

# The future of work in post-2020 Britain

Creating a positive and productive environment  
for the new world of work

O<sub>2</sub>  
business

BLUE  
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INSIGHTS



# Introduction: Workplaces and workstyles in evolution

The national COVID-19 lockdown forced huge and sudden changes in the way we work. While the disruption was sudden and stressful, many organisations found they already had the tools, resources and culture in place to make a smooth transition to remote and socially distanced working.

But as we continue to navigate an uncertain environment, the tools and practices that got us here won't necessarily keep us going long term. So how can British business adapt to an evolving normal? Which tools, technologies and attitudes should we take forwards, and what should we leave behind?

## Three key areas of focus

To answer those questions, we've pooled the thoughts of some of the UK's most dynamic and innovative organisations. This paper provides an overview of their thinking, strategic approaches and real-world experiences in three key areas:

- **Embracing change and opportunity:** As we look back over the pandemic period, what can we learn from the way we adapted, and what new opportunities are open to us?
- **A changing workforce and culture:** As we start to settle on a hybrid model of office and remote working, how do workplace tools, leadership practices and strategy need to change?
- **Tools and technologies in evolution:** Connectivity and digital tools helped us to shift to new ways of working. How will those technologies evolve to support work in the new normal?



# Embracing change and the opportunities from disruption

As we look back over the pandemic period, what can we learn from the way we adapted, and what new opportunities are open to us?

The pandemic forced immediate and sweeping change for organisations of all sizes. Whole workforces had to shift to working from home, and the right tools, connectivity and processes had to be in place to allow their work to continue.

Leaders had to find new ways to reassure, motivate, manage and recruit people – and new ways to keep themselves calm, focused and able to make good decisions.

**“I always go back to the mission, vision, values and strategic objectives of the company. They’re really helpful in a crisis because they keep you focused.”<sup>1</sup>**

Robert Gordon, CEO, Hitachi Capital



1. All quotes in this paper have been taken from the O2 Blue Door Expo 2020 – Future of Industry Panel Discussion

## Embracing change and the opportunities from disruption

Many organisations found they had the right culture and tools to pivot without too much disruption. Focusing on customers, on each other's wellbeing, and on the organisation's mission helped people stay engaged and productive. Digital workplace tools that were under-utilised before the pandemic came into their own.

But as time goes on and COVID-19 looks to be with us for a while yet, new approaches and new reserves of fortitude must be found. Some of the tools and processes that were 'good enough' at the start of the pandemic are now wearing thin. To create a resilient business for the long term, there are learnings to take forward in three key areas:

### 1 Tech, travel and working practices

Working from home has freed up time, but with the commute gone, there's a temptation to fill the time with more work – which for many people simply means more video conferences.

New approaches are needed to prevent burnout, and organisations are already finding them. Leaders are learning to carve out diary time to recharge, and offices are being re-imagined as spaces where people come together to bond and to collaborate – rather than places to sit at a desk. Creative collaboration tools, meanwhile, offer a welcome alternative to endless video meetings.

**"I don't think there's any appetite to go back into a building to sit at a desk all day. The way we're feeling at the moment is that we go into the office to collaborate on specific things."**

Victoria Higgin, CIO and Executive Director,  
Highways England

### 2 Culture, leadership and people

Culture carried UK organisations through the crisis. People stepped up and rallied round, and productivity accelerated as a result. Yet many find themselves in less-than-ideal conditions, juggling work with childcare and home schooling, or struggling to find a quiet place to work in a shared flat. Loneliness and isolation are real problems: while introverts have enjoyed time away from the hubbub of the office, those who thrived on it have suffered.

Throughout, the organisations that fared the best are those where leaders listened to, supported and communicated with their teams – maintaining a sense of team spirit and togetherness, and showing genuine compassion and understanding. Leaders have learned that listening, empathy and flexibility go a long way, and are keen to maintain those practices for the long term.

**"We must take the best out of this experience for our teams. There's an opportunity to figure out how to make a better, more diverse and open working environment."**

Sergio Budkin, Director of Business Products  
and Propositions, O2

### 3 Strategy, planning and agility

The pandemic has shown that we never know exactly when or how disruption is going to strike. But we do know there are more shocks on the horizon: Brexit is becoming reality, and climate change is a real and existential threat. Strategies must be agile and flexible to cope with the disruption these events will layer on top of the existing public health crisis.

One learning from our response to COVID-19 is that holding on to organisational goals and values helps leaders to keep focused, even if operations are severely disrupted. A valuable activity now is to re-examine those goals and values, and ensure they still hold true for the world we want to rebuild.

**"No one could have guessed the pandemic, but everybody could have guessed there'd be another shock event. So what can we learn from this for the next thing that comes along?"**

Giles Perkins, Head of Future Mobility, WSP UK



# An evolving workforce and culture

As we start to settle on a hybrid model of office and remote working, how do workplace tools, leadership practices and strategy need to change?

The changes wrought by COVID-19 are not over yet. Many organisations are navigating a shift to a new normal which involves much more remote working.

That creates a big challenge for previously office-centric organisations. Teams remained highly engaged in the initial phase of the pandemic, but prolonged working from home is starting to take its toll. People miss the workplace camaraderie, the buzz of new projects, and even the downtime afforded by their commute. How can organisations keep a remote workforce engaged for the long term?

**“Organisations are starting to announce they’re not going to go back to their central London locations. In the current climate, the opportunity to save money is being prioritised.”**

Jonathan Conn, Technology Director, Rugby Football Union



## Culture and technology go hand in hand

It's a question of practicalities, but also one of culture. While leaders can do a lot to set the tone of the new-style organisation, a successful transition will also come from teams and people embracing change, and finding creative and energising ways to operate in an evolving normal.

Clues about what to do next may come from how organisations are combating 'lockdown fatigue' today. Teams are finding new ways to engage and communicate: cooking or exercising together via video, replacing webinars with podcasts so that people can walk or run while listening in, delivering online learning in bite-size chunks, and using collaboration platforms to run virtual offsites.

**"We're seeing people try and find creative ways of using the technology platforms to overcome some of the disadvantages of permanent, virtual working."**

Catherine Leaver, Human Resources Director, O2

Chance conversations at the water cooler or in the coffee queue are among the most-missed aspects of office life. Could there be a way to recreate them virtually, using video 'mystery chats'?

## Trust will be the key to a strong culture

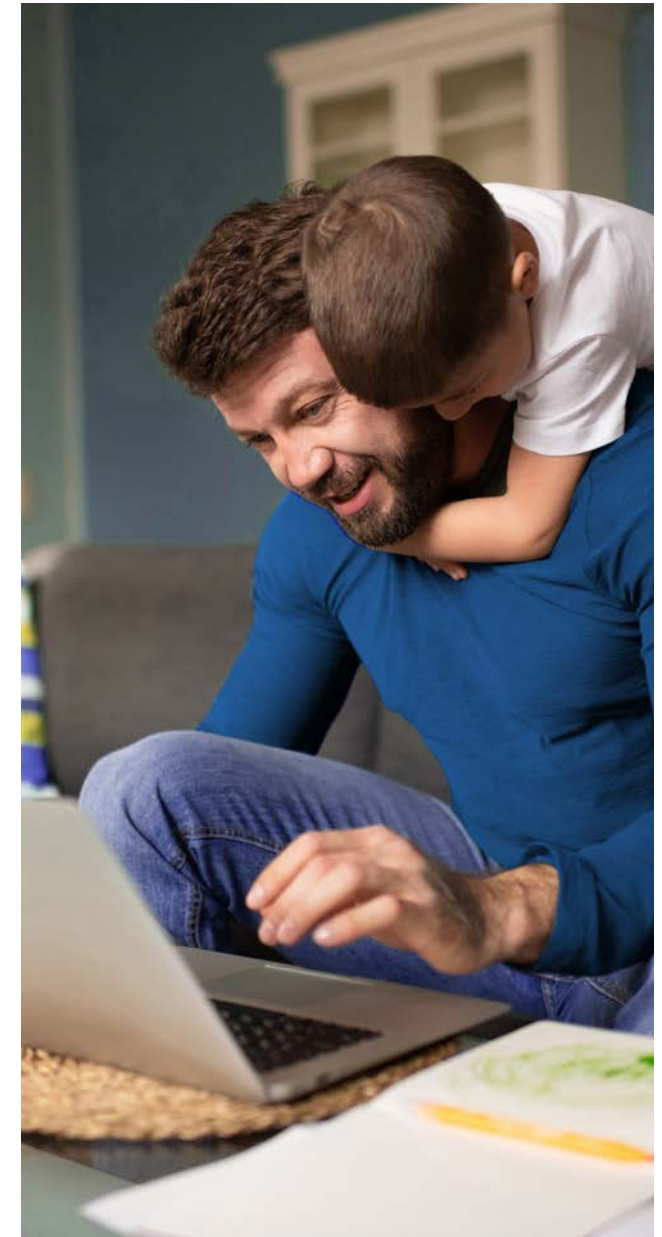
Whichever techniques are used, trust will be key to maintaining a strong culture. Physical presenteeism may be over, but digital presenteeism mustn't take its place. People should be evaluated on the value they deliver rather than the hours they put in at the webcam.

New policies may be needed, for example around when it's OK to switch off your laptop in the evening.

Crucially, remote workers need to feel involved, valued and part of the team. For leaders, that means redoubling efforts to be visible and approachable, to communicate and empathise – and to ensure that office-based and remote workers have equal access to technology, knowledge and opportunity.

**"A lot of people will be looking at how organisations treated their people during this pandemic, and making decisions whether they want to join these organisations based on that."**

Janine Chamberlin, Director, Enterprise Sales, Talent Solutions, LinkedIn



## A new recruitment landscape brings new opportunities

The new workplace culture will be pivotal not just to keeping current employees engaged, but also to attracting new talent. Recruiting for a remote-first world is a radically different proposition, evidenced by the fact that many organisations paused recruiting when the pandemic struck.

Now, talent acquisition teams are emerging into a very different landscape. One upside is that new hires can come from anywhere, creating exciting opportunities to tap into talent pools in different regions and among traditionally-excluded demographics, like parents and people with disabilities.

To attract the best talent, HR teams must create an outstanding employer brand, thinking like marketers to showcase the organisation as an exciting, rewarding and caring place to work.

**“The big shift is to ask talent acquisition teams to fundamentally become marketers, which means treating a candidate or talent in the same way you would treat a customer.”**

Paul Jacquin, Partner, Board Member and Advisor, Taptrove-Randstad

## Finding new ways to reach and engage young talent

As recruitment gets back into full swing, organisations should spare a thought for young people whose educations have been disrupted and who are facing the toughest job market for generations.

The careers fairs and open days that were staples of graduate recruitment have been cancelled, but forward-thinking HR teams will see this as an opportunity to find new ways to engage and recruit diverse talent.

As well as running virtual careers fairs, that could mean working with schools to offer remote work experience, internships and apprenticeships to highly-engaged young people who don't plan to go on to higher education.





# Tools and technologies in evolution

Connectivity and digital tools helped us to shift to new ways of working. How will those technologies evolve to support work in the new normal?

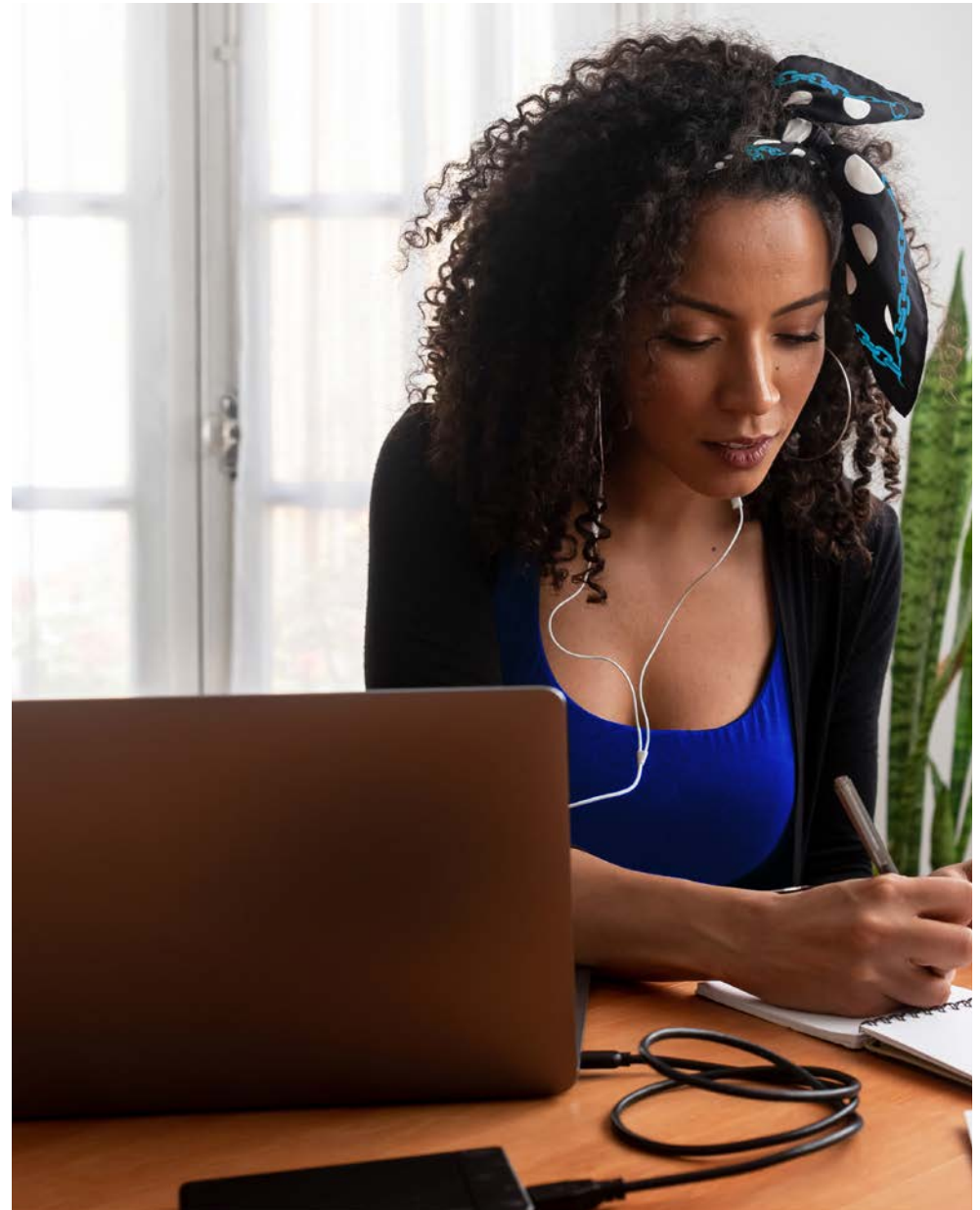
Existing investments in digital workplace technologies allowed many organisations to switch to remote working relatively easily. But as lockdowns and social distancing continue, the capabilities of those tools are being tested to their limits. New tech will be needed to take us forwards.

Tech vendors are stepping up, seeking feedback from users around the functionality and features that will be needed to support a more permanent remote way of working. Videoconferencing platforms are enabling large-scale virtual conferences with breakouts, for example, and virtual whiteboarding creates an engaging and inclusive alternative to one-way screensharing.

Not every development will be down to vendors. Lockdown has shown that allowing employees to experiment with the tools at their disposal can surface new and enjoyable ways of getting work done. Their success should be measured in business benefits achieved, which isn't always easy.

**“You could have a million meetings a month, but were they productive? Have they done anything to forward your agenda as a business? That’s much trickier to measure.”**

Rob Price, CTO, UK Partner Organisation, Cisco





## A hybrid workplace will need new tech and new approaches

The workplace of the future is likely to be hybrid, with solo work done at home, and the office evolving into a place where people meet, bond and collaborate. Many organisations will retain a mix of remote workers and office-based workers, so equality of access to technology will be essential to maintain cohesion.

That can be done partly through remote workplace audits, to ensure people have appropriate connectivity, devices and setups wherever they're working. But there's also a cultural requirement to make remote workers feel fully included in hybrid meetings, and ensure their ideas and contributions are given equal weight. That may mean reconfiguring offices to promote collaboration and creativity. Introducing collaboration suites can bring office-based and remote workers together seamlessly.

A permanent remote workforce will require a new approach to security, too, with 'zero trust' and resilience – the ability to recover from an attack – becoming the norm. While no organisation can be immune to attack, having fewer equipment vendors in the IT environment will reduce vulnerabilities, as will choosing vendors who partner on security.

**“Cloud security and cyber resilience are critical conversations right now in the boardroom. Zero trust security is another. Every organisation needs to assume that they're going to be attacked.”**

Nick Hedderman, Director, Modern Work and Security Business Group, Microsoft

## Digitising physical operations is the next step change in digital transformation

One of the biggest shifts will be towards digitising operations that are currently physical in nature. In manufacturing, a raft of new technologies will support the next industrial revolution, digitising and automating production processes. 5G will be a key enabler of factory automation and real-time tele-operation of equipment, improving productivity, safety and profitability.

**“Manufacturing stands to benefit a great deal from 5G, as do businesses with complex supply chains where speed, accuracy and efficiency across multiple time-sensitive processes are key to success.”**

Joe Walsh, Director of B2B, Samsung

Elsewhere, advances in connectivity will enable front-line workers in demanding situations to have greater access to the data and assistance they need to do their job. Ruggedised equipment, human-robot collaboration and local data processing in edge clouds will enable faster and better decision-making in the field.

AI will automate many processes, but it must be trained on trustworthy and appropriately diverse datasets, otherwise it risks making bad decisions. And some much-hyped applications of AI may remain permanently out of reach. Driverless cars may never be capable of thinking and reacting like a human in an unpredictable physical environment, for example. But there is good news for those holding out for flying cars: hover taxis are already being trialled in Singapore, Dubai and elsewhere.

**“The idea of AI systems interacting with humans, and learning the rules of the physical world, has to happen. Otherwise, we'll be living in a world of arbitrary decisions based just on training data.”**

Marcus Wheldon, President, Bell Labs, and CTO, Nokia

# Summary:

## Towards a better world of work for all

So much has changed during 2020 that it seems unlikely we'll ever return to our pre-pandemic way of working. Fortunately, there are many lessons we can take away from this period and use to rebuild more productive, more diverse and more engaged organisations going forwards.

New technologies are emerging to help us get there, leaders have rediscovered the value of listening, communicating and empathising, and whole organisations have learned to embrace and make the best out of change. We may be entering a new and at times unfamiliar world of work, but all the signs are there that we can make it a better one for all.





## Talk to us about your future journey

We're here to help your business build back better in any way we can.

If you'd like to discuss any of the ideas raised in this paper, we'd love to hear from you.

You can **contact** our team or call us on **0800 955 5590**

## Get further insights

Take a look at our latest **insights and research**

# Our future thinkers

We'd like to thank all of our contributors for their insights, experiences and expertise:

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