

## Riding out the (Second) Wave



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Recently the government finally softened its work from home stance, with increasing concern that the surrounding economic ecosystems that normally service office workers are in danger of falling by the wayside.

This change in stance was expected, and most companies would have been planning what can be done to safely return workers to the office. But as most if not all companies have found, this is not easy – open offices and hot-desking are very difficult to maintain, and all over the country, office diagrams denoting which carefully spaced apart desks can be used, and rotas of which people can be in the office on particular days are being drafted to try and meet the advice on a safe return to work.

Dependent on the size and structure of the offices in question, this probably means most will be lucky to get 25% of staff in an office at any one time. And that is before you consider individuals that are in higher health risk groups, and how those with children can return when current childcare options are equally restricted. If you been

on a train or bus recently, you would have noticed how empty they have been in comparison, with many people still concerned about the potential risk of travelling on public transport.

Once you consider these difficulties and add in the complication of meeting rooms, kitchens etc. for many companies it seems like a lot of wasted effort and expense – unless the company is suffering from not having a centralised staff, why go through all the effort when they have coped with working from home for almost four months? Some companies are probably finding that they are experiencing increased productivity, with home users able to exploit the usual commuting time to work or even catching up during evenings and weekends.

And then, of course, we come to the problem of the dreaded second wave – the UK was relatively lucky to be hit at the tail end of its flu season, with warmer weather expected to have some effect on the virus – but what happens when we move back into colder, wetter weather in autumn?

In the government announcements, it was confirmed the Nightingale field hospitals that were built to cope with the estimated (and thankfully overestimated) thousands of cases expected during the peak, are to be maintained in place until March 2021 – so there is clearly a concern that such a spike is on the cards.

Even if potential spikes are addressed locally, such as the recent example in Leicester and now Greater Manchester, there is a risk of a company having to decamp its staff back home for 14-30 days, potentially multiple times and especially in busier commuter cities. With this looming uncertainty and the potential legal implications of mandating staff back to offices, it is little surprise companies are not overly concerned with a push back to offices.

Last week Google announced it would not be requiring people to return to the office until July 2021 - in London this means 4,400 employees not returning to their offices for another year...

So how do companies approach this situation? Businesses would have coped with lockdown, and potentially had to rush in measures to support home working on a grand scale. Now the dust has settled a little and there is some respite, is this not the time to plan for making remote working as efficient and as flexible as possible?

If a team has been using spreadsheets to track work they would have managed face to face, is there a better system to

handle task management? If a contact centre hasn't been able to take calls effectively because their technology didn't allow for it, is now the time to embrace cloud-based solutions that will work whether in the office or not, and even offer more options such as web chat or social media options? Or is this the time to go the whole hog and follow Twitter down the path of letting their staff work from home permanently, and start examining the break clause in your office lease?

Whichever blend of office and home working companies end up with, there are potential benefits if the constraints of geography are lessened - recruiting in certain locations and for specific skill sets can prove costly. But if people could work from anywhere, the question of how you manage people and activity changes, and the systems needed to do this effectively become more important when you can't manage face to face (or mask to mask). Work naturally becomes **results-orientated** far more than attendance - how this is achieved in a natural way without oppressive time management will be a question for businesses to address in the coming months but it is achievable.

In the last few months, we have been busy on pretty much all fronts – we are helping clients redesign entire contact strategies using remote assessment to profile their contact volumes and problems, helping IT teams assess how to move more into the cloud and away from on-premises infrastructure

and supporting project teams who have to manage complex requirements and interdependencies while sat in their kitchens and dining rooms. Some of this is borne of necessity, and a determination to recover productivity they have lost – others are thinking beyond this to how they can leverage the 'new normal' in the best way possible.

If your company is looking at what the next few months hold, this is the opportunity to make some bold steps to bolster your companies capabilities - these don't have to be temporary measures - improving and implementing systems for remote working and management still have a massive advantage even when you all get back to the office. The companies (and your competitors) that do this are more likely to survive and thrive no matter what the next six months bring - ultimately how companies use the next few months may make the difference between riding a wave, or being swept away.

**If you are ready to take action now, contact us to discover how we can help you...**



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