

A GLIMPSE OF SERENDIPITY

LOCKDOWN WILL HAVE LASTING EFFECTS AND IT CERTAINLY SEEMS TO HAVE STIRRED A STRONG DESIRE FOR CHANGE. NOTABLY, A RECENT YOUNG GOV POLL RESULTED IN A TELLING STATISTIC, THAT ONLY NINE PERCENT OF BRITONS SAID THEY WOULD LIKE LIFE TO RETURN TO "NORMAL" AFTER LOCKDOWN.

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"Avoiding the daily commute, adopting different working patterns and autonomy has been celebrated by many. Millions of employees have seen a glimpse of how flexible work can be and they don't want to give it up"

More than half of those surveyed in that YouGov poll said they wanted to make changes in their own lives or see change in the country. While working from home has presented challenges - especially for those who have children to look after and home school alongside their usual day job - the benefits are plain to see. Avoiding the daily commute, adopting different working patterns and having more autonomy has been celebrated by many. Millions of employees have seen a glimpse of how flexible work can be and they don't want to give it up. It could be that the wider adoption of flexible working practices will be the main legacy of lockdown. Last year, it was reported that one-in-three requests for flexible working were turned down by employers¹. After this enforced remote working experiment, employers have been able to see for themselves how effective more flexible working can be and how it can work for a broad range of roles. Going forward, employers are likely to be far more receptive to flexible working requests and will require much more robust arguments when rejecting requests, as employees can now demonstrate how they can make flexible working work.

Another reason why flexible working will remain post lockdown is that employee expectations have changed. Almost half of employees envisage working more flexibly after lockdown and a huge 81 percent say they expect to work at home a least one day a week². Employers will find it very difficult, if not impossible, to counter such strong desires. Not embracing flexible working is really not an option and could be a massive boost to equality, diversity and inclusion.

Before lockdown many working parents felt a pressure to hide their children and not let their existence cross over into their working lives. Remember the expression on Professor Robert Kelly's face when he was interrupted live on BBC News when his child burst in? Now, with all parents having to work alongside their children, they are definitely being seen and heard. There is a new acceptance and understanding that working parents need to balance the demands of their job with raising their children and everyone is much more aware of the challenges of doing both roles.

The fact that working parents have managed to juggle everything and have continued to be productive, shows they have the skills and resilience to function, even in the most trying of circumstances. Employers should appreciate the efforts and sacrifices they have made during this difficult time and consider how best they can support them going forward, to help lighten the load and enable them to be even more productive. Unfortunately, not all the consequences of lockdown are likely to be positive, several areas are likely to be affected negatively. To cope with the strains of work, childcare and the complications of daily life, many people will have put their career development on hold. As restrictions on businesses are likely to remain at least in part for the rest of the year, it may be some time before employees are able to focus again on their own development.

Employers need to ensure the right mental health support is in place. However, given that a deep recession for the UK is

being predicted³, cutting costs is likely to be a top priority for employers. Many companies face huge financial pressures and hard decisions will need to be made. While reducing spend on wellbeing initiatives may be considered, this would be the wrong time to withdraw vital support from employees when they need it the most. Coronavirus could be greatest driver there has even been for a shift in workplace culture, with the power to positively impact equality, diversity and inclusion like nothing that has gone before - this is a golden opportunity that employers must not let slip. While enormous challenges lay ahead, the businesses that will recover most successfully will be those that value their employees, listen to their needs and understand how they can support them as effectively as possible. ●

1. <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/most-staff-say-flexible-working-not-available>
2. <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/half-workers-expect-work-more-flexibly-post-lockdown-survey>
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-52566030>



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