



Nine Feet Tall

Beyond 2020

The Future of
Work Conversations



The Future of Work Conversations

How will corporate history remember 2020? The scale and depth of change will be proved as time goes on. But as traditional white-collar workers, we are starting to feel like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, knowing **“We’re not in Kansas anymore!”**

In order to address the Future of Work, Nine Feet Tall have reached out to organisations including Royal Mail, The White Company, National Police Chiefs’ Council, Nationwide and Marks & Spencer. We have had conversations to understand the difficulties and changes they now face. During these discussions we learnt that getting the right technology is no longer front of mind.

Future of Work challenges are now focused on people, not technology.

This ‘white paper’ discusses our view on the key areas for consideration and how we can shape The Future of Work.

So where are we now?

The BBC recently reported that “fifty of the biggest UK employers have said they have no plans to return all staff to the office full-time in the near future.”¹ But is this truly viable? How will we restructure our understanding of ‘work’? Physical changes require emotional ones too. Whilst we’ll happily ditch the commute, can we also address issues of isolation in remote working? What happens to our social structures and hierarchies – historically deeply entrenched in office culture? What is the online equivalent of the ‘reserved parking space’ perk? **Working from home often used to have status attached to it; something for senior managers, not all. Now it is no longer a privilege, but a way of life.** That stigma of working from home has long gone now. Despite these complexities, and despite the government urging people “back to work”² in the summer, there is a clear appetite for structural change in how, when and where we work.

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-53901310>

2. <https://metro.co.uk/2020/07/10/boris-urges-brits-go-back-work-government-policy-u-turn-12974187/>

Cultural Changes. Getting It Right.

From Presenteeism to Productivity

For some organisations the only way managers felt confident that work was being done was to see it: people at their desks from nine to five. Often, in reality, this became 8:30am to 6:00pm as presenteeism competitors came in early and stayed late to prove their worth.

The coronavirus pandemic has changed presenteeism overnight. Now output and production have become the yardstick for effective working and the person in the office has become irrelevant. Organisations struggling to adjust will need to address their culture of trust and how it can be improved.

Looking at the ever-innovative Nordic countries can provide some interesting learnings. Finland has been working on changing the emphasis from presenteeism to production for decades³. It is surely no coincidence that Finland has “the highest levels of trust and social cohesion in the world”⁴. A significant step was passing the Working Hours Act in 1996. This meant that workers could vary the start and end of their working day by up to three hours; allowing them a schedule to suit their lives.

The UK introduced similar ‘Flexible Working Regulations’ in 2014 (nearly 20 years after Finland) where employees have the right to request ‘flexible working’ from their employers. This isn’t a right to flexible hours but the right to ask for it. UK employers have eight valid reasons why they can refuse⁵.

Finland has gone one stage further now by introducing legislation that gives employees ‘the right to decide’ where they work for 50% of their time.

What once seemed radical - employees able to decide when and where they work - surely seems like plain good sense in this year’s world.

Whilst high levels of trust enabled Finnish employers and legislators to enact Flexible Working decades ago, UK companies are having to adapt their expectations of their workforce and their lack of trust is proving to be ill-founded. This acceleration in attitudes needs to continue.

3. <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190807-why-finland-leads-the-world-in-flexible-work>

4. <https://www.foreigner.fi/opinion/mahmudul-islam/is-finland-s-trust-factor-an-edge-in-the-coronavirus-battle/20200409111500005234.html>

5. <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/work/rights-at-work/flexible-working/flexible-working-your-employer-refuses-your-request/>

Cultural Changes. Getting It Right.

No More Status Quo

If offices are becoming a place of the past, companies stand to lose a major way in which they communicate to the world. Would Saatchi & Saatchi have been as successful if it had been located in Grimsby instead of Golden Square, Soho? **An office is laden with symbolism that communicates who you are and what you're about:** the address, the architecture, the décor. Open plan vs cubicles or offices? Privately catered canteen vs industrial estate burger van? Without these how do you communicate to new recruits or customers to come to you?

As remote working becomes ubiquitous, the tangible perks of the job must also become more creative. Silicon Valley inspired foosball tables and fridges stocked with free Snapple start to feel very old indeed.

Existing status symbols such as the corner office on the top floor are no longer relevant.

New incentives could include stand-out broadband deals or weekly home fruit and veg delivery or even mortgage contributions to add to your benefits packages. They are likely to be centred around the employee's lifestyle – not the employee's status within the company.

Organisations should also consider whether their company's selling points have changed for their customers too. **If the experience of physically visiting you was a significant part of your identity and success you will need to look at other attributes to differentiate your offering.** The rules have changed.

The upside of this is for companies who longed for a central London address – but who could never afford it, nor the designer furniture required to stock it. **The playing-field has levelled out;** though we'd predict for a short time only. If there's one thing business is a good at it's being competitive. We are all going to build up new meaning to our working lives. Successful companies will be those that respond to this in sensible ways that provide value for their employees and customers.

Cultural Changes. Getting It Right.

Short Term Crisis Or Long Term Change?

As organisations, are you genuinely dedicated to planning how your workplace can become a place of the future? Where remote working and flexible hours are embraced... Or are you treading water until the crisis is over?

Just waiting to revert back to the old ways? Now is the time to really listen to your employees. Think about how the changes foisted suddenly on us all by the coronavirus pandemic have proved that people can be trusted and remote working really does work.

Returning to a culture of pricey season tickets and time-consuming, energy-sapping commutes is short-sighted. The bottom line is that it will cost you in the long-run.

The future of work is about turning the changes made in short-term crisis mode into long-term productive and sustainable change.

Working through the details of how and when to work differently will take time. Getting outside advice from consultancies on how to manage this as a change programme can help avoid pitfalls. This is a complex landscape and whilst changes in flexible working might be very positive for many people, there are significant areas where difficulties and challenges will need to be met.

“With the accelerated change from office-based work to remote working, traditional signals of status and hierarchy are going to disappear – the parking space, top floor corner office and better chair will either no longer be available, or, indeed, have any meaning. As hierarchies flatten and people work when and where it suits them, recognition and remuneration will change, too, and will move more to payment by results, rather than simply by time spent ‘at work’.”

Simon Parr QPM, National Police Chief's Council

Addressing People Engagement and Isolation

A Tale of Two Teams

Many businesses have both frontline staff who are customer facing and have little choice over location (those in shops, banks, restaurants, delivery drivers etc) and back office staff who can work remotely. It's easy for a new dividing line to spring up: those with choice of where they work and those without.

This can lead to a notion of “two teams” with a lack of cohesion between them.

You know your people. How can you, as a business, instil a sense of universal value and unity? Emphasising the different skills and opportunities of each role can help.

Welcome Aboard, Virtually.

Recruiting teams are now faced with overwhelming numbers of applicants for new roles. Aspire Jobs reported a growth of over 1300%⁶ in the four months of March to July.

Once the challenge of finding the right candidate has been achieved, you are then tasked with the problem of...

Integrating a new recruit into a team they can't physically meet.

Take time to listen to their experience after the first few weeks. If you didn't get it right - it is something to learn from and work on. This is likely to be how people will start out at new jobs in the future so it is worth getting it right. LinkedIn⁷ offer some useful tips and ideas about onboarding remotely.

6. <https://www.aspirejobs.co.uk/news/shift-in-demand>

7. <https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/blog/onboarding/2020/steps-to-creating-virtual-onboarding-program>

Addressing People Engagement and Isolation

Lonesome Day

Office life, for all its downsides, has significant upsides too. Social engagement being a big one.

Feeling isolated when working from home is a very real risk for all employees.

Not just for the office extrovert who thrives on the sociability of a captive audience, but also the office introvert who (believe it or not) also needs human contact. We are social animals. By working remotely it's easy to miss out on a sense of community that working in the same place naturally provides.

Social networking sites such as WhatsApp or Yammer can work well to keep conversations running. These forums and messaging services provide a useful place to discuss what you're working on and to connect with colleagues. John Stepper's book "Working Out Loud"⁸ explores the benefits of sharing information whilst working. He even goes further to suggest that **your value is no longer what you know, but what you share.**

There have been some innovative ways of improving the sense of togetherness as human contact has been reduced, such as WhatsApp chats about the weekend, team quizzes and funny gif competitions.

Keep up the banter⁹ to reduce isolation and remember that whilst social networks can foster collaboration, they aren't a substitute for in-person conversation. **Whilst some might take to social media versions of office life, most people would concede that online meetings and chat are just not the same, nor as good, as seeing people IRL.** The relief that emerged as lockdown was initially eased and we could see colleagues again has been powerful. Whilst we might want to increase our home-working; we're a good way off deciding to do without the office altogether.

Work/life balance is up for being renegotiated between employers and employees – not tipped over entirely as lockdown forced us to do.

8. <https://workingoutloud.com/>

9. <https://www.ninefeettall.com/blog/keeping-up-the-banter/>

Addressing People Engagement and Isolation

Taking Care of The Team

Now that you no longer see colleagues on a daily basis, how do you take care of them and their wellbeing? As well as addressing the mental health implications of isolation, employers must check on the Health & Safety measures in the place where staff now conduct their work.

We have heard reports of people using ironing boards as desks, sitting on uncomfortable chairs, not taking regular breaks and health and wellbeing declining as a result. Employers have a duty to ensure their staff are set up with all of the right equipment to complete their jobs and this goes further than simply supplying the relevant technology.

Remote workers may feel they have to always be available. This is not what flexible working means and boundaries need to be put in place to ensure work life balance is maintained when both work and life are conducted in the same setting. New 'psychological contracts' with work need to be defined and conversations about staff expectations need to be had.

These expectations need to be made explicit and discussed; **this is new territory for both employers and employees, no-one can be expected to 'just know' the social and cultural 'rules' around remote working.**

Not knowing can create anxiety and over-work, or conversely, a feeling of lack of control. Talking it through will go a long way to making the new expectations clear on all sides. Matt Mullenweg, founder of Wordpress and Automattic makes a strong case for **asynchronous working**¹⁰. Mullenweg believes there are many benefits to having employees work at different times to achieve a better output. With a globally distributed team he is able to pass the baton on a project across time zones to achieve project efficiency. Just make sure your staff know when to stop and hand the baton over, not keep running alongside the next runner!

Furthermore, Mullenweg makes a case for interspersing the working day with life commitments such as exercise, shopping, school runs etc. This allows employees the time to mull over ideas and different approaches rather than remain static and robotic at their desks.

10. <https://ma.tt/2020/04/five-levels-of-autonomy/>

Understanding 'work' better

The Sorting Hat of Transferable Skills

When work is dominated by *where* it happens (an office, a factory), not much attention goes on *how* it gets done. This can hide a lot of valuable transferable skills that people like to use.

The physical restrictions of lockdown have forced us to throw open the idea of 'where' work happens. As a result, how work gets done and who does it, can be opened up too. Historically, we've recruited people into job roles by defined outputs (marketing, project management, accounting) and location (office, factory, building site, van). So more on the 'what' than the 'how'. Now companies may be interested in their employees' transferable skills that lie buried in their job roles.

Shaking up how we think about people and their capabilities can open up new ways of working that go beyond job title and can work for company and employee alike.

"I predict a permanent change to a more flexible workforce, in which, ... factory workers are able to use their newly acquired technical skills, and office-workers can be more easily redeployed, if necessary, to logistics centres and factories."

Danone's Chief Executive, Emmanuel Faber
Interview with the Financial Times¹¹

11. <https://www.ft.com/content/01fd6ad5-b062-4699-b098-ab81bdc8f7b2>

Structured vs Unstructured work

As transferable skills become more apparent, something has emerged about the nature of work being done in offices: the difference between structured work, which transfers well to being done online; and unstructured work which doesn't. Zoom calls and emails work well for highly structured work (project delivery, procedural work, well-defined, task-based work). Productivity in these areas is great. However less structured work (strategy work, ideation, creativity, discursive work) suffers. The risk is that structured work comes to dominate, because it works online and is relatively easy to quantify.

But less structured work is vital for keeping us in touch with the context of the work we're doing – with customer needs, environmental responsibilities and changing employee needs. **It is as though the left-brain (logic, process, detail) risks crowding out the right-brain (context, language, meaning).**

We need both. Right-brain, unstructured work is particularly vulnerable – precisely because it's harder to quantify and more difficult to argue the case for as it lacks compelling detail. Managers need to pay particular attention to keeping the balance here.

Informal Work Positively Affects The Bottom Line

In organisational psychology the value of 'informal' work, as opposed to 'formal work', has long been recognised and is at risk of being ignored in the move to virtual ways of working. Informal work such as chats in the corridor, stopping by someone's desk, vaping together, having a cup of tea, drinks after work, create productive relationships and much 'work' happens either in them – or as a result of them. These informal work structures are as essential as formal work structures, such as meetings, official correspondence, performance reviews. These methods aren't the only way people get things done.

100% remote working doesn't support informal work at all well. Instead the online substitutes (private WhatsApp groups or quick social catch up calls) can verge on the cliquy. Informal work relies on and fosters our sense of each other as real people who matter. It happens when we are 'off-duty' and at our most unguarded. If companies fail to understand the value of this interaction, in the longer-term they will lose competitiveness. Keeping employees in touch with each other - is the mirror of keeping the company in touch with its customers. A single-minded drive towards efficient remote-working can not only damage employee's sense of connectedness within the company.

Changing Processes. Digital Technology and Supply Chains.

Technology's Right Hand Talking To Its Left Hand

Interestingly, our Future of Work conversations have been less about getting the right technology in place (most organisations addressed this in the spring as lockdown hit) but more about linking systems up.

Collaboration has become a useful part of work and will continue to be so in the future, but the technology must work together for different departments and organisations to connect. We have heard about competing retailers coming together to discuss their challenges and paths forward, but conversations

being hindered through opposing tech systems. Similarly, supply chains need to be aligned to customer communications – there is no sense in running a promotion on stock which isn't there! The systems need to be enabled to talk to each other when humans are no longer in the same building.

Staying Alert: Security Attacks.

Sad but true, criminals are taking advantage of the move to remote working. To avoid security breaches make sure that you have the right technical measures in place such as firewalls, VPNs and antivirus software. Be certain that your employees fully understand the possibility of scams and how to stay safe. In May EasyJet were victims of a data breach in which 2,208 customers had their credit or debit card details stolen.¹² The Future of Work will require employees to be aware, informed and vigilant.

“We talk about the ‘internet of things’ and how one device can talk seamlessly to the other to create an effective network of connections. But should the next generation of communication be the ‘Internet of People’. We need creative thinkers, cognitive diversity to develop solutions to create the ‘Internet of People’? This was always coming, I feel Covid has accelerated it by at least 5 years.”

12. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-52722626>

Dominic Lavery, Farrans

Changing Landscapes

The New Look Monopoly Board

With significant changes to real estate portfolios, the demand for office space in London fell by 30% in Q1 2020¹³. Will it bounce back?

Organisations have spoken about the benefit of reducing their footprint, such as the obvious cost savings and more agile approach to the working day. Moreover, if office location restricted recruitment in the past, could you now be looking at a nationally or globally distributed workforce?

Co-working spaces were on the rise before the crisis of this year and this kind of third space fits with flexible working patterns. As organisations look to downsize, many have linked up with Property Consultants to understand what their office footprint for the future might be.

Travel? What Travel?

The majority of people are not missing their commute to work. As we mentioned, employers will need to find compelling reasons to draw their staff back to the office. So what will the impact be on transport in the future? Organisations who operated locally or nationally before Covid-19, now have the opportunity to operate virtually and globally. Reducing staff journeys doesn't limit reach. The government's commitment to infrastructure projects will surely boost employment in the short term, but whether this is a good long term investment will be determined by the Future of Work.

13. <https://workplaceinsight.net/demand-for-london-office-space-plummets-but-will-bounce-back-to-an-extent/>

To Sum It All Up

The purpose of this paper is to highlight and address considerations you may be facing for the Future of Work.

We have looked at changes in culture and issues of presenteeism which were common threads in discussions across different sectors.

We have challenged you to reflect whether your changes are a quick pit stop or a better strategy for the long game. There have been questions to answer about the potential divisions and the well-being of your teams. Having expected conversations about technology, the overwhelming focus of discussions around the Future of Work centred on the people and understanding work better: identifying transferable skills, looking at structured work vs unstructured and informal vs formal outputs and changing our working patterns to become asynchronous.

One thing is for sure, this year has given us the opportunity to stop, listen and rethink work. We believe this is a good strategy to take forwards and shape the Future of Work.

**If you would like to hear how we can shape bespoke strategies for your organisation please contact Huw Jones
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