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Reconnecting At Work:

The dark side and
the sunny side

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Acknowledgments

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Foreword

At Pearson, our purpose is to add life to a lifetime of learning so everyone can realize the life they imagine. That life is increasingly digital as we have transitioned to remote and hybrid working, and this fascinating report perfectly encapsulates the new world of work with its dark and sunny sides.

We all know the COVID-19 pandemic meant decades of change happened much faster than expected, and we're still learning how to realize the potential of remote and hybrid working successfully. Some people have fully embraced this new world, but others have struggled and as a hybrid worker, I completely empathize with the main challenges cited: video conference fatigue, connection and building relationships. There's an irony that technology means video calls and chat messages are only a click away, but we can end up feeling less connected to our colleagues.

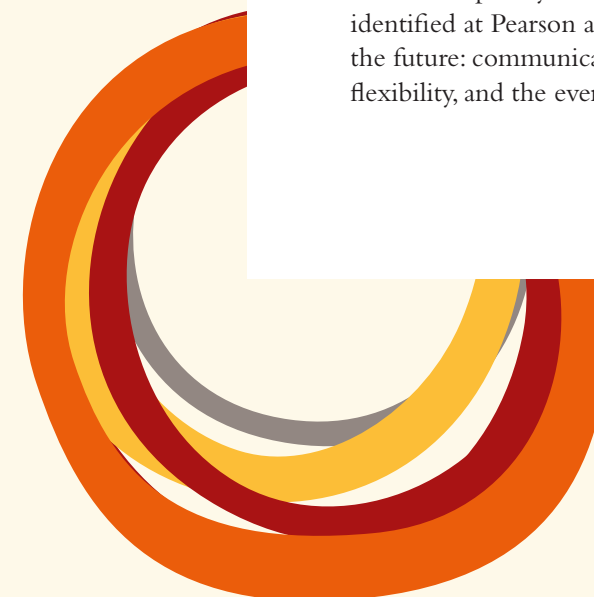
Thank you to Hult International Business School for conducting this vital research, and to all the respondents for participating. The skills mentioned by the respondents chime completely with what we've identified at Pearson as the skills of the future: communication, resilience, flexibility, and the ever-present 'digital'.

I'm excited to be at the forefront of commissioning business books to help workers with this new normal, as well as adjusting to remote working myself. The book 'Connect' was commissioned in 2018 pre-pandemic and published in 2020 when it turned out to be even more timely than we'd expected, and the type of book we all need to read for now and in the future.

It's fantastic to see that 98% of respondents feel prepared for future working conditions but I firmly believe we've yet to fully grasp the potential of remote and hybrid working. We know we can do it, but we all need to learn how to do it better. The recommendations in this report for organizations and individuals are a great place to start so we can improve our work-life balance, our connections, and our skills.



Eloise Cook
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Executive Summary



Executive Summary

This report describes the impact and implications of the post COVID-19 shift to remote working, and the resulting decline in social contact – for people, leaders and organizations. Through a survey and interviews this research explores how the pandemic has impacted communication, connections and the quality of relationships at work. It describes some of the issues and dilemmas workers faced during the pandemic, and how they are feeling now about changes in the work environment – their hopes and fears for the quality of connectivity and working lives in the future.

The findings from the research highlight both the dark side (the turbulence, the uncertainties and anxieties) and the sunny side (the opportunities and innovation) of the changing post pandemic workplace. Recommendations provided based on the findings can be used by leaders to help them to reconnect, and stay connected with their teams, and by organizations to restore their culture and connectivity following these uncertain times.

Context

In 2020 the book ‘Connect’ (Lubitsh and Lubitsh-White, 2020) was published. This book focused on resolving conflict, improving communication and strengthening relationships at work. Since publication, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered huge shifts in how we work, dramatically affecting our connections both inside and outside of our workplaces. There is still a large amount of change and great ambiguity in terms of what the future of the workplace looks like. The current research aims to explore these changes and understand the impact and implications of the challenges and opportunities for leaders and organizations.

Research Methodology

The specific aims of the research were to explore the impact of changes in work patterns post pandemic on communication, connectivity and the quality of relationships. In 2021 and 2022 quantitative data was gathered through an online survey of around 250 professional working men and women. Following this survey, qualitative data was gathered from interviews with 14 individuals.



Research Findings

The details and insights from the research findings are organized into six main themes. Each of these themes comprises both a **dark side** (demonstrating the negative findings – the turbulence, the uncertainties and anxieties) and a **sunny side** (illustrating the positive findings – the opportunities and innovation).

Research themes

1. The Changing Post Pandemic Workplace
2. Work-life Balance: Flexibility versus blurring
3. Inclusion and Isolation: New opportunities for connectivity versus increased loneliness
4. Physical Workplace: Serendipity versus effort
5. Winners and Losers
6. Skills

1. The Changing Post Pandemic Workplace

Respondents stated that they felt both enthusiastic and concerned about changes to their workplace post pandemic. The majority reported that they felt prepared to navigate their future working conditions. They described a range of challenges and benefits as they navigated different working situations. In the digital world, it is considered an imperative to build and sustain motivation and engagement of workers.

2. Work-life Balance: Flexibility versus blurring

Work-life balance was something workers wanted to maintain and manage as they navigated different working conditions. The flexibility of hybrid working was described as at times positive – providing increased connections with family and opportunities for personal time. In some cases though, the blurred boundaries were having a detrimental impact on work and personal lives. The challenge for individuals, and organizations, is ensuring the right balance can be achieved.

3. Inclusion and Isolation: New opportunities for connectivity versus increased loneliness

Participants described the virtual world as being more inclusive and collaborative, with no limitations on physical space or travel requirements. However, at times this resulted in concerns being raised around speaking up in meetings. There were also stories of loneliness and apprehension around a lack of connectivity and a lack of visibility. The challenge now is how to promote inclusivity, and maintain and increase connections in the most appropriate ways.

4. Physical Workplace: Serendipity versus effort

Individuals detailed how they tried to schedule their working week – including the time, cost and planning of travelling into a physical office. Many, for example, reported trying to plan as many face-to-face meetings as possible on a set day to reduce the effort on their part. An unexpected outcome of making the effort was positive and unplanned interactions with others. There was a hope that this idea of chance interactions, or serendipity, could increase connections, a sense of community and also lead to new business opportunities.

5. Winners and Losers

The pandemic was experienced in a different way by everybody. The research findings suggested groups of ‘winners’ who have found more positives in terms of changes to their working lives over the past few years. For example, working parents. On the other side there were ‘losers’ who described reduced opportunities caused by changes to their working situations. These included junior staff and new starters.

6. Skills

Respondents described the skills needed to navigate the future workplace. They focused on communication and how to create meaningful relationships and engage with people online. People also emphasized the importance of training and development for returning to work, including helping with their motivation and purpose.

Based on the research findings, the key messages that have emerged from the results and the literature include:

- As we emerge from the pandemic there is a need for **new perspectives on leadership and management** to balance connectivity whilst maintaining individual freedom and autonomy. The report offers many recommendations for leaders.
- **We are in a period of transition.... now is the time to try things out and learn from experiences.** There seem to be more questions than answers still, but this provides opportunities for organizations and individuals to try things out, to try new ways of doing things and learn from these experiences.
- There is a need for organizations to **focus on connections and community**, perhaps involving a rethink of the organizations communication, the style of leadership and prioritizing time for such activities.
- As individuals enjoy greater freedom, autonomy and better work-life balance, there is a need to be **mindful of the risks of the rise of individualism.**

Recommendations

Recommendations for organizations

- Reinforce relationships/ collaboration
- Focus on purpose and belonging
- Try out new things/experiment and learn from these experiences
- Improve boundaries between work-life balance
- Increase psychological safety in your organization
- Challenge poor behaviors
- Hold regular open forums to express and share painful emotions
- Reset expectations
- Set up a buddy system
- Skills development for working in a virtual world

Recommendations for individuals

- Listen more and show humility
- Demonstrate empathy and accept personal vulnerabilities
- Maintain boundaries between personal and professional
- Do not give up on difficult conversations
- Where possible highlight positives
- Make sure that you are adaptable
- Allow time for Micro Moments of Connectivity (MMC)
- Take care of personal resilience/ self-care
- Understand your 'Connector type' (see Appendix 1)



Context

Connect - Resolve conflict, improve communication and strengthen relationships (Lubitsh & Lubitsh-White, 2020)

Connect is a book that was published by the FT/Pearson in September 2020 (shortlisted for the business book of the year). It is an easy-to-use guide to connecting effectively, building stronger relationships, resolving conflict and improving communication – packed with handy tools, tips and techniques. It enables leaders to increase self-awareness of their leadership style, take ownership and improve the quality of their relationships, maintain self-esteem and validate and support their teams.



It can also be used as first-aid-kit for relational emergencies in the workplace.

The first part of the book provides the opportunity to identify your personal connector style and consider how this plays out at work and in your personal life. It describes the need to capitalize on strengths and to be aware of the risks of overdone strengths. The second part lays out a model of connection. It will give you a practical framework and tools to understand where you are stuck and how you can improve current relationships. The last part of the book looks at implementation of the tools across cultures, generations and connecting in a digital age. It provides guidance and frameworks for handling conflict effectively, flexing your leadership style and improving communication skills and social confidence. The book aims to help people to connect at a deep level and address the human longing for connection and belonging.

This report describes research conducted after the publication of the book *Connect in 2020* (see box). Since this book was written, a global pandemic has dramatically affected our connections inside and outside of our workplaces. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered huge shifts in how we work. Many employees were forced to work remotely, from home. People had to become accustomed to attending and hosting virtual meetings in their own homes, where they had to balance work commitments with a host of distractions.

Remote working¹ has some significant advantages on the old way of interacting, with many enjoying less commuting time, more focused meetings and a better work-life balance (e.g. “No Commute is the UK’s Favorite Aspect of WFH”, 2021). The shift into remote working has also brought many benefits to collaboration. It is much easier to share information and collaborate across geographical boundaries. Without the need for daily commute to work, many people have also been reporting a much better balance between home and work lives, especially having more quality time to spend with family, to socialize with friends and to spend on hobbies.

The impact of COVID-19 and remote working, however, is also accelerating worrying trends. For example, Hadley (2021) suggests that 70% of workers are feeling lonely with side-effects such as depression and anxiety. People have become used to Zoom calls where it is very easy to get distracted and do other things, reducing our genuine engagement with one another. Previous studies have also shown the main reason executive careers are derailed is a poor ability to form relationships – rather than cognitive skills and abilities (“Keep a Promising Career on Track”, 2020). Whilst working remotely, staff have been missing the informal office (“water cooler”) conversations that are important for understanding what is really going in the business and how work is being distributed. As people struggle with Zoom fatigue (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020), we are also witnessing a reduction in human connection and an increase in loneliness (Lubitsh & Lubitsh-White, 2021). Tackling these issues are key to the bottom line.

¹Defined in this report as working in a location other than a central office, usually at home.

Two years on from the start of the pandemic, and the publication of ‘Connect’ there is still a large amount of change and great ambiguity in terms of what the future of the workplace looks like. As government enforced lockdowns have lifted, employers and employees have had to negotiate what a return to the workplace actually looks like. Different businesses and sectors are answering what the future of their workplace looks like in different ways. There have been numerous articles in the press citing different companies’ decisions for letting workers stay working remotely at home, or for bringing everyone back to the office, or proposing an in between hybrid working² solution.

Initially, in the technology sector, several companies (e.g. Google, Microsoft) were backing remote working and the advantages it brings (Murphy, 2021; Verge, 2021). Google suggested that employees were more productive at home, citing the positives of increased productivity, providing a better work-life balance, a wider workforce talent pool and greater employee inclusivity and retention (Telegraph, 2021). This was in contrast to companies in other sectors. Barclays boss Jes Staley, for example, made it clear that in his view, working from home was not sustainable (“Barclays boss Jes Staley”, 2021). At the same time, technology giant Facebook and Aviva Insurance emphasized wanting to offer greater flexibility and independence for workers while maintaining certain structures (Yeung, 2021).

A year later, and technology companies, including Google, were in the press defending their requirement of mostly in-office work, describing the need to protect the company’s social capital in the form of people’s connections to and trust in each other (Sander, 2022). At the same time, other tech companies, and non tech companies, were offering employees much more flexibility (see Tsipursky, 2022, for examples).

All we know at the moment is that the structure of the post pandemic work world remains up in the air. Although many articles describe how hybrid working models will persist in the wake of the pandemic (e.g. Lund *et al.*, 2020; Office for National Statistics, 2022), the solutions are not just about which organization, or which sector you are working in; it will depend on the nature of work people do, their working patterns and so on. Leaders will need to work out the best solution for individuals and their organization and prepare workers for a future that may be different to the one they anticipated.

All of this uncertainty has put immense pressure on leaders and staff across all sectors. It has tested both individual as well as team resilience. Leaders are having to contend with new issues impeding the quality of connectivity in the workplace. How to maintain some of the positive developments of using online communication, whilst also ensuring the need for employees to connect in person, was highlighted as a vital factor in building trust

and encouraging innovation. Alongside this, senior leaders and organizations are continuing to face a whole raft of challenges, from the climate emergency to growing inequalities, the cost-of-living crisis, war in Europe and economic instability.

What does all of this mean in terms of people’s hopes and fears for the quality of connectivity and their working lives in the future?

Research Aims

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the move to remote working, and limited social contact, we are curious to understand better the impact and the implications for both leaders and organizations. What have been the challenges? How have people and leaders adapted and are continuing to adapt? Are there any emerging strengths/highlights that can be leveraged upon?

Specifically, the research aims of this project are to explore the impact of changes in work patterns post-pandemic on: communication, connectivity and the quality of relationships at work.

The findings from the project will be used to provide senior leaders with insights on the emerging tensions and dilemmas, as well as tools on how to continue to stay connected, adapt and innovate with their teams during uncertain times. Furthermore, we will provide Human Resource (HR) and Learning and Development (L&D) professionals with strategies and tips on how to retain organizational culture and connectivity in relation to the emerging gaps.

²Defined in this report as a flexible working model that supports in office, remote work in in different locations (e.g. office, home).



Research Methodology



Research Methodology

Introduction

This descriptive research project took place during 2021 and 2022. In order to explore the research aims, quantitative and qualitative data was gathered through an online survey and a series of interviews and a discussion group. The details of each of these data collection methods are described below.

Online Survey

Design and distribution

Quantitative data was collected through an online survey. The survey topics were based on the relevant existing literature, including topics in the 'Connect' book, and topics being widely covered in the media. Using a variety of question formats, the survey explored the challenges and the highlights for workers in terms of the following topics: relationships and connections at work, resilience, collaboration, psychological safety, sense of belonging, isolation, loneliness, motivation, benefits and challenges of remote working, benefits and challenges of hybrid working, readiness for the future workplace.

The majority of questions were closed-ended (including multiple choice and ranking scale questions). Some open-ended questions were included which aimed to gain a deeper insight into participants' opinions, beliefs and observations than could be gathered via closed questions. Through these questions the survey also sought to obtain stories and anecdotes.

A link to the survey was shared with personal and organizational networks.

We used employee snowball recruitment, asking peers to share the survey with their networks and relevant contacts. The survey link was also placed on relevant social networking sites. Respondents were able to provide an email address if they would be willing to take part in a discussion on the topic.

Participants

After data cleaning there were 251 responses to the online survey. These were made up of more females than males (58% and 42% respectively). Respondents were based in the UK (34%), US (19%) with the remainder being based in many other countries. They were aged between 21 and 69 years, with a mean age of 41 years and a mode age of 31 years.

The respondents were working in a range of sectors. With the largest proportions from education (15%); human, health and social work (15%); financial and insurance (12%); and professional, scientific and technical activities (10%). Around two thirds (63%) reported having a management role within their organization.

The majority of respondents (75%) were working mainly face-to-face (in the office, visiting clients etc.) prior to the pandemic. Around two thirds of respondents moved to remote working (working from their home) during the pandemic. Over two thirds of respondents (68%) are now working in a hybrid way (partly face-to-face and partly remotely), having moved from working face-to-face to working remotely during the pandemic.

Interviews and Discussion Group

Participants

Participants were recruited from the online survey responses and from personal and organizational networks to take part in an interview or discussion group. Data was collected from 14 people. Nine people took part in interviews, six females and three males. Five people took part in the discussion group, three females and two males. All of the individuals work full time. The participants have diverse professional backgrounds (education, engineering, marketing and administration), and come from various organizational settings (civil service, business school and pharma). The interviewees were in different stages of their career. Several participants were entering into the workforce, while others were more experienced. There was also a range in terms of the level of hybrid working. A number of interviewees were home based whilst others were operating in a fully hybrid style of working.

Design and recruitment

An interview topic guide was developed based on the findings from the online survey and topics of interest in the literature. Topics included: details of working life, feelings about work, purpose and motivation, career plans, quality of relationships at work, communication at work, skills developed and needed. For each of these topics, the changes since pre pandemic were explored, whether positive or negative, along with any positive stories or examples around increasing connections at work.

Interviews took around 30 minutes and took place online and face-to-face. The discussion group took place face-to-face. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Notes on interpretation of the data

When interpreting the findings, it is important to remember that as not all employees were invited to complete the survey, or take part in the interviews, all results describe individuals' experiences and perceptions. Therefore, the results are based on the opinions of those who took part in the research and not the entire population of employees.

In the report text or tables where percentages do not add up to 100%, this is due to multiple answers, computer rounding and/or the exclusion of neutral, don't know or not stated responses.

Research Findings



Research Findings

Introduction and Structure

The interviews and discussion group conversation were all transcribed. The responses to the survey and the interview transcripts were all analyzed using content analysis to identify patterns and commonly occurring topics in the discussions. All findings (from the participants' survey responses and discussion in the interviews and focus group) were combined and are presented as six research themes.

From the analysis of the data it emerged that there was no one clear message for each research theme. Instead, each of the themes comprised both a dark side and a sunny side. The dark side demonstrated the negative findings: the turbulence, the uncertainties, and anxieties. The sunny side illustrated the more positive findings: the opportunities and innovation. Each of the key themes is explored below. Under each theme the source of the findings are identified (whether from the survey, or from the interviews/discussion group). Throughout this section, quotes from participants are used to illustrate their experiences.

Research themes

1. The Changing Post Pandemic Workplace
2. Work-life Balance: Flexibility versus blurring
3. Inclusion and Isolation: New opportunities for connectivity versus increased loneliness
4. Physical workplace: Serendipity versus effort
5. Winners and losers
6. Skills

The Changing Post Pandemic Workplace

Challenges and benefits when working remotely

In the online survey respondents were asked what the main challenges of working remotely were for them. They were also asked what the main benefits of working remotely were. Participants were able to order a list of ten response options in terms of importance and they could also include their own response option. The findings from these questions are summarized in Figure 1. Over one third of respondents selected the challenges or benefits shown in Figure 1 within their top three.

Responses about the benefits of working remotely were more consistent across respondents than responses about the challenges were, with a higher percentage of respondents selecting the same benefits within their top three. The top benefit, listed by 80% of respondents, was 'flexibility'. Sixty per cent of respondents listed 'autonomy' as one of their top three benefits, and almost one half (46%) listed 'work-life balance'.

The range of challenges selected by respondents varied more. Between 30% and 40% of respondents selected 'video conferencing', 'work-life balance' and 'building new relationships' in their top three challenges. Some of the challenges not listed in the table, but selected by around one quarter of respondents in their top three, include: 'loneliness'; 'decreased motivation', and; 'technology issues'. As shown in Figure 1, 'work-life balance' was selected as both a challenge and a benefit, this theme will be explored later in this section.

Figure 1: Key challenges (n=148) and benefits (n=145) of working remotely

Key Challenges



Key Benefits



The literature on the impact of the pandemic on the workplace is still emerging. However, several of the key challenges identified are in line with some existing research, especially the feelings of a lack of connectivity at the workplace (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020). There are also numerous commentators who described some of the perceived benefits which are aligned to our research findings (e.g. "No Commute is the UK's Favorite Aspect of WFH", 2021).

Enthusiasm, concern and readiness for the future

In the online survey respondents were asked to report how enthusiastic and how concerned they felt about their working life in the future. They were also asked how prepared they felt to navigate changes in future working conditions due to the pandemic (readiness). These findings are summarized in Figure 2.

As Figure 2 shows, the majority of respondents reported feeling both enthusiastic and concerned about the changes to their workplace post pandemic. Overall, people are feeling more enthusiastic (91%) than concerned (74%). Almost all respondents (98%) reported feeling prepared to navigate their future working conditions.

These mixed outcomes and feelings support other research that has recently been conducted with hybrid workers, describing a combination of advantages and challenges as they return to the office part time (Wiger & White, 2022).

Figure 2: Feelings about working life post pandemic (n=172-175).

How people are feeling about their working life post pandemic



Current challenges and benefits

In the online survey, participants were asked about the challenges and benefits to their working life post pandemic. Note that the previous question asked about the benefits and challenges participants had experienced whilst working remotely. The current questions asked respondents to think about the benefits they could access in a post pandemic world, with most of the respondents returning to hybrid working, or the challenges they were concerned they would continue to face. Participants could list their top three benefits and their top three challenges in their own words.

All of the words provided by the participants were coded and counted. The top benefits listed are shown in the word cloud Figure 3 and the top challenges are shown in the word cloud in Figure 4.

A word cloud was used as a visual representation of the words participants were providing, with the most frequently used ones appearing as larger words in these figures.

Figure 3: Word cloud of main benefits hoped for post pandemic, hybrid world of work (n=347 benefits listed by 140 respondents).



As Figure 3 shows, the key benefits listed by participants included: flexibility, work-life balance, spending more time with family, autonomy, connections, cost saving – to self and to business, having more time (to learn to train), remote working, being able to choose where to work (home, office), having more of a focus (a shift in thinking).

Those respondents who referred to ‘flexibility’ described how flexibility allowed them to appreciate a greater work-life balance; spending more time with family. Many described how the result of this could be a more motivated and happy workforce.

Some described how the pandemic and changes to their working lives led to a shift in thinking. They were very clear that they wanted this to remain, and they want to continue to be more focused in their work post pandemic.

For example:

“COVID made me reflect on what I say ‘yes’ and ‘no’ to doing.”

Others wanted the increased level of autonomy they had during the pandemic to continue:

“COVID showed us a different side to life and work-life.”

Figure 4: Word cloud of main challenges post pandemic, hybrid world of work (n=311 challenges listed by 130 respondents).



As Figure 4 shows, the key challenges listed by respondents included: connections, work-life balance, teams, travelling to a physical office, stress, and inclusiveness.

Many referred to challenges related to working in teams – including maintaining team spirit, especially whilst some workers remain working remotely and others are co-located. Related to this, the challenge of inclusion was mentioned many times – with concerns about people at home possibly feeling excluded. Several respondents also talked about the unfair distribution of work between those working in person and those working remotely.

The majority of those who used the term ‘connection’ were referring to human connections – either losing connections or being unable to build new connections. For example:

“The main challenge to my working life post pandemic is a loss of human connection.”

And the simply put:

“I miss people.”

There were also some references to a loss of connection with the organization or job role. Finally, some respondents were concerned about the increased travel time, or “wasted commuting time” if travelling into a physical office.

A key challenge and a key benefit listed by participants was around work-life balance. As described above, work-life balance was viewed by respondents as both a benefit and a challenge when working remotely. As described in the introduction to this report, the future world of work is still unclear and this is

a key benefit that people want to ensure they maintain as they navigate different work situations, including hybrid working. Work-life balance is explored further below.

Work-life Balance: Flexibility versus blurring

As described above, work-life balance was referred to many times by participants responding to the online survey, as both a positive and a negative. This theme was explored further in the interviews and discussion group. The participants provided a range of positive examples of working remotely, or in a hybrid way. They talked about spending less time commuting, meaning more time spent at home. For some this has changed their whole work-life balance. For example:

“Looking back on it, when I used to commute all the time, my life was dominated by work....and then weekends was sort of family time. I don’t really feel like that now, it feels quite different.”

This better work-life balance resulted in increasing connections with family, especially children, and friends too:

“I see more of a work-life balance.... the commute itself has cut time for me and my partner so we can spend more quality time together after work as well.”

People also described how being able to work flexibly, and in their own time, meant that they were able to fit things in for themselves or their family – going to the gym, attending classes, attending activities with their children, being around for their children more, going for lunchtime walks or dog walks, not letting the washing pile up, and so on. Overall, participants described how they had an improved work-life balance, determined by what they wanted.

Finally, this extra time gained, mainly from reducing the commute, also provided an opportunity to think about purpose at work and beyond, providing them with a different view on life in general. For example:

“I was made more aware of the importance of life outside of work and my own and my family’s wellbeing.”

Although family connections have strengthened in many cases, there has been a reduction in human connection at work, as introduced in the challenges word cloud (Figure 4) above. For example:

“I do feel a bit isolated and disconnected.... I don’t think it has any impact on how I feel about the job or how I perform or anything like that.... But I am aware that I’m sitting in my little study/bedroom. Yeah. A long way away from my colleagues.”

For some, this reduced connection was having a significant impact on wellbeing and productivity. As one interviewee stated:

“I experienced difficulties with writing a proposal....I was hesitant to approach others.. being home based, it was not easy to call or email colleagues. I very much miss the office where you can easily approach others.”

Working from home more has also blurred the boundaries between work and life. Which for many has proved a challenge, and in some cases is having a detrimental impact on their work and personal lives.

The challenge for individuals is ensuring the right balance can be achieved. One interviewee described how he puts on a work shirt and walks into his home office to signal to himself and family that he is working. He then changes out of his work shirt when he has finished working.

Ensuring the right balance was described as a priority by many interviewees. For example:

“Moving forwards, the priority for me will be to draw a line between work and my personal life....making sure I can become more efficient when I’m at work in order to make more time to share with my loved ones and take care of myself.”

Individuals are trying to arrange working days in the office to maximize face-to-face time. They want to strike the right balance between the cost and time of commuting into a physical workplace and having face-to-face meetings with their colleagues. This theme is explored further in the physical workplace section below. Organizations also need consider what the right balance is.

Inclusion and Isolation: New opportunities for connectivity versus increased loneliness

In interviews and the group discussion participants mentioned a positive of working in the virtual world as it being more inclusive. For example, with no limitations on physical space or travel requirements, more people can be invited to a meeting. Furthermore, junior employees may be invited along to more senior meetings they may not have been invited to before:

“Virtual working has led to a more inclusive environment....thinking about meetings and thinking about people with disabilities, thinking about people at lower grades that might have gotten notched out of meetings before because the room wasn’t big enough. That’s what used to happen. You couldn’t go to a meeting because there’s only 12 seats in the room. You don’t get any of that now.”

Inclusivity was mentioned when speaking to working parents, particularly the mums. They described how previously they have had to leave work to do a nursery or school pick up and they often missed out on attending meetings. However, virtual meetings meant that they could join more meetings and were not the only ones not there in person. They had previous experiences of there being “a bit of a stigma, not to be there in person for some of meetings”.

Some of the interviewees commented that virtual working has allowed better organizational collaboration especially within international organizations. One interviewee described how this provided more opportunities:

“I have access to forty people around the world via Zoom. This was not possible before COVID. I am able now to reach more people across the globe and open up unique collaborations across geographical boundaries.”

It is clear that virtual working presents organizations and individuals with something of a paradox. On the one hand, it has the potential to offer greater opportunities for collaboration than ever before, bringing people together across functions, departments and geographical boundaries and leading to unprecedented levels of connectivity. Many organizations have reaped the benefits in terms of greater team cohesion, as over the last two years employees have collaborated, supported each other and pulled together to keep the wheels turning. However, working remotely and managing your time can be challenging in many ways – detaching from work, maintaining relationships and loneliness are some of the biggest challenges that have been cited.

These two sides can be found in the current research. In contrast to those interviewees who described the positive, ‘sunny’ side of virtual working, there were others who have been experiencing the ‘darker’ side, describing feelings of loneliness and lack of connectivity.

Although participants talked about a more inclusive workplace in the interviews, in the online survey many participants stated they were feeling more isolated and lonelier at work since the start of the pandemic. Over half of respondents (54%) agreed that they feel more isolated at work (compared to just over one quarter, 28%, who disagreed) since the start of the pandemic. Almost one half (46%) also agreed that they feel lonelier at work (compared to one third, 33%, who disagreed).

In addition, almost half of respondents (47%) agreed that the quality of their relationship with colleagues they do not work closely with became worse during the pandemic. The impact on external relationships and connections was even more noticeable in the results. Respondents felt they were able to **maintain their existing external networks**, however over half of respondents (59%) reported that their ability to **develop external networks** had decreased.

On the flip side of the virtual working world of work are problems around visibility in meetings and speaking up in meetings. With more people, at all levels of seniority, being invited to attend a meeting some interviewees described how they found it harder to speak up:

“Whereas before there have been 12 people in the room, now there are 40. That’s really inclusive, but to be honest, it makes you sort of worry a lot more about what you’re saying. Because it’s going out to a bigger audience and you’ve got to make sure you’re on point for stuff. Whereas, you know, in a smaller meeting, I probably wouldn’t have done.”

As hybrid takes hold, there is also the danger of exclusion and the potential lack of a level playing field between home-workers and those who are mainly office based. Some employees feel resentment, stemming from their perception that work is being allocated unfairly or that they have become ‘invisible’. Participants described how if too many people are invited to a meeting individuals do not really have visibility. Some described how they felt they had more visibility when they were physically in an office and can “*bump into leaders.*” Participants also referred to the need for the “*inclusion of people not in the room with you.*” They spoke of the importance of the inclusion of remote workers when many are physically in the same room.

Previous research (Reynolds, 2017) details how teams that are both cognitively diverse and have high levels of inclusivity, can adapt better to changing contexts and solve problems faster.

Therefore, it is vital to continue to pay attention on how to include quieter voices in discussion (whether face-to-face or virtual), and where possible increase diversity of mindsets/thinking within the strategic process.

Physical Workplace: Serendipity versus effort

As described above, the workplace is going through one of the biggest changes we have seen for decades. During the interviews, many respondents described the effort and cost of travelling into their place of work. Specifically, interviewees talked about the cost of petrol, the cost of train tickets and the time spent commuting. The theme of travelling to a physical office also emerged as a challenge in a hybrid world of work in the survey responses (as shown in list of challenges in Figure 4 above).

People described how even when they did make the effort to commute, taking the time and paying the financial cost, they often ended up sitting alone as everyone was in their own online meeting or others were working remotely:

“When I do go in, there’s not so many people around often. I’m often on my own in my office.”

There were responses which seemed to suggest people were grieving the office of the past (pre pandemic) – they spoke of missing face-to-face interactions, human contact, and having the opportunity to have informal conversations:

“You do miss out on an awful lot of corridor conversations, and what’s going on here, what’s going on there. You don’t know what you’re missing out on really, but there’s so much you’re missing out on I think when not all bumping into each other.”

Others went on to describe a feeling of loss of community at work:

“I think it’s the sense of community, really, that’s what feels different [when I do go in]. And I don’t know how you generate that.”

Interviewees described how they had to plan which days they would travel to the workplace and planned their day whilst they were there. For example:

“I arrange to go in on days where I’m going to meet people I want to see face-to-face. You have to be good at organising your workload, you need to be planning a good two to three weeks ahead in your diary as to what you’re doing, who you’re meeting when you’re coming to [the office]. I think actually, people are having to become really good diary keepers, and really think about what they’re doing a lot longer in advance than they’ve ever had to before.”

On the flip side of the effort, cost and planning of going in to the office is the idea of serendipity.

In his recent book, Busch (2020) introduced the ‘serendipity mindset’, focusing on welcoming the more positive and fortuitous outcomes in life. Busch describes the importance of creating time for random interactions which can support new ideas and provide new opportunities. This was supported in our research. Respondents described how they appreciated each other more after connecting face-to-face in the office. In addition, they now valued face-to-face interactions and the opportunities they bring more when they did make the effort to travel into a physical office. This is also congruent

Conclusions and Recommendations

In the survey, the top skills listed were: communication, resilience, flexibility, and digital.

Other skills listed included: adaptability, compassion, motivation, time management, networking and relational skills.

Interviewees described how they had developed many technical skills as they went along, during their forced remote working in the pandemic. When talking about what is missing, what skills they would like to develop, many wanted more training with the technology, but they also talked about learning how to create meaningful relationships online, how to engage people online, and how to manage and understand people's emotions in a virtual world, and deal with them:

"I think probably we all need to come back and revisit our skills with face-to-face human interaction, because a lot of us would have got tired, tired, maybe lazy."

In the interviews, participants talked about the importance of training and development for their return to work but also to help with motivation and purpose. As one participant detailed:

"I think that going back into the workplace, and really looking at your training and development is really important at the moment. In the pandemic, there was just no time to think about yourself, or your development or where your career was going or reflect on what you did. So I lobbied my manager to go on a pipeline leadership course. Really just kind of waking up from this hibernation was exactly what my career needed. And it got me back physically, mentally, where I needed to be in terms of picking myself up from the pandemic and carrying on with my career."



Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary

We believe that alongside massive difficulties and challenges, there are positives and opportunities in the post-pandemic world of work. The key messages that have emerged from the results and the literature:

- **There is a dark side and a sunny side to reconnecting at work**

There were no clear answers emerging from the research; instead the findings have highlighted further complexities, tensions and dilemmas. A set of themes emerged as the results were analyzed. Each of the themes comprised a dark side, with uncertainties and anxieties, and a sunny side, with opportunities and innovation.

- **New perspectives on leadership and management are needed**

As we continue to emerge from the pandemic, leaders and managers need to balance increasing connectivity across the organization, whilst maintaining the individual freedom and autonomy employees have become used to. They also need to continue to reap the benefits of the pandemic (flexibility, reduced costs and so on). All this requires new perspectives on leadership and management – several recommendations are provided below.

- **We are in a period of transition... now is the time to try things out and learn from experiences**

The current research was conducted during a period of transition: individuals and organizations are at different stages in terms of still coming to terms with changes/losses post COVID and in terms of returning to the office. There are more questions than answers still. This period of transition provides an opportunity for organizations and individuals to try things out: “the time is now.” Organizations need to continue to adapt and change which requires a highly connected, resilient, agile and confident workforce who are willing to try bold experiments and new ways of doing things, and learn from these experiences.

- **Need to focus on connections and community**

As referred to above, humans are designed for connections (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2009). The post pandemic period has highlighted our need for human connections and community. Organizations need to adapt and find creative ways of connecting staff on the emotional level (both in virtual and face-to-face experiences). This implies rethinking organizational communication and style of leadership, as well as prioritizing time for such activities (as opposed to continuing to focus solely on outcomes and results).

- **Be mindful of the risks of the rise of individualism**

Perhaps most significantly, the new work context we now find ourselves in has opened up opportunities for individuals to discover greater freedom, autonomy, and better work-life balance. If not managed carefully, there is a danger that this move towards individualism could give rise to a competitive, dog-eat-dog environment, threatening the progress that has been made on equality and inclusion, and leading to mistrust, stress and lack of engagement (Lubitsh, 2022).



Recommendations

Recommendations for organizations

- Reinforce relationships/collaboration
- Focus on purpose and belonging
- Try out new things/experiment and learn from these experiences
- Improve boundaries between work-life balance
- Increase psychological safety in your organization
- Challenge poor behaviors
- Hold regular open forums to express and share painful emotions
- Reset expectations
- Set up a buddy system
- Development of skills for working in a virtual world

As leaders and organizations work through the tensions and transitions, there is a need for more open conversations about the implications as well as putting in place strategies to move forwards. There is a need for more open conversations about the implications as well as putting in place strategies to move forward. Several recommendations are provided below. Recommendations for organizations focus on culture, environment, and the systems they can put in place. Recommendations for individuals focus on self-care and ways in which leaders can reconnect their teams post pandemic. Note, that the recommendations provided are in no way exhaustive. Leaders and organizations will continue to learn and define as the post pandemic world evolves over the next few years.

Recommendations for organizations

• Reinforce relationships/collaboration

Research by Microsoft found that companies that provide bonuses for internal relationship building activities had employees with higher levels of job satisfaction and happiness. Reinforcing the legitimacy of time spent on connecting and collaborating is important – whether that is through formal reward and recognition or through initiatives such as internal buddy systems.

• Focus on purpose and belonging

The younger generations in the workforce are demanding to work with organizations that have a clear purpose for the wider environment/world, as well as provide a sense of belonging. Review together with colleagues, to what extent do you offer such working environments and what else can be done to improve.

• Try out new things/experiment and learn from these experiences

We are taught from early on in our careers that in order to progress, we need to ‘play the game’ and win. However, our most profound learning and real confidence comes from mistakes. Organizations and leaders should devote effort to creating safe environments for employees to try out new ideas/initiatives, and be able to fail without any fear of scrutiny and shame.

• Improve boundaries between work-life balance

The changing work context, has created new expectations in the workplace. Many employees (including those that are joining the workforce) expect flexible working environments which allow a balance between work and social/home commitments. In general, we believe that this is a positive change. However, at the same time, leaders need to be mindful that employees may feel obliged to join Zoom calls on their days off and would struggle to establish personal boundaries. There is growing evidence of some of the negative impacts of virtual working (e.g. Zoom fatigue). Organizations and leaders need to put in place rules and mechanisms that help employees to maintain a healthy balance and avoid poor mental health.

• Increase psychological safety in your organization

Given the loss of physical connection, it is important to invest more in a climate of psychological safety in which people can express themselves without fear of sanction.

• Challenge poor behaviors

Because of fragmentation and hybrid working, toxic people can continue to operate under the radar. Managers need to have more difficult conversations around performance and continue to challenge poor behaviors.

• Hold regular open forums to express and share painful emotions

Organizations tend to focus on the more tangible aspects of organizational life, including targets, actions and bottom line performance. However, it is important to organize forums where staff at all levels can discuss some of the painful emotions arising from the last years. For our well being we need to exchange real emotions which are critical to friendship.

• Reset expectations

Hold a kickoff meeting with your team and key stakeholders to reset expectations on ground rules of working together including; Who is doing what and how have roles shifted? What are the open as well as the hidden expectations? How do we communicate now? How do we make decisions and resolve conflict?

• Set up a buddy system

It may help nurture team bonds if you assign mentors or buddies. This connection may encourage your team members to share their experiences over the past couple of years and offer support.

• Skills development for working in a virtual world

Henry Timms, CEO of the performing arts Lincoln Centre argued that we need to challenge the notion that ‘in person’ is meaningful and everything else is

trivial (“Lincoln Centre CEO Henry Timms” 2022). We need to be prepared for a blended experience. In this context, it is critical to teach people how to develop meaningful relationships online.

Recommendations for individuals

- Listen more and show humility
- Demonstrate empathy and accept personal vulnerabilities
- Maintain boundaries between personal and professional
- Do not give up on difficult conversations
- Where possible highlight positives
- Make sure that you are adaptable
- Allow time for Micro Moments of Connectivity (MMC)
- Take care of personal resilience/self-care
- Understand your ‘Connector type’

Recommendations for individuals

- **Listen more and show humility**
Be humble and praise others for their success. A Google study showed that managers who expressed interest and concern in other team members outperformed their colleagues in both the quality and quantity of their work (Zak, 2017). We believe that this is becoming even more important in the face of growing anxieties and ambiguity.

- **Demonstrate empathy and accept personal vulnerabilities**

The changing context will require leaders to adopt a different style of management. Instead of the traditional controlling (machine like, heroic) style of leadership, managers at all levels will be required to become better coaches who are able to show empathy to employee’s feelings, ask good questions and be ready to accept personal vulnerabilities.

- **Maintain boundaries between personal and professional**

In this changing context, it is vital to think of rituals that will help you maintain good boundaries. Some of our clients reported putting on a work shirt even when working at home, to signal to children and partners that they are busy. Others keep to a fixed time to end their working day so that they do not lose balance.

- **Do not give up on difficult conversations**

Acknowledge fears/difficulties/tensions. The virtual space may have made it easier to avoid difficult conversations. The fragmentation can lead to many communication and trust issues. Use face-to-face opportunities to create the space for conversations on poor performance, difficult strategic choices or any other painful decisions that were made.

- **Where possible highlight positives**

Fredrickson and Losada (2000) argue that in high performing teams, you need a ratio of 3:1 of positive interaction to negative. As a leader, you need to make sure that you continuously amplify positive emotions/interactions for successful communication and performance.

- **Make sure that you are adaptable**

Under pressure we tend to make thinking errors and our fears take us over into virtual fantasies such as; people are not interested in my views’, ‘no one is willing to help me’. Our thinking can become too rigid and we ‘get stuck on one solution’ and lose flexibility (although there are many ways to resolve a problem). It is very important to recognize when we get stuck in unhelpful patterns and to think about how to reach out to your manager, colleagues and stakeholders.

- **Allow time for Micro Moments of Connectivity (MMC)**

Our daily work is often busy and packed with virtual meetings, schedules, tasks, to do lists etc. In the new world of work, we need to also allow space and time for human connections. This means ensuring that you keep time in your diary time for informal in person catch ups with good colleagues and strategic partners. It will give you an opportunity to connect with key others at the emotional level, and ask for and offer support.

- **Take care of personal resilience/self-care**

In a recent Health Service Journal magazine, a CEO of a major health care provider argued for the need to be kinder to oneself during a period of tremendous change. He said “I had to recognize that actually I’m not super human” (Webster cited by McLellan, 2021). Self-care is paramount in these changing times - continue to seek ways to top up your energy/resilience so that you avoid burnout.

- **Connector types**

In order to overcome the fragmentation and loneliness that currently exist amongst employees, it is becoming paramount to connect with our own feelings as well as with others within and outside the organization. Understanding yours and others’ styles, preferences and motivations will help you connect to others in a more productive and impactful way. You can find out more about preferences for connecting using an online connector type tool (Appendix I).

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Appendix 1

The Connector Type Tool

Lubitsh and Lubitsh-White (2020) identify four different 'connector' types. Using an online tool you can identify your own connector type. You can access the tool here:

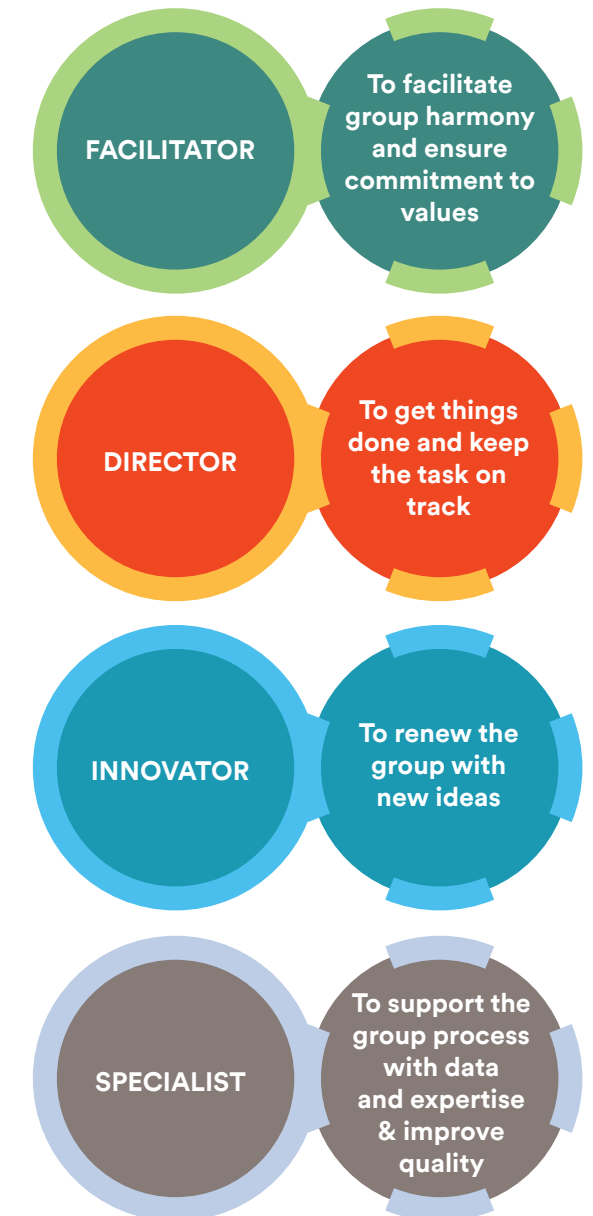


https://public.leadershiplive.hultef.com/section/connector_type

Identifying your own connector type will help you understand your own behavior as well as become empathetic to others and able to connect with them in a deeper and more meaningful way. This kind of understanding opens the door to connect and respond in a manner which is much more productive and impactful to achieve collaboration and mutually agreed goals. This is particularly important within a changing hybrid environment.

The four different connector types are shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Four Connector Types (Lubitsh and Lubitsh-White, 2020).





About This Research

This report describes the impact and implications of the post COVID-19 shift to remote working, and the resulting decline in social contact – for people, leaders and organizations. An online survey, interviews and a discussion group took place during 2021 and 2022. The findings from the research highlight both the dark side (the turbulence, the uncertainties and anxieties) and the sunny side (the opportunities and innovation) of the changing post pandemic workplace. Recommendations provided based on the findings can be used by leaders to help them to reconnect, and stay connected with their teams, and by organizations to restore their culture and connectivity following these uncertain times.