

Recover, reimagine, rebuild



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In every aspect of our lives, the pandemic is forcing us into the wholesale adoption of technologies and ways of working and living that have previously only existed in pockets.

The social or behavioural barriers to these were swept away by an enforced lockdown – we went home, and we went online.

The future of work has been a topic for debate for a number of years. Shifting from jobs to skills, agile resourcing, remote working, digital learning, and automation, are themes that have been transformed from the mainly theoretical into common practice, almost overnight.

Concepts that were being pushed are now being pulled out of necessity. The question we are all asking is whether these changes will stick once we move from “respond” to “recover, reimagine and rebuild”.

Work patterns organisational structures will change

In one month, we have gone from 5% of the UK workforce working regularly from home to 44%. That proportion would be higher if the infrastructure and technology were more widely available.

Barriers that had been felt insurmountable for years have been relatively quickly overcome. Managers are learning how to run teams remotely. Many workers are finding that they can do their jobs just as efficiently from home, and traditional concerns about productivity can be set aside. There will likely be a significant rethink about the about both organisational structure and the property portfolio or at the very least how firms use their physical offices.

And while large parts of the workforce can't work from home – what we may well see is increased flexibility around hours, roles, and a wider recognition of the value society places upon the jobs that keep us all going – delivery drivers, shelf stackers, porters and so forth.

Social, economic, and environmental factors at play may be here to stay

The benefits of these new ways of working will be hard to persuade people to give up going forward. Reduced commuting time and costs, flexibility of working hours, and the positive impact on the environment.

Firms will have to up their technology game

One of the biggest tests has been whether organisation's have the technology, supporting processes and governance to support their people.

Workforce management solutions are in demand. From payment systems to logging sickness and absence, these tools are becoming essential as we manage our employees in new ways. And if we project forward to a point when millions of workers can in fact take the amassed holiday they have been unable to use – that will become business critical.

But all of this will require better integration of new technology, and some careful work on the part of employers to change their workplace culture.

The refocusing from jobs to skills will accelerate

One of the fundamental shifts taking place is in the distinction between static jobs and skills. In our own organisation we have found people with project management, IT, creative and design skills where most would ordinarily not look.

Firms are now asking what's the best way to get our work done? Where and when have we got untapped resource in another part of the businesses and who can help? Often, we find that organisations have little visibility on under-utilised skills or resources – they need help to identify them and deploy them.

Organisations should also be thinking about how to build, borrow and buy skills. Some skills do not exist in huge quantities so whilst you may be able to buy or borrow 80% you may need to build the remaining 20% yourself. We are moving to a more permeable model where skills can come in and out when they are needed. The notion of talent acquisition already appears out of date.

Redeployment will be the start of a re-imagining of the workforce

In the previous financial crisis, organisations first reaction was to cut all discretionary spend and one of the first areas was to reduce the number of people. A lot did not think about how to retain capabilities so that when the crisis was over, they could hit the ground running.

Those who did think about maintaining skills capabilities came out of that crisis in better shape. If we think of the airline industry as one example. If an airline has just furloughed 30,000 employees is it really a simple case of business as usual in three to six months when they re-open for business? Will everyone return to the same job they were doing before? What will the re-deployment process look like when you factor in things like security checks, operational capacity, and new ways of working? What are the new skills their workers will require?

Those firms that are already planning their reskilling and training requirements will emerge in better shape than those who simply focus on reducing the size of the workforce.

Skills and learning are two sides of the same coin

We must use this as a hard reset - how do we manage, retain, and access existing critical knowledge, and how do we upskill and re-educate?

Covid-19 has exposed the gaps in capabilities in delivering learning digitally – in the workplace and in education.

It has created interest around a wider review of learning strategies – a desire to test how robust existing learning roadmaps are (post Covid-19) and the links with the wider HR workforce planning, succession plans, executive education, post 13 education and apprenticeship agendas.

We will not end up back where we started

Time will tell, but I would say most of the changes we are seeing are here to stay. It's just a question of how long they take to become mainstream. Definitely faster than we could have imagined pre-crisis.



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