentation because every individual has the ability to contribute to the shared product.*

### What emerged about working patterns?

The biggest impact for most people was that they no longer had to commute. This has some advantages, the obvious ones being the savings in time and travel costs. Others included the ability to do the school-run, and so spend more time with their children, and the ability to start work early and “clear down emails” before the collaborative day began. There were disadvantages. There was a loss of “me” time, which might have been spent on reflection, mental planning or simply relaxing. There was a loss of a clear boundary between work and home. In terms of time-management, there was the tendency for work activities to creep into home-time.

*There is an idea that it is beneficial if people can be their authentic self at work. This presupposes that we are only ever one “self”, whereas in fact we adopt different identities depending on the role we see ourselves playing. We have one self for home and a different one for work (plus others as we meet friends, play sport etc). This is entirely natural and we shift between our multiple selves automatically. However, there is effort involved in this shifting, especially if we have to do it quickly, and we might have to do it more often if working at home.*

Most managers reported that, despite the extra time gained from not needing to commute, they were working longer hours. This included working outside normal office hours and occasionally at weekends. This was usually taken as “flexibility” (see below). Some found that they were more productive in their own specific outputs as there were fewer interruptions.

Peoples’ working patterns were determined by a combination of factors such as the needs of the task (including the need to collaborate with others), the needs of the organisation and the needs of the people doing the tasks. There is nothing new in this. Another factor, which is not always considered, is the preferred management style of the manager. This was probably less obvious before lockdown as managers would have been recruited to fit in to the culture of the organisation and then adapted their preferences to make them work in that setting. COVID-19 imposed a sudden, unplanned change in culture. Most managers were able to adapt their

styles to suit the new ways of working through a combination of hard work and experimentation. Some were reluctant to let go of old practices that were no longer appropriate.

*As described by the interviewees, working patterns could be grouped under four general headings which we have labelled fixed, variable, flexible and fluid. Each situation was likely to be a combination of all four in varying amounts.*

*Fixed. This is when individuals have no opportunity to change their work hours. Few managers were 'fixed' in this way because their activities tended to be less time-boxed. Much of their working day was spent communicating or working with their team and some of their other output had to be produced outside formal hours. The more senior the manager, the more likely this is to be so.*

*Variable. This is when individuals can arrange with their manager to work a different but fixed pattern of their work hours. This has to be done in advance and approved.*

*Flexible. This is when individuals can adjust their working hours completely as they saw fit in order to balance the demands of their job with all the other demands on their time.*

*Fluid. This is when individuals introduce unmonitored variability/ flexibility into their work patterns. Rather than endure the administrative load associated with variable working, people adjusted their own working hours without reference to the system.*

*All the working patterns above are descriptions of activity, not output. Organisations need to find the right balance between measuring both of these. The balance might not be static and might need to change, in which case some fluidity would be useful. It is useful for individual managers to be aware of their preferred style of management. They can then modify it to suit the circumstances.*

It was hard for managers to manage their own time and stick to a routine. Having a fixed time to start work was easier than sticking to a stop-time. In an office it is usually obvious when you are busy with something or in a meeting (even a virtual one). Others then know not to disturb you. When everything is virtual, what is happening in the multiple communications channels available is not apparent across those channels and so busyness is no longer obvious. There is a perceived pressure to answer communications immediately. Some missed the "end-of-day natter" with colleagues and peers.

*It can be healthy to 'bookend' the working day and the week, signalling to team-members (and oneself) when you no longer expect people to be available.*

### What emerged about trust

Trust was even more important when people were working remotely and needed to work both ways between managers and their teams. It was different online and had to be re-established, which took time.

*The subject of trust brings together several of the ideas explored above. We identified the importance of setting expectations. Trust is not a boundless concept, to establish it you have to know what you are trusting people to do. It works both ways: you have to know what people are trusting you to do. Work-flow applications usually measure the output of subordinates; very few give subordinates a view of what their boss is achieving on their behalf. Hard metrics are “content”: important but insufficient on their own. Trust also has an emotional dimension, or “context”. It is hard to trust someone that you don’t know, which affects new-joiners particularly.*

### What was the impact on health?

There was a widespread acknowledgement of both the potential impact of the lockdown on mental health and the importance of doing something about it. Organisations had generally provided more guidance and support on this and there was increased internal communications from companies on well-being.

There was less explicit acknowledgement by organisations of the impact that lockdown had on physical health. For individuals, some of the effects were positive. Those able to work flexibly were able to schedule in exercise and proper meal-breaks. This was less true for those working variably, for example they might not be able to get a time-slot at their gym that aligned with their variable hours. There was a seasonal aspect as well, such as being able to run in daylight hours. After the surge of increased workload at the start of lockdown, individuals became more aware of the need to be proactive about physical health. This included structuring their day to avoid over-work and booking in breaks, especially a clear lunch-break. They also found that modelling good behaviours had an impact on their teams.

*Mirroring the distinction made earlier between content and context, approaches to supporting mental health are partly procedural, partly interpersonal. It is generally true that healthy organisations are more productive in the long term. They are also more resilient and so will be better able to cope with the change to the next normal.*

