Uncertain advice on 'returning to the office' is destined to fail

Cautiously, slowly, the UK employee is being urged to return to work. For many of us, remote working has been surprisingly successful and for some, a benefit of lockdown, but now as we negotiate a safe and productive return to work there are some serious challenges. Paul Statham of Condeco explores the current situation.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Some of the world's biggest employers - Twitter, Facebook, Mastercard, WPP and Barclays - have questioned why companies would ever need to have thousands of people pouring into offices each day again. The home-working experiment through which we have been forced in recent months will change the way we work forever, in many respects.

Safety will remain a priority for months or even years to come, with social distancing causing challenges and reducing the numbers who can or want to return to the office.

Inevitably many big companies will adopt a more flexible approach to work, but that doesn't mean that the office will cease to exist. The importance of these steel and glasshouses of production cannot be understated. Workers do need to leave the distractions of home behind and spend time with their colleagues, collaborating, planning, learning and socialising.

These activities cannot always happen virtually. The biggest challenge during lockdown has not been communication or productivity, it has been

ensuring employee wellbeing with 37% of staff recently polled stating that 'loneliness' is an issue.

Creativity, in particular, requires close collaboration with colleagues and returning to the office supports this. Working with colleagues face-to-face is one of the main reasons people give for wanting to return to a formal office.

A return to the office is also a commercial imperative. When companies can interact directly with employees it helps to promote an organisation's goals and values more effectively. Younger workers find the office an important place to learn new skills and behaviours, as well as meet a wider circle of people.

The office worker also plays an important role in the economy and getting back to the office in some form, will help stimulate the recovery of the UK hospitality industry that employs around 2.5M people, and relies on office workers who spend an average of £1,580 a year on lunch alone.

That is why it is regrettable that the plans the Government has laid down to re-open 'work settings' are so woolly. Telling everyone simply to get "back to work" with social distancing, without explaining how in detail is careless.

The vague instruction to divide employees into teams or shifts to reduce the number of people going to the office each day is simply unworkable and shows how little they understand the workspace in the 21st Century. Employees have proved that they can work from home just as efficiently to perform daily administrative tasks.

But coming to the office is driven by the desire to collaborate and socialise. This cannot be mandated to only happen on certain weeks of the year. Effective business processes are fluid and involve multiple teams of disparate people, who all have their own schedules and needs.

The most productive employees have busy schedules and demand their companies provide the resources they need when they need them, not when the rota dictates.

Human nature and modern business practices will mean that this archaic plan to halve building usage through allocating people into teams and mandated shifts will undoubtedly fail. If we reopen offices without proper planning and capacity management, there is a very real danger that people will simply turn up, regardless of whether it is their allocated day.

> *Office space will be overwhelmed causing social distancing to fall apart. People will fall ill and we could find a second wave of infection quickly puts us back to square one.*

To stave off this threat, we need to use technology to manage the number of employees returning at any given time. Whether working from home or an office, digital tools are the best solution and can empower employees to make the best choice.

Workers know when they want or need to visit the office and when they want to work from home. By giving the employee the ability to choose where they feel they will be most productive, and asking them to reserve a safe space in the office if needed, the natural effect will be to reduce the total number of days spent in the office, without rotas or schedules.

People are used to booking what they need in advance. You wouldn't arrive at an airport without a plane ticket. Nor should you turn up at the office, given the current situation, without booking your place. Ensuring that your workspace is reserved before setting off to the office is the only safe way to maintain the right employee numbers in the office and safely

distance yourself from others, whilst allowing choice.

Technology is shaping the future of the way we work, and it will drive the change to where we work. By using tech to allow employees to choose when they want to come into the office, we can maintain social distancing and also help facilities and real estate managers plan what space is needed when it needs to be cleaned, and record when it's been used, for contact tracing.

Returning to the office is not about short-term needs, it's about long term planning and coordination. It's about employee choice and empowerment. Relying on the Government's last-century advice – which removes employee choice and herds the workforce back into a potentially lethal space - will fail. At best it will destroy the trust that has been built up between employers and their teams in the last few months and at worst it will put lives at risk.

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