



Returning to work after the initial COVID-19 lockdown

Implications for people managers

Current situation – April 2020

Strict lockdown measures are now starting to be relaxed in a limited way in the countries that experienced early outbreaks. This trend will accelerate globally over the next months. People will be returning from compulsory working from home to a changed working environment.

We will need to be prepared for a further period of volatility and some unique challenges in restarting our activities. In many ways this will prove more difficult than the sudden but compulsory move to home working. We need to make choices and plans and find the right balance between the health of our people and the needs of our businesses and the economy.



Travel and social distancing restrictions will continue for the next 12 months or more, may change at short notice and vary in different locations.

Some individuals may be unable or unwilling to travel or attend collective meetings. We will need to prioritise and innovate within shrinking budgets as we enter a global recession.

As a training business and long term specialist in new ways of working (including developing the world's first remote teams training program 26 years ago) we have been carefully studying the research and best practice, and looking at developments in countries who experienced the outbreak early for learning on what to do to help our own business and our clients adapt to this changing environment.

“If your national government announced a return to work for your industry next week would you be ready for your people to return and prepared for the new normal?”

There is a huge amount of information available and I particularly recommend the McKinsey scenarios and articles produced over this period at <https://tinyurl.com/u57bffb>.

Whilst there is still a lot of uncertainty, some elements of the next 12 months are becoming clear. Those people who are waiting for a swift return to previous business conditions and ways of working are in for a disappointment.

This document is our summary of the key challenges as they impact people management specifically, and some questions we need to be thinking about at this stage.

We hope this document will give some stimulus to your thinking.

Your colleagues at

www.global-integration.com

1. The safety of our people.

The measures taken so far have been designed to limit the spread of the disease to a level that can be managed by our health systems, not cure it. Until we reach herd immunity through prior infection or vaccination, there will still be a need for precautions and a level of risk, particularly for vulnerable groups. This will probably take from 12-18 months, though if an existing treatment is found to be effective and does not require human trials, this could happen faster.

As people “return to work” (as if it wasn’t work when we got things done from home), a higher level of social distancing and hygiene measures will be expected, including the use of physical separation and personal protective equipment at work.

This will be supplemented by testing, technology-based contact tracking and monitoring that may mean specific individuals and groups are suddenly required to self-isolate. This will have implications for a wide range of working practices in our offices and other facilities from meetings to desk spacing, occupancy of buildings, catering, hygiene and the use of public transport.

Individuals, organizations and countries will have different levels of risk tolerance and many people will be reluctant to return quickly to travelling and working face to face. People who are vulnerable themselves, have any contact with people in vulnerable groups, or are just personally risk averse, will wish to continue avoiding risk and organizations will struggle to cope with this. We will need to consider how to remain inclusive of these groups.

Questions

Do you have policies in place for the safe return to work of your people?

- How will your location environment need to change to allow social distancing?
- How will your site deal with employees and any external visitors?
- How will you include people unable or unwilling to travel?
- What will be your travel and working policies for your people and visitors?

“Try mentally walking through the process of travelling to and participating in face to face working or meetings, where people are always trying to stay at least 2 meters apart and wearing masks, to get an idea of how this might feel.”



2. Continued remote working

People will want to and be encouraged to work from home where possible or may initially return to the office in limited groupings or with alternating periods of home and office work. Some organizations in Asia are already alternating different days with different departments to limit the number of people in their buildings at any one time.

Vulnerable individuals and some jobs and business sectors may face a much more extended period of working from home.

Demand for home working will remain higher than it was with 65% of US companies with employees anticipating an increased use of and demand for home working.

International travel will be seen as risky and airports, planes and public transport will not be attractive places to be. International meetings are very unlikely to be run face to face for the rest of this year.

After an initial period of 100% working from home people will adapt to an ongoing period of mixed home and small group work.

As this all builds on an existing trend towards higher levels of remote working, it is likely that this will provide a permanent push towards more remote working for large numbers of people in the future.

It will be hard to resist calls for more flexible working where it has been shown to be effective and brings more personal flexibility and lower commuting time.

Many organizations had backup locations and systems available in case of business continuity failures. These were largely useless in the current situation. Organizations will now include remote working capability as a core skill set in remaining resilient and maintaining business continuity in future.

Most of us have access to the technology we need to collaborate remotely, but it has quickly become clear that this is only part of the solution, it is the behaviours and how we use the technology that will define the success of our remote leadership.

Questions

- How will you respond to these remote working trends in your team and organization?
- What is your ongoing remote working policy?
- Do your individuals, teams and leaders have the skills to work this way at scale across the organization?

“Our skills in working remotely will either enhance or place a limit on our ability to collaborate”



3. Virtual Meetings

Given likely restrictions (and reluctance) to travel, we believe that face to face meetings will be rare during 2020. Many of our clients have delayed important events until the autumn in the hope that the situation will have improved. Whilst we too hope things will ease, we think that some risk reduction measures will last beyond the end of this year. This is particularly likely in any events requiring international travel for participants.

Tens of millions of people have just received a crash course in virtual meetings. For some the technology was new, others were new to it being the main means of collaboration and found their diaries jammed with invitations.

Our clients are finding three main challenges in this new environment

1. Inboxes full of meetings invites where the relevance and outcomes are not clear – we need to get better at saying no and cutting out unnecessary meetings.
2. Lack of familiarity with the technology and the opportunities it gives us. It only takes one person who cannot log in or use mute to disrupt a meeting
3. A lack of engagement and participation with many meetings becoming a series of page turning presentations or just replicating phone calls.



As the barriers and costs to setting up a virtual meeting are low, people seem to be setting up more meetings and planning them less. This is a significant waste of everyone's time, our participants tell us they spend on average of a day each week in unnecessary meetings.

“It is now clear that where we do run face to face meetings and events, we will be exposing our people to additional risks and excluding certain vulnerable groups of people.”

Virtual meetings were already growing fast as, provided we maintain interactivity and quality, they deliver big benefits in cost and convenience. This period will have significantly increased people's comfort levels with online meetings, and probably cut their travel budgets. We expect virtual meetings to be the norm for at least the rest of this year.

Questions

- Do you have contingency plans in place to replace any further face to face meetings and events planned in 2020 with a virtual alternative?
- Do your people have the skills to set up, run and attend interactive and engaging virtual meetings?
- Do you have a strategy for helping people disconnect from unnecessary virtual meetings?

4. Digital transformation

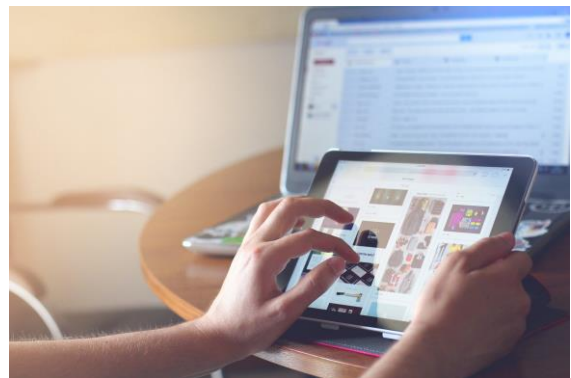
This crisis will give a boost to many organizations' digital transformation efforts. Digital business models, jobs and services that can be delivered remotely have seen less disruption during the crisis and will become increasingly attractive as we move into recession.

We need to be able to deliver digital transformation by developing our own digital business models and building the skills required to operate in an agile and digital environment.

Leadership at digital pace requires agility, faster technology adoption and the ability to fail fast and manage risk, whilst working with multiple autonomous teams and emergent non-hierarchical leadership

Some agile principles, such as preferring co-located teams, may become less sustainable as remote working becomes more common. We will need to focus on virtual agile teams instead.

“Organizations will be focused on anything that allows business continuity and resilience when people are not available or unable to get face to face”



Cross functional and “matrixed” ways of working that cut across the traditional silos is essential to delivering digital initiatives. This requires the ability to manage accountability without control and influence without authority.

Whatever your role and business it is time to consider how your functions and activities can be delivered virtually and on demand.

Questions

- Do you have a digital transformation plan for your function and activities?
- Do you have the agile and digital skills needed to stay up to date and play your part in this transformation?

5. Training and capability building priorities

Consumer confidence is low, and we are moving into a serious global recession. In a recession, organizations usually lose jobs, become more integrated and centralized, and focus on cost saving, resource sharing and innovation.

People will not need awareness building or information giving about VUCA or uncertainty – they certainly now know what that feels like. They want practical skills and new ways of working to cope with this reality – delivered virtually!

As virtual and remote working becomes a bigger part of our ongoing way of working, we need to reflect that context in **all** our training. If we run teamwork training it needs to assume the team will be at least partly remote. If we are training people to present or run meetings the context needs to include doing so in virtual meetings and online presentations.



“It is clear we will need to prioritize hard and innovate to equip people to succeed in the new normal.”

This will not mean just running our existing training programs and mentioning technology at the end. Virtual teams are very different and require different skills than face to face teams and some things that work face to face do not translate well to virtual team effectiveness.

Many of us have recently re-learned that it is the human factors of creating community, wellbeing and managing communication remotely that make remote working sustainable over time. These factors need to be reflected in our skills development.

Some leaders (and organizations) will come out of this experience more respected by their teams and organizations and will see the benefits in engagement and loyalty longer term. Others will have damaged relationships, and these will be hard to repair. We need to reflect on what worked and incorporate the learning into how we develop our leadership and collaboration skills.

In some areas, like sales, where we may have been relatively dependent on face to face techniques, we will have no choice but to learn new skills if our customers discourage site visits – for example in engaging with and influencing customers when we can’t get face to face.

Questions

- Do our people development priorities reflect the new reality? What will we stop doing to make space for new priorities?
- Do our people have the ability to deliver their critical skills and activities virtually?
- How can we update existing practices that assume a face to face context to reflect our new ways of working?

We are sure you will think of other challenges specific to your context. Hopefully, these reflections and questions will stimulate some good discussions within your organizations and help you to prepare for the new normal. It may be starting very soon and is likely to continue for longer than we hope. Unfortunately, “hope is not a strategy” and we need to prepare based on the best information we have at the moment.

At Global Integration we have been focusing on new ways of working for over 25 years, **if we can help in any way please let us know.**

About Global Integration?

We inspire and enable people to succeed in the increasingly connected virtual, matrix and agile/digital organization.

- Remote and virtual teams
- Engaging online meetings
- Matrix management
- Agile and digital leadership

We do this through highly interactive training - face to face, live web seminar and online learning.

We have operated globally for over 25 years and trained over 150,000 people in hundreds of the world’s leading organizations.

Experience our ideas in our free webinars, white papers and books at www.global-integration.com

See more about our bite sized virtual learning modules at <https://www.global-integration.com/virtual-matrix-agile-and-digital-bite-sized-learning/>

We asked our clients them why they chose us and continue to work with us year after year, they identified 5 key factors



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We are proud of our 2019 Net Promoter Score +92% with zero detractors and 96.5% Customer Effort Score (how easy we are to work with).

