Collective Wisdom:
Employee engagement and ways of working during a global pandemic

A division of The Creative Engagement Group
Collective wisdom: employee engagement and ways of working during a global pandemic

In late June 2020, we asked a group of senior HR and employee communication leaders from global healthcare companies to spend an hour with us (Forty1) in a digital focus group.

We asked them to share their experiences of working through the global pandemic lockdown. With their HR and employee communication leader hats on, we wanted to understand how they had found it, what they had learnt and which employee engagement initiatives had been accelerated or put on hold.

In this document you will find:
• An overview, which is an infographic of interesting data points
• Part one is a summary of the key themes we heard
• Part two is the full report of the session

We hope you find the report insightful and useful for your H2 engagement and communications planning.

ThinkTank: the psychologically safe, online platform for gathering collective wisdom

Over the last couple of years, we have run over 70 virtual focus groups, with over 1500 participants for global organisations on the ThinkTank platform. The anonymity for respondents means that very quickly we can get to the heart of a question, with candour and openness rarely seen in a real life group. Additionally, because all of the responses are collected on screen, every voice has equal weight, which means that our natural biases don’t come into play. We are able to see the genuine consensus in a ‘room’. If you’d like to be involved in our next Collective Wisdom Think Tank for senior leaders, or if you’re interested in ThinkTank for employee listening, please contact Liz Bryant.

Forty1: we are an employee engagement consultancy

We blend insight, technology and creativity to deliver unforgettable employee experiences that drive engagement and business performance. As part of The Creative Engagement Group, our strategic insights are brought to life by a creative delivery engine spanning digital, events, design, film, virtual reality and augmented reality.
The significance of the challenges of working during a global pandemic

- Work-life balance
- Planning for the future
- Engagement
- Upskilling with new technology
- Maintaining culture
- Onboarding new employees

48% of respondents suggest there will be more flexible working (moving between home and office) in the future.

When asked which parts of working life they felt would be affected, 13% said there would be less travel and a greater focus on digital and hybrid meetings.
How we are planning to support our people back to offices:

- Revised employee benefits
- Induction on to site
- COVID-19 testing
- Revisit the performance management approach
- Flexible return to work
- Focus on virtual training

54% of people say over communicating/scheduling was the most common error made during this time.

Our respondents rated the impact of the global pandemic on the workplace of the future 5/6.

52% of respondents say that supporting leaders in communicating effectively with employees and a focus on purpose and progress was vital.
Business as usual: the biggest challenges when returning to work*

1st
Not falling back into old habits
4.47

2nd
Health and safety
4.4

3rd
Respecting differences in ways of working
4.33

4th
Understanding how the culture has changed
4.32

*impact of challenges on organisations rated on a scale of 1-6
The virtual paradox part 1

Many people, when asked, will say that virtual meetings can be difficult; the overload of visual cues, the exhaustion of back-to-back meetings, the inability to gauge body language and tech issues. But, overwhelmingly, our focus group reported that the sharp increase in virtual working has made the workplace more caring, human and warm. People are more aware of colleagues’ lives outside work – it’s difficult not to be when a three-year old joins a Teams meeting. And this paradox – that we are social creatures who enjoy and relish real life contact, ‘but feel that virtual meetings are more ‘human’ is one that, we think, needs to be explored more by HR and employee communication professionals.

How has office-based culture become so lacking in humanity? What can we take from this time to bring caring and warmth to our interactions and the employee experience? What can change to reap the benefits of virtual working in real life?

The virtual paradox part 2

For years, flexible working has been thought to be something of a cure-all for employee work/life balance. Giving people the flexibility and the option to work from home would help them juggle all their commitments, not just their commitments to their colleagues. And then we find that when huge swathes of an organisation become virtual, helping employees to manage their work/life balance becomes a huge challenge.

We have rapidly adapted to these new ways of working and have become incredibly efficient. The group talked about the pace that they were seeing and experiencing. Add to this the extraordinary global situation of a world largely in lockdown and maintaining work/life balance was identified as the single biggest challenge.

Despite this, more flexible and virtual working was considered to be the most significant change that would arise from the pandemic in the future workplace. Respondents felt that less time would be spent in the office or travelling. Of particular note for the healthcare industry was the lack of large in real life events, including congresses.

Part 1 – The key themes
Necessity is the mother of all invention

Respondents reported a significant increase in agility and innovation during the pandemic and also reported high rates of digital adoption and upskilling.

Digital adoption has been accelerated, along with the number of informal, regular communications. When it comes to leadership, respondents feel transparency, visibility and candour has increased, as has the focus on wellbeing.

On the flip side, our respondents are concerned that the removal of place – the office – has had an impact on culture, although there was a sense that they weren’t yet able to quantify or articulate that impact. However, understanding that ‘culture has changed’ was considered to be fundamental to the planning for return to work.

Also, the inability to hold large leadership and sales meetings was seen as a challenge for organisations.

Other, perhaps unexpected impacts of pandemic working included a pause on employee value proposition and benefits review projects, holding off on internal new brand launches and other non-COVID internal campaigns.

Business as unusual

Respondents were clear that there will not be a return to ‘business as usual.’ The workplace has changed forever and key to a successful return and defining the new normal was to not slip back into old habits and “getting senior leaders to accept new ways of working are ok.”

Of course, the pandemic has been an excellent proof of concept for virtual working, but respondents were keen to point out that certain roles – specifically sales teams – had been impacted more than others in their ability to work ‘virtually.’ As someone put it “expecting salespeople to work as telemarketers.” How healthcare companies engage with healthcare professionals in a socially distanced, and largely virtual world is something that respondents noted as being of concern.
Section 1: pulse check

What 3 words would you use to describe your company’s experience of working through this time?

When asked what three words participants would choose to describe their company’s experience during the pandemic, Challenging, Fast and Caring had the most mentions. Human, Agile and Innovative were the next most frequent.

How much has the current situation impacted your employees’ ability to do their job?

Participants felt that the pandemic had significantly impacted their employees’ ability to do their job 4.06 average, 1.39 Standard Deviation (with 1 meaning ‘not a lot’ and 6 meaning ‘a lot.’)

How has it impacted the way employees work?

When asked how the pandemic has impacted their employees’ ability to do their job, clear themes emerged around balancing home and work life, barriers to work like ‘inability to visit HCPs or attend congress,’ new ways of working (digitally with agility), wellbeing (missing office environment) and lacking fast collaboration/purpose/direction ‘leadership not stepping up.’

What employee engagement initiatives have been accelerated during this time?

During the pandemic, some engagement initiatives have been accelerated, such as wellbeing, digital/channels, ‘roll out of MS teams,’ communication, ‘increased informal team and department meetings,’ leadership presence/comms ‘the line managers have really stepped up,’ learning & development ‘lots more learning has happened’ and diversity & inclusivity ‘discussions on race’

What employee engagement initiatives have been put on hold during this time?

Some stated that internal projects such as EVPs, launch of new brand and agency review have been put on hold due to the pandemic. In person meetings have had to stop, including town halls, on-site training, sales meetings and regional conferences.
What have been the most significant challenges?

We asked participants what the most significant challenges during this time had been, 26% of responses mentioned work/life balance. Upskilling, maintaining culture and being able to communicate on and balance topics other than the pandemic were all also seen as significant.

If work–life balance has had the most significant impact, what did you do to address this challenge?

We looked at how participants had addressed WLB within their own organisation, there was a focus on removing guilt/no judgement during this difficult time. Especially comms with, ‘leaders making sure people don’t feel guilty about looking after their kids etc.’ Other ideas mentioned included reviewing ways of working, allowing for more flexibility and focusing on wellbeing with experiences like wine tasting and coffee mornings.

How much of an impact do you think the current pandemic will have on the workplace of the future?

5.00 average, 0.94 Standard Deviation (on a scale of 1-6, with 1 meaning ‘not at all’ and 6 meaning ‘it would have a huge impact.’)

What impact will it have on the workplace of the future?

48% of respondents suggest there will be more flexible working (moving between home and office) in the future. When asked which parts of working life they felt would be affected, 13% said there would be less travel and a greater focus on digital and hybrid meetings.
Section 2: lessons learned

What changes do you intend to make to your employee experience post Covid-19?

As well as a reduction in travel and a focus on working virtually, participants intend to focus on employee wellbeing and upskilling, including digital skills. This included reinventing the HCP engagement experience and introducing new digital ways of learning and working. Interestingly, participants mentioned that there will be more transparent communications that use a more informal tone: “up-skilling managers - they need to be better communicators. New ways of communicating with employees will help improve the employee experience. Some mentioned more ‘snail mail’ posted to homes to keep things interesting. Leaders are aware that working virtually can become monotonous and it will be important to think of new ways to communicate moving forward. There was also mention of testing employees as we move into sites/offices.

What have you tried during the pandemic that hasn’t worked and what did you learn from that?

Over communicating/scheduling was the most common error made during this time (54% mention this). Setting expectations of employees/leaders was also mentioned, with some commenting that sales people were being ‘expected to work as telemarketers.’

Rate agreement to the following statements

- We have connected more as an organisation
- Our values and culture have worked for us in dealing with this crisis
- We have prioritised employee well being during this time
- We have demonstrated agile and dynamic ways of working
- We have maintained motivation and employee listening
- We have simplified decision making
What broad employee trends do you think will be accelerated by the pandemic?

48% mention flexible working and working virtually. 22% talk about building trust between leaders and employees, as well as more transparent communications. Employee listening was also mentioned. Some wanted to move away from pulse surveys to regular check-ins and more open lines of communication.

Do you think there are any areas of the employee experience that will be harmed by the pandemic?

Participants felt employee wellbeing will be affected by the pandemic, with specific examples being social interactions and collaboration, connecting to topics other than COVID and sharing your house/family life with work and how you are perceived – ‘judging if you have kids in background; your WIFI is faulty and you are viewed as an idiot...’

Thinking about the next few months, how will you support employees transitioning back to business as usual?

In terms of support, participants recognise the importance of listening and the adapting the way we work:

- Revised employee benefits
- Induction on to site
- Testing
- Revisiting performance management approach
- Flexible return to work
- Focus on virtual training

What communications will be important during this time?

Training for those not familiar with communicating digitally will be important moving forward, with supporting toolkits.

52% of comments were around supporting leadership in communicating to employees and ensuring that expectations of employees are communicated clearly, focusing on priorities, progress and purpose. Leadership communication needs to be open and transparent – ‘leader comms - leading by example / being calm and clear about what’s happening.’
What will be the biggest challenges when returning to business as usual (BAU)?

When returning to work, many participants challenged BAU, so this will need to be redefined after the pandemic, while the shift in ways of working will also need to be understood, so that processes don’t just return to how they used to be. On the other hand, participants felt the challenge will be ‘getting senior leaders to accept new ways of working are ok’. Ultimately, organisations will need to be conscious of how they will adopt lessons learned, as ‘accommodating flexibility and new ways of working through ‘accommodating flexibility and new ways of working’ and not ‘falling back into old, unsuccessful patterns.’

**Impact of challenges**

- Not falling back into old habits
- Health and safety
- Respecting differences in ways of working
- Understanding how the culture has changed