Head Light

The 'New' World of Work

How our relationship with work has changed, the future of hybrid working and what this means for engagement, succession planning and talent management

part of our We think… series

Talent **Cloud®**. Breakthrough **software**. Raise **expectations**.

The changes taking place

We have been thinking – and talking – a lot about what work and workplaces will look like in the coming months and years. As we're sure every organisation has. Reflecting on how we currently relate to work and conduct our business – how this has changed and how it has stayed the same – we are particularly interested in what the impact of the pandemic (and emerging freedom) means for practices in our world, such as learning and development, engagement, leadership, talent management and succession planning.

We'd argue that what we've seen is not a total revolution, nor anything genuinely 'new', but rather an acceleration of trends that were already in motion, putting a spotlight on things that were happening before we'd heard the term 'new normal' (which we shall studiously avoid for the remainder of this article).

The pandemic – and the necessary response to it – accelerated those trends and emphasised some existing challenges. A recent McKinsey report supports this, identifying three broad trends that have been sped up by COVID-19:

- The shift to remote work and virtual interactions;
- The surge in use of e-commerce and other digital platforms; and
- The accelerated deployment of automation and AI.

What else does the research tell us about shifts in ways of working and what to expect as we begin to emerge from the pandemic? New research from Microsoft says we're becoming more siloed. Their 2021 Work Trend Index saw interviews with 30,000 people across 31 countries, and analysis of "trillions" of emails, messages, MS Teams meeting interactions and activity on Microsoft 365 and LinkedIn.

We're not surprised that one trend could be summed up as "a little less conversation, a little more email". Indeed, there were 40.6 billion – yes, billion – more email messages sent in February 2021 compared to February 2020. Microsoft found that 'meetings' lasted longer on MS Teams than they used to; people were spending 2.5 times more time in meetings than they did before the pandemic and 45% more chat messages were sent. We are spending more time (virtually, at least) with our immediate teams but less with our broader networks. Messages to whole MS Teams channels were down by 5%, while private and small group chats were up 87%.

There is also a risk that there are further siloes emerging within teams, with people who have very specialised, unique or technical roles being left to get on with things and being less aware of what the wider team is doing. As management consultants, HR professionals and business psychologists, we've probably spent a good proportion of our working lives helping organisations to become less siloed and more collaborative. Therefore, it's disappointing to think that we have regressed in this respect.

The report also surmises that remote and hybrid working reduces our ability to build social capital in the workplace, to see links between our own roles and other areas, to spot opportunities for collaboration or to take advantage of water cooler moments. It also, surely, minimises the chances of having those opportunistic, career-boosting chats with influential people.

But it's easy to focus on the negative side of all this. Let's not forget that a shift in our ways of working also offers benefits and presents opportunities – there is also good news.

More people are reporting feeling able to bring their 'full selves' to work – including pets, children, homelife, book collections, artwork and, importantly, emotions, mental health issues, struggles and challenges. However, this seems not to be true across all demographics, with reports suggesting that this might be widening a gap between ethnic groups, generations and people of different backgrounds. Many Gen Z workers, for instance, say that it is harder to balance their home and working life as they don't have the space and set-up to facilitate effective homeworking and can often be working, meeting, living and eating in the same room.

But we're back to the downsides.

A February report from Tech.co identified seven (mostly positive!) predictions:

- More flexible and fully remote work hours . . .
- . . . and more potential downsides to remote working;
- New employee experiences (e.g., podcasting, coffee roulette);
- More digital and hybrid events;
- Increase in cybersecurity concerns and data protection challenges – but more opportunities for experts to come to the fore here and for organisations to improve in these areas across the board;
- More cloud-based tech; and
- Greater cross-organisational collaboration.

So how do we balance these challenges versus opportunities?

All the organisations we work with are reviewing the use of their office spaces and physical locations. They are having conversations about returning to work for those who have been working full-time from home and are also reviewing their HR policies and looking at how best to move forward.

Here we look at three aspects of the double-edged sword of hybrid working:

- The issues of using video technologies.
- The need for integration – not just balance – of work and life away from work.
- Greater flexibility may lead to less visibility.

While we don't pretend to have any of the answers, we firmly believe that good talent management practices and sound technology solutions have a critical part to play in realising the benefits and minimising the downsides.

We'll also consider some challenges and questions for those of us who work in the talent management and learning and development space as we consider these areas.

Aspect #1 of the double-edged sword of hybrid working: Zoom (and its equivalent) is both a blessing and a curse

Zoom was becoming increasingly popular before COVID-19 forced many of us into our bubbles, but its use has exponentially increased. We've heard new terms associated with Zoom (and other equivalent platforms) such as 'Zoomshock' and 'Zoom fatigue'.

Zoomshock is not (as it may sound) the feeling that you get when you log into your first meeting of the day, the camera pops on and you can see how much grey hair you have, or how big the bags under your eyes are! It is, in fact, an economic phenomenon recognised by the Institute of Economic Affairs in January 2021. With many organisations – and individual workers – moving out of city centres and with the increase in homeworking, we are seeing a crisis for service and hospitality companies. Or it represents an opportunity to move out of the cities – potentially benefitting from lower business rates – to provide services in suburban areas.

Gianni de Fraja and fellow researchers point out that commuters spend a lot of money on "locally consumed services" near their place of work: coffees, sandwiches, after-work drinks and meals, hairdressing, gyms, retail etc. However, if, say, 50% of commuters to an area switch to homeworking two days a week, this means a 20% fall in potential demand for locally-consumed services. de Fraja et al estimate that over 75% of jobs in the City of London and approximately half of jobs in Westminster, for example, could be done at home.

And what of Zoom fatigue?

We all know – experientially – that virtual meetings are more exhausting than being face-to-face, and research has proved this. The increased drain is because we are constantly striving for synchrony (this refers to how communication is an interplay of talk, gestures, movement, eye contact and timing) that is more difficult on virtual platforms. These platforms constantly flood us with cues and information, which our brains tire trying to process. There is also the fact that technology does not always work optimally. It often leaves us struggling for a connection or to resolve an IT problem, along with all the stress that that creates. We also have strong reactions to faces that are too big or too close – it triggers the fight or flight response in our brains. We can't control our location, make eye contact with specific people and have to cope with people moving about. Our fast-thinking circuits will make more mistakes (e.g., remembering people's names is helped by where they are in a room, usually) and our mental shortcuts or biases will, for instance, more often get confused between the two blonde women wearing glasses or the two men wearing turbans.

This does not an inclusive culture foster… We need to develop and train people in virtual facilitation and meetings management skills and we need to ensure that we are taking breaks away from our screens and engaging with people in other ways. Team-based software company, Saberr, have put together a useful guide to help people discuss diversity in remote teams.

But what about learning?

Anyone with school-aged children will undoubtedly have witnessed the challenges of virtual learning. However, in the world of work, perhaps as adults, we shouldn't need someone to supervise us and ensure we attend our online lessons?

Research from neuroscience shows us that our brains are activated differently when engaging virtually, resulting in higher cognitive loads. This will impair our capacity to learn. Learning on platforms, such as Google Meet and Webex, affects our GPS neurons (that code our navigation behaviour), mirror neurons and others (e.g., that are involved in attention, empathy and intuition). This results in higher cognitive loads and can mean reduced creativity, reduced social and professional identity and more complex team dynamics.

One source of discomfort that most of us have experienced is the activation of the 'self-attention network'. This is because we can see our own face most of the time and, as a result, become more conscious of ourselves. This distracts us, as we can now see ourselves in the way we think that others do. It draws our attention to things we would normally be less conscious of and also amplifies the intensity of emotions, making them more difficult to control in a social setting. This all takes up precious brain-processing capacity, meaning we devote less of it to actually learning.

Of course, for some people, their cognitive load is higher than others when face to face. So, in this way, virtual learning is more inclusive. However, there are real challenges for learning providers in terms of making hybrid-learning events workable, to ensure that those engaging remotely are not excluded from the 'in the classroom' networking and peer-learning opportunities.

Aspect #2 of the double-edged sword of hybrid working: work-life integration or work-life balance?

The first of these terms has only come to the fore in the last two years. It seems that integration is something that has been necessary for many people, with balance perhaps even less possible than it was before, or just an unhelpful concept.

So, is work-life integration the right way for us to be thinking? Should we be focusing back on separation and balance between our working life and everything else outside of it?

Not wanting to sit on the fence, we suspect this will be an individual choice, with some people welcoming, benefitting from and thriving on the opportunity to merge two worlds together and others desperately seeking delineation again. We are yet to fully understand the long-term mental and physical health impacts of isolation, inadequate workspaces, fear, disrupted education, anxiety and longer working hours on the current working population, let alone future ones.

Much of the research seems to suggest that a good number of us have traded the commute in for extra working hours. Potentially, this gives us a few hours of our day back, every day. However, the reduction in travel – both at the two ends of the day, and within it – has raised expectations about what can be achieved in a working period. This does mean that we have lost the 'cognitive white space' and decompression that the commute offered.

Microsoft offer 'Virtual Commute'. This is part of their platform that helps you to manage and organise yourself at the end of the day. However, this might be missing the point. It might help us be more productive but it doesn't help us switch off and make the transition from 'work' to 'home'. Many people have replaced the train journey with a walk – even if it was just round the block – but it's easy for that to be subsumed into the working day because it's not essential, it can 'give'. It takes discipline (and also, preferably, decent weather). This article from MDA Leadership provides some useful guidance on realising the benefits of a virtual commute and explains why we need one.

Virtual platforms and remote working, let's not forget, have also offered organisations an opportunity to make significant progress towards their carbon net zero objectives, as people stop commuting in droves. Many organisations have reported an increase in productivity – even the walk between floors from one meeting to another has been eliminated, meaning most of us have been able to fit a lot more meetings into our working day. OK, so more meetings does not necessarily mean greater productivity, but for those of us who run training courses, coach or run assessments for a living, it does. However, does it mean we take fewer breaks? Are less effective? Get tired more quickly? A 'quick chat' is now more likely to mean an 'MS Teams meeting' and often without the forethought, preparation, agenda and governance that meetings might usually benefit from. Again, good meeting practices and a constant challenge to ourselves as to whether a phone call – or even meeting in person – would be better, will help us to navigate hybrid working more effectively.

Aspect #3 of the double-edged sword of hybrid working: greater flexibility gives us less visibility

Spookily publishing their research just ahead of the pandemic, organisational scientists, Ioana Cristea and Paul Leonardi, looked at the impact of proximity on workplace opportunities and behaviours. Their research showed that workers who had a higher amount of 'face time' with their line managers (being located in the same workplace), were:

- Given better, more interesting, higher-profile, more developmental work assignments;
- Promoted more frequently; and
- Less aware of what their colleagues based at home, or in different locations, were doing with regards to the above, and did not appreciate the level of extra effort that they had to expend (the 'sacrifices' that they had to make) in order to achieve the same results as co-located staff.

A blog by Leah Ryder for Trello (the online tool for managing projects and personal tasks) takes this work and builds on it, providing some useful hints and tips for maintaining our visibility, sharing a 'Visibility Framework', looking at three different aspects of visibility (social, strategic and supportive).

For those in the L&D space, the question is will 70:20:10 still apply? This 70:20:10 is the popular learning model, developed by Morgan McCall, Robert Eichinger, and Michael Lombardo at the Center for Creative Leadership in the mid-1990s, after surveying almost 200 executives about how they believed they learned in the workplace.

Many HR strategies and plans have leveraged this statistic in the last 10 years – but is it still valid in hybrid environments? If we get an estimated 20% of our learning through social interactions and observing others at work, what does that look like for people who work predominantly remotely? How will social learning differ if we have fewer face-to-face interactions. If we can only observe people when they are online, what might we be missing? Perhaps really critically, we need to think about what this means for new entrants into the workforce. We need to be making sure that they have opportunities to learn how to influence, engage in meetings, build rapport and relationships and collaborate with their peers, which would largely have been derived from social learning and observation of others.

How are you responding to these challenges?

What are your priorities?

You will be setting your own 'next steps' and determining your own priorities.

From the conversations we have been having with clients, we see the following as being priority areas for many HR and L&D communities:

- Re-writing, not just tweaking or re-focusing on, our People Strategies or Capability Plans;
- Re-invigorating our efforts in the areas of equity, diversity and inclusion;
- Thinking about trust and how we demonstrate that as leaders and as organisations;
- Working to help people be visible, to have impact and presence in the virtual world, as well as the face-to-face one;
- Re-visiting our wellbeing strategies;
- An increased drive for fairness – particularly in decisions such as promotion and succession; and
- Developing managers in dispersed leadership skills.

Dr Steve Harrison, a professor at Virginia Tech and director of the Human-Centered Design Programme has asked: *"Will the notion of leadership be distorted by the people who are able to manipulate the medium?"*

There is a real risk that we exclude groups from progressing to higher levels of organisations, such as older workers, or those from more challenging socio-economic backgrounds, in the hybrid world of work.

Here it will be easier for those who can navigate technology, have a great space in which to work and who are used to impacting and engaging with people on virtual platforms to showcase their talents.

Developing our leaders and managers in inclusive behaviours and meeting practices will be essential, as we have identified. We need to help them reduce siloism, to find ways of being proactive in connecting employees across the organisation, making space for connections outside official meetings and encouraging and rewarding social support.

Yes, we've said it before but now is the time for us all to be kind and empathetic. To listen to each other, to really hear what people need from us and our leaders. Every leader, every team and every individual will be different.

How Head Light can help

We firmly believe that good talent management practices and sound technology solutions have a critical part to play in realising the benefits and minimising the downsides of hybrid and remote working.

We've been working with clients to bolster and retain the collaboration and feedback between teams that remote working and video technologies has enabled. We've also been helping clients make sure that the hybrid model of working between office and remote location, doesn't impact the visibility of those not in the office all the time.

- Talent management tools such as those used in performance review enable individuals to seek and gain input from others across the wider team. It provides input for signposting next steps for achieving goals and flags areas of development need. But, more than this, it helps to ensure that a connection is made between team members even those not part of the more formal team and emsures that individuals can check the goal alignment of their specific objectives with those of the organisation.

- Engagement tools provide a snapshot of the current perceptions of the organisation, the location of hot spots of lower engagement and what needs to happen.

- Succession planning tools allow organisations to make date-driven decisions about those ready for promotion or to step into a new role bringing together evidence from a range of sources.

Next steps

If you would like to discuss the changes you may need to make to your talent management activities given a shift to hybrid working, please get in touch.

About Head Light

Head Light is an award-winning talent management software and consulting firm that works with clients to define and implement impactful talent management strategies.

Talent Cloud® is our cloud-based portfolio of integrated talent management software tools designed for those who expect the maximum return from talent management processes. Our training and consulting services uniquely complement our breakthrough software that engages employees, managers and senior leaders in the selection, development and progression of people in their businesses.

Companies in the FTSE 350, public sector, large and small, from retailers to high tech innovators have all benefitted from our tools, techniques and expertise. Founded in 2004, we are headquartered in the UK.

Head Light has attained the ISO27001 standard for Information Security. Certificate No 217613.

How do I…

transition to Continuous Performance Management

How do I…

introduce robust Succession Planning

How do I...

spot High Potentials and Future Leaders

How do I…

drive Engagement through Career Conversations and Development

How do I…

embed new values and improve culture

How do I…

conduct Skills Assessments and a Gap Analysis

E: info.request@head-light.co.uk   W: www.head-light.co.uk