**May 2020 blog #2**

**Will working remotely become normality?**

Remote working is nothing new. The number of UK workers working remotely rose by 250,000 during the ten years before COVID-19 struck**[[1]](#footnote-1)**, but the pandemic has hyper-accelerated the trend.

Prior to lockdown, 18% of British workers enjoyed the flexibility to work from home. A month later, 48.2% were working from home[[2]](#footnote-2), yet only 41% of UK office workers were confident in their companies’ ability and technology to enable them to work productively and securely from home.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Remote offers fewer distractions and a balanced work/life schedule to workers; enhanced productivity and lower operating costs to employers, although workers can wind up picking up the bill through enhanced network connectivity, power and even coffee consumption. [[4]](#footnote-4) [[5]](#footnote-5)

Remote workers need to have confidence in the digital tools available to them, much of which comes from familiarity. Lockdown has exposed workers in unprecedented numbers to video conferencing and meetings technology. Some organisations have developed bespoke productivity management tools that enable the employer to measure the level, sentiment and directionality of their digital interactions with employees. For example, at Capita Travel and Events, we have created a virtual platform for team building and virtual events.

Companies that did not have a particularly strong culture of employee-engagement before the lockdown have been forced to think again. Remote working is all about flexibility; working digitally enables a better balance to be struck between the employee’s wellbeing and productivity – both fundamental elements of modern company culture.

In years to come, commentators may come to look on COVID-19 as a tipping point in digital transformation because the lockdown has encouraged workers to adopt digital tools that improve working practices. Although there is no reason that trend should stop when restrictions are lifted, the pandemic has also shown there’s no substitute for face-to-face meetings.

Human beings need personal interaction. Face-to-face communication provides live feedback through body language and facial expressions that can make the difference between information being conveyed effectively or not. Anyone can send an email, but who can say that the contents have been fully understood?

Face-to-face meetings are more successful than emails [[6]](#footnote-6) and generate more ideas compared to virtual meetings.[[7]](#footnote-7) Unlike virtual meetings, face-to-face enables hands to be shaken and interpersonal trust to develop. Face-to-face meetings build trust, foster camaraderie and create memorable experiences. Meetings are where things get done.

People have been denied the mental health benefits of physical contact during lockdown, so it’s likely that many will look forward to the return of face-to-face meetings, despite many being wary of the inherent risks involved, at last to start with.

The post-COVID 19 landscape is likely to be very different, with an un-precedented focus on workplace health and safety. Temperature checks, health questionnaires and risk assessments could become features of the workplace alongside split teams, working hours and shift patterns.

Travel managers may decide that the environmental downsides of road travel are offset by the reduced health risk compared to train or air transport. The number of same-day journeys to attend meetings could be significantly reduced, with client-facing meetings combining face-to-face with digital. Instead of two or three team members travelling to a meeting – often together - one could attend in person whilst the others attend virtually. The days of travelling off-site for an internal meeting could be under severe threat.

Meeting facilities will extend beyond hand sanitiser. Venues will be adhering to certain standards (once they are set), to ensure confidence for the users and it will be likely that venues will need to produce evidence of the cleaning regime, and that the necessary standards have been met.

To instil confidence in workers cautious of attending face-to-face meetings, meeting planners will have an important role to play in deciding between virtual vs physical meeting, playing to the strengths of each. Virtual meetings could be reserved for the more regular meetings i.e. team huddles, business briefings and alike, whereas nothing can succeed as well as a face-to-face meeting when it comes to motivational reasons, or income generating – pitches, presentations, first time customer meetings.

Meeting planners may also see policy changes, that require reasons for their choice and a check-list to adhere to that has employee safety and wellbeing top of the agenda. Content may be king, but collaboration will be critical to future meeting success. Collaboration, discussion and inclusion can be hard to accomplish virtually, which is why face-to-face will retain its importance – albeit stripped back.

A return to all-singing, all-dancing meetings is unlikely. Instead, we are more likely to so pared-down events with costs, safety, security and wellbeing closely analysed. Attendance at events could be highly selective and closely monitored to mitigate unnecessary travel and allow people to stay closer to home wherever possible. Those who have to attend a particular meeting or event may still do so; those for whom attendance is marginal, will not.

Although we don’t believe that virtual conferencing will replace face-to-face meetings, for some organisations it could become the default medium for communication and, over time, could integrate into meetings. We may also see that contingency planning for virtual options becoming the norm. Within organisations, meeting professionals should, where possible work with their colleagues, and their TMC to shape travel and meeting policies in terms of what forms to adopt, where and when.

The lessons learned from the pandemic will shape how we travel and connect in the future. We have learnt that virtual meetings and collaboration can work. We have been strongly reminded that smarter working - thinking before travelling and avoiding unnecessary travel – is the right way forward. Above all, the value of face-to-face meetings and events has been highlighted.

The future of business travel and meetings lies in employers and employees striking the right balance between the interest of both parties. The productivity and profitability of the business coupled with the safety, security, health and wellbeing of those working in it..

1. Office of National Statistics [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. YouGov [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/charlestowersclark/2020/03/27/will-remote-work-become-the-new-normal/#7c8bc473cd1c> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gartner [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/remote-work-statistics/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cornell University [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://medium.com/@shannonkelly_80469/steve-jobs-on-the-importance-of-face-to-face-meetings-even-in-the-age-of-iphones-a5a4b83621a6> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)