



# **EMBEDDING NEW WAYS OF WORKING**

Implications for the  
post-pandemic workplace

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# Embedding new ways of working: implications for the post-pandemic workplace

## Appendix: Case study interviews

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# Transport company

## Background

The employer is a transport management company that connects coach and bus operators with clients needing transport. They deal with leisure bookings as well as having corporate clients and operating around 200 home-to-school routes every day. They have circa 75 staff.

## Employment levels

The impact of COVID-19 has been very significant for this company as there has been no need for transport. The pandemic struck at the worst time for the industry as summer is typically the peak season. The company is trying to negotiate some level of contract payments between the coach and bus operators and schools to help keep the operators in business.

Seventy-five per cent of staff have been furloughed – mainly operations staff, as transport is not running. Management level is still working and are using this time to review our structures and publications and policies. They are looking at what the business's needs will be when people return to work, given trade for this summer is not anticipated to recover and the next peak in trade will be June 2021.

The interviewee reflects that if the furlough option hadn't been available, some redundancies would have been made.

In addition, everyone has voluntarily taken a temporary 20% reduction in pay, with the intention being that people would also cut their hours, so work four days a week. However, the reality is that most people are still working the five days. The majority of those not on furlough are now working from home.

No redundancies have been made but the company is looking ahead to what the industry landscape will look like and considering their structure. Their entire anticipated revenue stream for the summer months has gone. As well as school runs stopping as a result of the pandemic, the company has needed to refund bookings or save people's deposits to use against future bookings.

The company is awaiting more details about the part-time furlough scheme. They said they would have welcomed that option at the start of the pandemic, preferring to keep more people working part-time with pay topped up by government, rather than people going off work completely. They feel that if people had been able to work part-time, they'd have remained more involved in the business.

Before the onset of the pandemic, the company were developing new technology – *'a tracking system that tracks all the passengers on the bus and tracks the bus and sends notifications to parents'* – but it was necessary to furlough the software developers. With a flexible furlough scheme they may have been able to continue to work and that product may have helped to generate revenue.

The company is working hard to ensure their furloughed staff stay involved, such as holding weekly virtual social meetings. And all line managers are required to have weekly contact with furloughed staff to make sure people feel looked after.

## Homeworking

Before the onset of COVID-19, no one worked from home on a permanent basis. Some people would do so occasionally in account manager roles or if they had a long commute, but it wasn't common.

Now everyone apart from the interviewee is working from home. The company has embraced technology more than it has done previously and use of technology is part of discussions about what working structures and practices will look like going forward.

It's anticipated that many people will continue to work from home. The company is reviewing its leasing agreement as they are unlikely to now need an office that will accommodate 75 people each day. People will be encouraged to come to the office one or two days a week when the time is right to still feel part of the company, but they will largely work from home. And, *'people are finding that they are financially better off working from home because they're not commuting'*.

## Impact of homeworking on productivity

Overall, people feel they are more productive and more focused when working from home. In addition, people are able to do quick house chores, for example put the washing on, as they're at home, which doesn't distract them from work but does free up their social time. People appreciate that.

However, it's recognised that homeworking may not suit everyone and not everyone will be more productive in that way of working. So, there may be a need to effectively manage those who are less focused or less motivated when working from home.

The entire workforce is equipped with laptops, but not everyone will have a workspace at home. The company is looking at providing people with some sort of grant to buy the equipment they need to work from home effectively, *'because it's not fair to have work impact their home environment in a negative way'*.

## Impact of technology

The use of technology has increased with homeworking, and that has productivity implications as people are having fewer distractions. People send questions and requests to each other via Microsoft Teams rather than interrupting people at their desks, so it's possible to reply during a natural break in work rather than having constant interruptions.

The interviewee feels clients may be more open to virtual meetings now rather than requiring an in-person meeting to develop a relationship.

## Returning to the workplace

The company has rearranged the office for social distancing and can accommodate 30 of the 75 staff at one time. The next step is performing risk assessments and to set out how the business will now run. The risk assessment will focus on the physical limitations of the building, including having one entrance and one kitchen. They are considering departure and arrival times and how the cleaning cycle will operate, as well as whether different teams come to the office on different days: *'it's just coordinating the space that we have and using it as efficiently as possible, but also as safely as possible.'*

*'People are very keen to get back to work [and], for the people who are working, they like the idea of continuing to work from home.'* However, until the return to work plan has been completed, they're unable to tell the furloughed workers what's going to happen.

### **Investing in training**

There will be a need to ensure people feel able to work effectively with using technology from a distance, which may require some additional training.

### **Priorities**

*As an entrepreneurial company, the priorities before the pandemic were to 'increase growth, increase sales... but also a stabilisation of our place in the market, to ensure that our product was meeting the needs of our clients. We have invested, so return to investors, so not only an increase in gross revenue, the gross profit was going to be important.'*

The main HR priority was to ensure they had the right person in the right role. In some instances that required cross-training people and giving them exposure to different parts of the business. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, priorities have shifted to focus on getting sales revenue back. HR has also streamlined processes and reviewed company structures to fit the new industry landscape, which will involve redundancies.

Streamlining processes involves standardising contracts, as each new contract has been traditionally approached in a bespoke way. An operations manual containing step-by-step processes, so everyone is doing the same thing the same way, has also been developed. Then if someone is made redundant or is off sick, someone else is able to pick up their work where they left off. In the past people have tended to hold this information in their heads, but now the company is now at a stage where more formal processes are required.

The interviewee reflects that streamlining processes was always on the to-do list, but the current situation has meant *'I've got some time to actually examine the company and decide how I want it to be and then produce the documentation processes to make that happen.'*

### **Health and wellbeing**

The company recognises the importance of regular contact with furloughed employees to make them still feel part of the company for their health and wellbeing. The interviewee explains: *'we're maintaining contact with them, we're trying to keep the positivity up. The weekly social is a real plus. Quite a few of the team have their own WhatsApp chat groups.'*

However, a few people are finding the situation difficult, and *'there's a lot of anxiety about whether people will have jobs to come back to.'* Those who are struggling may not join in with the group activities as readily. Regular phone calls with line managers are therefore important.

## Large retailer

### Employment levels

The spread of COVID-19 had a positive impact on the firm in terms of business activity and employment levels. Due to absence levels and strong demand, the company has had to hire more than 5,000 additional staff since the outbreak of COVID-19. There have been no redundancies and none are planned in the future.

### Homeworking

The onset of COVID-19 has led to increased working from home among employees who work at the head office. These employees had little or no previous experience of working from home. On average, people who work at the head office work from home three days a week. By contrast, those who are working at the distribution centre and the retail stores cannot work from home.

Overall, between 10–15% of its UK workforce are working from home at any one time, whereas the proportion of the workforce that worked from home prior to the onset of COVID-19 was close to zero.

### Employee attitudes to homeworking

Overall, employees are reporting higher levels of satisfaction. Key factors include lower commuting costs and time and being able to better manage personal lives. On the downside, the lack of social interaction and the ability to have a quick conversation with a colleague are reported to be the main disadvantages.

### Impact of homeworking on productivity

Homeworking reduced the efficiency of the company during the early stages as it adjusted to new ways of working – partly due to an insufficient number of laptops and monitors. However, once this was resolved, the organisation reports that productivity has increased at the firm. As the project manager of the firm explains:

*From the team's perspective, everyone's actually been slightly more utilised than they would have been had they been in the office... We're getting through so much more stuff. It sounds silly, but it's when members of the team might come to you with a simple question, and you end up having a five, ten-minute conversation about it. A lot of the team, because it feels a bit harder to raise that simple question, think about it a bit more themselves, and just get on with it. I think that's probably where the time saving's coming from.*

As a result, the company expects to change its policy and grant requests to work from home. Prior to the pandemic, employees were not allowed to work from home. The project manager at the firm continues:

*They've [management] now probably been able to see that people are still doing the same amount of work from home, so hopefully the fear around that has gone.*

## Returning to the workplace

At the time of writing there was little information about how and when staff returned to the workplace. There have been suggestions that employees could return to work one day a week; however, no definitive decision has been made.

According to the project manager at the firm, the organisation is not addressing sufficiently some of the concerns employees have about the potential return to the workplace:

*People are quite nervous about it. A lot of people live with people in vulnerable categories, so they don't want to be the one that catches something and brings it home to the family. The business is saying it's going to do it slow, phased, everything within the guidelines, to reassure people... They [management] understand it, but they're probably not as sympathetic as they could be. I think the organisation is probably taking the view, 'We're going to do everything to the letter of the law, and therefore you should be reassured that it's all going to be okay.' I think they see it as, it's not really up to the employees to decide whether they're going in or not, they'll be told when it's safe to do so.*

## Health and wellbeing

The company has a number of initiatives in place to support employee wellbeing. These include a best practice guide to working from home, which addresses various issues such as desk layout and taking breaks. In addition, each team holds virtual meetings twice a week and separate weekly check-ins for non-work-related reasons. Employees also have access to a helpline to deal with confidential counselling and advice on a wide range of work and personal issues. Overall, the company feels that they are doing all they can to look after their staff.

## Travel and tourism company

This tourism operator employs more than 1,000 people in the UK.

### Employment levels

The spread of COVID-19 has had a very negative impact on the firm in terms of business activity and employment levels. The majority of staff have been furloughed at the 80% rate due to lack of revenue. Those employed in the retail stores and in hotels are most likely to have been furloughed. As the HR director of the firm explains, there are no short-term plans to bring back furloughed staff:

*I simply think that, for the travel industry specifically, I just don't think that that's enough on the part of the Government. Even the market leaders in the travel industry have had to cut staff. If you've got no future bookings coming, you still have all your outgoings but you have no income coming in. I just don't understand how anyone is supposed to bring staff back on any basis, because they can't pay the wage bill.*

As a result, the firm expects some companies to go bankrupt unless there is sufficient government support because activity had all but come to a halt at the time of writing.

In addition, there have been some redundancies, with more redundancies planned in the future. Redundancy decisions were primarily based on length of service and cost, which had a disproportionately large negative impact on those in lower-paid positions.

Overall, the company welcomed the substantial support it has been given through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (JRS), which covers 80% of the income of employees who have been furloughed temporarily. However, it also claims that the scheme has merely delayed redundancies rather than helped the organisation avoid them. The only departments not to have been covered by the JRS include HR, payroll and finance.

### Homeworking

The pandemic has led to a sharp increase in working from home for the vast majority of employees. These employees had little or no previous experience of working from home due to company culture:

*We did have flexibility to work from home when we wanted, but it was still not really a cultural thing within the company. Between two and three people within the entire company would work from home maybe once a month.*

However, a small minority could not work from home due to a lack of laptops.

Looking ahead, the company does not expect homeworking to be adopted as part of the new way of working and has some concerns about a wider uptake of working from home. As the HR director of the firm comments:

*I don't think it will be a 100% thing. I don't think people will be allowed to work from home permanently because some employees need to be in the office maybe a couple of times a week to avoid isolation, while other parents find it hard to concentrate if they have children at home... I also think some people just don't*

*adapt very well to working at home, which partly depends how seriously you take your job. I can see why individuals would want to work from home and the freedom it gives them, but a lot of managers won't really want that... My own personal experience is that when I've scheduled a call, one of my staff members will be outside or have gone to the shops or something, and obviously that wouldn't really hold within the office environment, so I do find that for myself, I'm having to micromanage a lot more than I would like.*

In addition, the HR director of the firm also claims that achieving a work–life balance is very difficult, because there are some who you need to monitor closely because they are not doing the work and others who are working very long hours.

Looking ahead, the company has recognised how easy it is for people to work from home, which will be reflected in increased uptake of working from home in the future. As a result, the expectation is that the proportion of people who work from home will increase fairly sharply. A tiny proportion of staff worked from home prior to the onset of COVID-19.

### **Impact of homeworking on productivity**

Homeworking is reported to have reduced the efficiency of the company because the lines of communication are less efficient.

As the HR director explains:

*It's simply when people have to really concentrate and run reports, or a task which, in the quiet of an office and with your colleagues all working alongside you, you would probably get done faster and more efficiently. I do find that you're having to wait longer for anything from the employees, and on top of that, where if they had a question, they would just say, 'Can you just check this is right?', now it's just email after email and back and forth. It's a lot harder than just walking around to someone's desk.*

However, at the same time, the company claims that technology has helped overcome communication challenges:

*My team, for example, tends to do a Teams or a WhatsApp call, and we'll have the video link on even as we work, so we still have the natural flow of conversation as we're working. I don't know how much people across the country have embraced that.*

The HR director of the firm also reports that people with childcare responsibilities have caused disruption due to rescheduling of meetings and tasks:

*I personally find it quite disruptive, because for me, I'm not so much interested in the childcare part of the employee side. I get there's problems, but for me, I need them to achieve a task, so I do find that I'm having to reschedule quite a few things, or say, 'Okay, we'll reconvene in half an hour,' or what have you.*

To address some of these challenges, the director at the firm wonders whether a new target-driven performance management system might be introduced to ensure that productivity levels do not fall as a result of widespread homeworking, which is reported to be a concern among managers:

*I think people have become more interested in measuring productivity. I've found that I've had to start setting severe deadlines for staff, saying, 'Well, I need this by the end of the day,' or what have you, whereas before I wouldn't have really done that as much. I think probably as the weeks have gone by, our managers have to learn to do that.*

Additionally, the firm claims that it has been more difficult to resolve problems.

### **Flexible working**

The company has seen more employees adopt more flexible working hours since the start of the pandemic, but this has not led to a change in policy. The firm anticipates a rise in demand for flexible working in the future, especially in terms of parental leave.

### **Returning to the workplace**

At the time of writing there was no information about how and when staff returned to the workplace because there had been no information given by the Government. As in other case studies, the firm expects more senior people to return sooner than low-paid staff – which is reported will have an additional dampening effect on the earnings of low-paid staff.

### **Health and wellbeing**

The company has a number of initiatives in place to support employee wellbeing. These include an employee hub with mental health support, which the HR department updates weekly. In addition, the firm provides both links to wellbeing classes, a counselling helpline and a forum in which people can address how they feel or any queries that they might have. The HR department is also contacting employees weekly and has provided regular updates from senior management about how well the business is doing.

However, at the same time, no support has been given to line managers. Facilitating remote working and ensuring that people had the right IT equipment was the most immediate priority following lockdown. However, now that this has been largely resolved, health and wellbeing is reported to be the most important current HR priority. The company reported some resignations and long-term sick leave due to stress and anxiety. Those who are on sick leave receive fortnightly calls as part of an employee engagement programme. There is no initiative in place for employees in work, which the HR director of the firm acknowledges is a mistake – especially given the isolation and high levels of anxiety by some, which is primarily due to financial worries.

*[T]heir only form of contact often of the week will be work phone calls. I think managers are trying to just check in with people and see that they're all right, but I don't really think that is something that should fall down to individual managers. I do believe there should be an overarching HR scheme just to check in on people... employees are struggling a lot. Most of our employees who don't work in the office are on the very minimum wage. Furlough didn't even allow the 2020 numbers to be applied, so they're being paid 80% of their pay on their 2019 wages. I think it has badly impacted people. The only thing we could do to help them was to suspend living and accommodation deductions from the payroll.*

## Training

COVID-19 has had a negative impact on the firm's capacity to train staff. The company's apprenticeship schemes have continued to run, but they have been beset by some challenges. This is because the apprentices are more reluctant to engage over the phone than in the classroom, which is illustrated in the following example:

*For instance, we have an HR apprentice and normally she would be bursting with ideas, and she would be coming to us with feedback about what she thought was good and was not. However, she seems to have clammed up since lockdown... I think people are a bit more hesitant to go into detail or talk about any concerns they have over the phone... I just don't know if it's the enclosure space that makes the apprentices feel a bit more secure.*

Meanwhile, other training activity has ground to a complete halt. The training was mainly classroom-based, which included mentoring programmes. The firm acknowledges that *'this has been an oversight on our part.'*

# Manufacturing company

## Background

This UK-based manufacturing company makes bespoke steel rolling mills. They've been trading for over 40 years and they primarily serve large industry. Machines tend to cost £2–5 million, which is a major financial investment for companies. They do their own research and development and manufacture their own electronics. The majority of their business is export and they supply steel rolling mills all over the world.

The sales team travel around the world to meet with customers to find out what they need. The company then does the necessary research and development in-house to see if they can meet those needs before hopefully going back to the customer with initial designs. The mills are manufactured in the UK and transported to the customer's site, where they are installed and tested.

Given the specialist nature of what they do, the company does not have a sales office, but they do exhibit at trade shows and are well known in the industry. The customer typically approaches them.

## Employment levels

The company closed quite quickly in response to the pandemic, but a good IT system enables a large number of people to work from home. No staff have been made redundant and the company is reluctant to lose people as employees are highly skilled in their respective fields.

Around a fifth of the workforce are foreign nationals with specific expertise, and even if they have returned home for now, they are still working for the business as they can work remotely.

The five apprentices are also still being paid and are expected to continue their studies at home as the company doesn't want to lose the apprenticeships.

Cleaners and administrative staff are being paid 80% of their wages and the company will consider furloughing more staff if the situation carries on and people aren't able to return to their usual roles. At the moment they've resisted furloughing people or making redundancies.

*They're all high-paid, so furlough sounds good, but not when it's 80% of £2,500... If we mentioned furlough and gave people 80% of £2,500, I think we wouldn't have to make people redundant, would we? I think they'd quit.*

*A lot of our people who have got a lot of expertise, it's easy for them to find another job, they're not going to be going down the dole queue.*

However, the company has applied to have its tax delayed.

## Homeworking

Before the pandemic, people didn't work from home very much. Those working in research and development may be doing multiple funded projects for different clients so were often offsite. And service engineers would mostly be working on client sites all around the world.

The company does have a working from home policy and that was sometimes used by administrative staff. And directors will either be working on client sites, in the office or working at home. They don't always work the typical 9–5 working day, but often flex their hours around project demands.

People have flexibility in their working hours but there is a schedule that people need to stick to in order to complete projects: *'people have got the flexibility to work around family and children as long as set times are met for the conference calls.'*

The interviewee reflects that homeworking during the pandemic has *'brought people closer. You stop seeing people as managers and directors, and see them as humans, with families, problems and everything else.'* And people are working together better.

### **Impact of homeworking on productivity**

The interviewee feels that on average people are working harder from home. They are getting through the work and have time to think about how things could be improved as, with not being in the office, they're not always in and out of meetings and there aren't constant interruptions. For example, it is reported that *'people have more time to chase suppliers, search for alternative suppliers and problem-solve.'*

### **Returning to the workplace**

The company are being flexible to individual circumstances. *'We've looked at everybody individually and seen what position they're in and where they're at. We're not making anybody come back, that it's going to cause a problem with. We have one employee, his wife is on the shielding list, so nobody's expecting him to come back. It's no problem.'*

People are working from home as much as possible, but areas have been set up for people in the office if they need to go in without contact with other people: *'Sometimes you need to look at the old plans and records and see if something is going to work.'*

As yet, it's unknown when people who returned home to be with their families will be able to return to the UK. They'll continue to work from home at the moment and conference call scheduling takes different time zones into account.

### **Pay cuts**

The directors have all taken a pay cut of 10% of their salary until the company is back up and running. They want to make sure there are jobs for everyone.

### **Investing in training**

The company isn't planning to take on new staff as they estimate they are about four months behind schedule with work and so wouldn't have time to train people up. The more experienced staff train the apprentices onsite, and the company aims to hold onto the apprentices so that after their training they become part of the workforce.

Videos and tutorials have been made available to people to access remotely if they have extra time at the moment.

## Priorities

The company is thinking about what will happen next in the economy. The interviewee feels they have a realistic view approach and have been through ups and downs before, for example the recession. They have letters of credit on current orders so are less concerned about the present, but there are concerns about the future and whether potential customers will have the funds to invest in new machinery: *'We're realistic to know that when there's a recession on, people are not going to spend a few million pounds on an asset.'*

## Health and wellbeing

The company keeps in closer contact with people they know are struggling in the current situation. They are aware of a few people who may need some extra support and managers check in on people as well as colleagues looking out for each other. Those who are struggling will have the opportunity to come back to the office first if they want to.

In terms of financial wellbeing, everyone is still on full salary at the moment (apart from the directors, who took a 10% pay cut). The firm offers a loan scheme if people do have money problems. *'We put a memo around in the meeting, if anybody has misgivings, problems, anything, to get in touch and we'll see what we can do, and nobody has, so from that point of view I think they are fine.'*

## Training provider

This training provider provides traineeships to 16–18-year-olds, and apprenticeships in a range of disciplines from Level 2 up to degree level. Headquartered in London, it's a national company with several sites across the country.

### Homeworking and wellbeing

Before COVID-19, there was a small amount of flexible working, and around 10% worked from home. All staff have been working remotely since the COVID-19 outbreak, and no one is travelling.

The company is flexible in how it expects employees to complete their 40-hour working week. As the HR representative says: *'They can take time off in the middle of the day to go out for exercise if they wish or need a break. If they've got family or children at home, they can work more evenings. It's totally flexible. As long as the work is being done, we really don't mind how it's being conducted or at what time.'*

There are daily Zoom meetings with staff since moving to 100% homeworking, to give business updates and check on people's health and wellbeing. There's a conscious effort to make time for informal and social connectivity, including an online quiz for all staff on Fridays. The HR representative also connects with every individual on a one-to-one basis to discuss any challenges and ask how they're feeling. The company regularly sends out helpful information to support people's mental health, including signposting to sources of advice and help.

The company also has a well-established 'buddy system', so every individual has got another person that they can approach, understanding that one person might not want to open up to HR but might want to open up to somebody else.

People's experience of homeworking varies considerably depending on their individual circumstances, which the company is sympathetic to. Some people are struggling because they're home alone and can't see any family, while others have the whole of family at home, making it hard for them to work.

The company believes strongly in employee wellbeing, and is keen to support people during this difficult time. As the HR representative comments: *'Unfortunately, we've had people whose immediate families have been taken ill or died... so we've been quite conscious about giving them as much time and space as they need, and for what they need to do, and just being there for them as needed.'*

### Embracing technology

Fortunately, the company was already quite technology-based and forward thinking pre-pandemic, and was already part-way through delivering a lot of its teaching and learning online. When the virus hit, it had to put things in place digitally a little bit more quickly than anticipated, but the company has welcomed the opportunity to be pushed forward a bit quicker in this direction.

However, in terms of homeworking, the main challenges have come from the hardware. People have equipment at home and are able to do their jobs, but it's *'probably not the best equipment'*, with some laptops being a bit old.

The company has seen a lot more 'coming together' since the crisis began, reports the HR representative. Motivation '*can be an issue*', and this is one challenge that HR has tried to get on top of, for example by helping people to plan and keep their spirits up. However, productivity has actually gone up since the shift to homeworking.

### **Longer-term change afoot**

The company has made clear to staff that it doesn't want anyone travelling into offices even as lockdown restrictions are eased, as its priority is keeping people safe. It recognises that many people had concerns about using public transport, particularly as its head office is in London, and so it has been quick to reassure people. The HR representative explains:

*We're actually thinking that we will stay remote working to a degree, but we're in the process of doing a survey to find out what staff think about that and what their reservations would be, and whether there's anything that we would need to do to make working from home acceptable for them.*

The problem is that some people aren't in an environment that's ideal to work from home. If that's the case, and the company has another employee who is working from home nearby, it might, once the restrictions are eased, look at them working somewhere else. This could be a smaller pop-up office that's near to them that they could go to and work in rather than them having to travel.

So far, the company has not made any redundancies. It aims to plan its future in a strategic way, but it's looking for long-term change. Its strong focus on employee engagement and wellbeing will stand it in good stead to do so. As the HR representative said: '*Would we have to make redundancies going forward? We can't tell them that, but all we can do is be as honest and as open as we can on a daily basis. That's all, really.*'

## **Agency staff provider**

This small family-run firm of 18 employees, which started business in 2012, supplies agency staff to care homes and clients in the community. As well as care workers, staff include an office cleaner and receptionist.

### **Employment levels**

The spread of COVID-19 has not had a negative impact on the company's purpose of providing its clients with care staff. Therefore, it hasn't needed to furlough any staff or make anyone redundant. It has also been fortunate enough to be able to find enough PPE to provide to its employees, such as gloves, masks and visors.

### **Homeworking**

While the office has been kept open, some staff are now working from their homes. Prior to the lockdown, no one worked from their homes. The care staff work in their clients' homes, but they don't need to go into the office.

### **Impact of homeworking on productivity**

The organisation judges that its employees are just as productive now as they were previously. This it believes is because it's a small employer and so its people know their colleagues well and can coordinate between themselves their workloads, despite now being physically separate from each other. It also saves the firm some money as it no longer needs to spend so much on facilities, such as providing staff with lunch. After the pandemic, the firm will allow its people to work from home and will consider other forms of flexible working.

### **Employee attitudes to homeworking**

Employees report that they like working from home as it saves time and money on the commute. Because the firm is more concerned with the output than the input, it is happy for employees to manage their work around their personal care commitments, such as looking after children. It believes that this working relationship is beneficial for its people.

### **Impact of technology**

The employer says that the technology needed for working from home has not been a challenge. It has had to provide some of its employees with laptops and is now looking at providing them with headsets to help staff better hear what's being said via video-conferencing.

### **Returning to the workplace**

Because of the nature of its work, it has always been careful regarding health and safety and has focused on the importance of cleaning to reduce the danger of contamination. So, the firm believes that it already has a culture whereby staff are aware of the importance of reducing the risk of infection.

The only thing that has changed since the outbreak is a new policy whereby if an employee, or one of their family, has symptoms of the virus they must stay at home for seven days. Because they work in the care sector, all employees have access to virus testing.

### **Investing in training**

Training courses have been put on hold during the crisis. In the past, most training took place at work and consisted of five to six people. Some of the development, such as moving and handling, involves practice as well as theory, so that wouldn't lend itself well to online courses. It was also the case that not everyone had a laptop to begin with, so they would have been unable to participate until their computer was delivered.

### **Priorities**

The organisation's main priorities haven't changed. The only new one is acquiring enough PPE to secure the safety of its employees and their clients. Most staff visit several sites a day, so they can't wear the same PPE more than once.

### **Pay cuts**

Because the firm is now buying more PPE than it used to, its costs have risen. Previously it supplied staff with gowns and gloves, but now it also provides them with masks and visors. To help meet these costs, the directors have taken a small pay cut. There is no plan to cut the pay of the rest of the workforce as well.

### **Health and wellbeing**

There has not been a significant increase in staff being off work due to the coronavirus, either because they, or their family members, have symptoms.

A few workers have suffered from stress, either because they have lost close family members to coronavirus or because loved ones have fallen ill from it and it was uncertain whether they would survive.

The firm already employs a counsellor to help staff deal with their stress, though since the pandemic the counselling service is now over the phone rather than face-to-face.

Because the firm is so small, employees know when colleagues are feeling distressed, anxious or depressed and are always prepared to help informally.

# Biotechnology company

## Background

This biotech company, based in the south of England, employs eight employees in the UK. They make medicines and nutritional products from honey bees, which they export to around 60 countries.

## Employment levels

The pandemic has not had any impact on employment levels at the firm. The firm considered furloughing a member of staff, whose role was to liaise with veterinary practices, which she was unable to do due to social distancing rules. However, the firm was able to avoid this through redeployment and using technology as a substitute for site visits. Employment levels are expected to remain unchanged in the short term.

However, COVID-19 did have a big impact on business activity during the early stages of the pandemic because the manufacturing operation of the firm, which is based in Italy, was closed for several weeks. This caused major disruption to the supply chain for several weeks, which continues to cause problems for the firm. These include unfulfilled orders because the inventory remains well below pre-pandemic levels.

## Homeworking and productivity

The pandemic has led to a sharp increase in homeworking for all employees. Around half of the workforce had experience of working from home at least once a week. Looking ahead, the company expects working from home to increase, not least because the firm believes that the recent homeworking experience has been successful. This is partly due to social interaction and productivity levels holding up well during the crisis.

As the commercial director explains:

*I never really thought that we had the right set-up to work from home to such an extent, but these last nine weeks, or whatever it is, has proved that we do. We remain just as productive as we were prior to the lockdown, so there's no reason not to [increase working from home]. I have a family, so it certainly helps with that side of things as well... As a small company, we tend to sit in our individual offices. We might say 'good morning' and 'goodbye', but we don't tend to chat very much. Bizarrely, this situation has meant that we've sort of forced ourselves to do at least bi-weekly catch-up video calls, and we probably spend a lot more time discussing things that we should be discussing than we did beforehand.*

The company expects to invest more in technology to meet the increased demand to work from home.

On the downside, the current working arrangements have proved challenging from a business development perspective – both in terms of client development and marketing opportunities such as trade shows and conferences.

### **Flexible working**

The company has always had a flexible working hours arrangement which allows workers to schedule work around their needs. However, this is an informal, ad hoc arrangement, which the company does not plan to build on in the future.

### **Employee wellbeing**

There's no formal support in place, which the company puts down to its size. However, the company director is communicating regularly with staff informally and is not aware of any financial or employee wellbeing issues.

## Boarding school

The employer is a boarding school based in the north of England that employs up to 230 people, either as teachers (80) or in other roles (150), such as grounds or catering staff. The school is currently closed, and its pupils are learning from home.

### Employment levels

The teaching staff are teaching their pupils online from their homes. Some of the support employees, such as the catering and the laundry workers, have been furloughed, while others, such as the grounds staff, are still working.

So far, the school has not increased the number of teaching or non-teaching staff and has no plans to do so. Equally it has not made anyone redundant and has no plans yet to do so.

### Homeworking

Because teachers can't tutor the schoolchildren physically, they are using online platforms, such as Google Classroom, to give lessons to pupils. Work is set weekly, sent to the students and they complete it at home. The school provides pupils with online resources and video feeds. Teachers record lessons; these are available on various platforms and pupils watch them from home.

### Impact of homeworking on productivity

The focus of the school is to deliver to its pupils at least the same amount and quality of education as well as pastoral support as it would have done if there had been no coronavirus. There is also the expectation from parents, who are paying fees, that the school delivers the best results. So, while the teaching and support output has changed during the crisis, the outcome in terms of quality and quantity has not. However, some teachers are having to work harder if they teach over several year groups.

In terms of education, there has been no benefit from homeworking for the school. It believes that it is important for pupils to be onsite and interacting with their teachers and fellow classmates for help and support. This can be harder to do when people aren't together. Also, unlike in primary schools, it can be harder for secondary school pupils to ask their parents for help with their homework.

### Impact of technology

While before the crisis most teaching was done in person, there had been some use of online teaching. This meant that the school had experience of these systems and teachers didn't need to spend too much time and effort learning how to use them.

However, teaching online does requires more work:

*With Google Classroom, we would set a piece of work, and then students would submit it via that portal, then teachers would have to mark it and resend it back. It is quite complex and awfully time-consuming. You have to produce work where students can work independently, and that's not always possible. At school, we'll introduce a topic, explain, and then students would go off and do the work on it. In the current situation, we can't do that. Students have to do a lot of their own*

*independent research. We're lucky it didn't happen 20 years ago, because we'd have been really stuck.*

### **Returning to the workplace**

Currently, the employer is aware that its staff are worried about returning to school, especially while the infection rate in its area remains as high as it is. Teachers will have to return to their families at the end of the day and there is a concern that if they pick up the virus in school, the chances are that their families are also going to catch it.

The school had been exploring various options for reopening the school, in line with guidance from the Government, the local council and the teaching unions, as well as talking to its staff, governors and parents. It would not have been feasible to bring everyone back before the start of September. Even bringing back some pupils, teachers and staff before September will be complex, especially with social distancing. In terms of who would return first, the school will focus its resources on examinations years – Year 10 who would become Year 11 next year and Year 12 who will go into Year 13 from September.

### **Investing in training**

Apart from those online courses where staff have already enrolled, nothing new has been initiated since the lockdown started. Not all training is by course in any case – some happen when staff go on conferences or when guest speakers give presentations to workers. However, during the pandemic this type of development has not happened.

### **Health and wellbeing**

While working from home, teachers are under an obligation to deliver the curriculum to their students, and they can do it how they see fit. They wouldn't have to register whether they were ill, so the school would not be aware of whether there had been an increase in sickness among its teaching staff.

Senior staff have had private conversations about the state of employee mental health. They assume that staff could be feeling stressed because they are worried about their students, the progress they're making, and whether they're falling behind. There is also pressure from parents, because of the fees and their expectation on staff to deliver. However, now, because the staff are all spread out, it is difficult for the school to gauge how people are feeling.

Talking about mental health could be something that the school considers when people return to site and people are able to discuss things as a group, face-to-face. However, it is aware that people still perceive that being open about their mental health could be detrimental to their career and they might not feel comfortable talking about it with their colleagues or senior management.

Because teaching can be a stressful profession, the school has various measures in place to reduce the stress, such as mindfulness or meditation. The school employs counsellors to help their pupils with their mental health issues; staff can also see these counsellors, but few do.

### **Financial wellbeing**

The school assumes that its teachers are okay, because their salaries are still being paid in full. However, there is a concern that it might not be able to keep paying teacher salaries in full if

schools remain closed for another term. Non-teaching staff may have to take a pay cut next term if the school can no longer charge parents as much.

## **Contractor for the defence industry**

The company works specifically on the communications and information side, with a number of sites across England and Scotland. It employs just under 300 people in total.

### **Employment levels**

The company has continued to take on staff throughout the crisis as it still has work and contracts to fill. It continues to have quite a high number of vacancies, particularly for more experienced roles. Recruitment was initially paused as the pandemic began but it has since moved its recruitment process online. There are no current plans to make redundancies in the short term. There is a hold on employing apprentices but this was implemented before the pandemic.

### **Homeworking**

A large majority of staff have been able to work from home throughout the pandemic. However, those that are in production or have to work on specific projects have continued to go into the office, where they have introduced social distancing and more cleaning. For others who can work from home, they initially implemented a rota system.

Currently it is encouraging staff to follow the government guidance that if they can work from home, they should do, but has offered flexibility to come in if they want to so that they can have some contact with colleagues. It is aware of the potential risk to people's mental health of constantly working from home so certainly will not turn people away if they want to come into the office. It does have some staff who are vulnerable, or shielding, who have chosen to stay at home. All those working from home have been provided with adequate equipment – suitable chairs, two screens, and so on – if requested.

Before the pandemic, it had a handful of staff who worked from home, but the previous HR director had a more old-fashioned view of homeworking so it was only a minority of people. However, the pandemic has demonstrated it can be done.

### **Employee attitudes to homeworking**

Employees seem to have taken to homeworking well, by and large. The firm expects there to be a 50-50 split in terms of asking for homeworking in the future – some staff really like going into the office and don't want to work from home at all. However, others are keen to continue to work from home moving forward.

One perception is that some employees have found it challenging not to be in an office where they have their manager and HR readily available. Communication has been slightly more difficult, and the company doesn't want staff to feel abandoned.

Interestingly, the company is considering a site move at some point in the future and the shift to homeworking will have an impact in terms of the size of the site they will choose.

### **Impact of homeworking on productivity**

There hasn't been any discernible shift in productivity as a result of homeworking. The company reports a very self-motivated team that takes great pride in its work. It has noticed that some staff have been starting later than their usual time and working slightly later, yet no apparent change in productivity. This is put down to the time saved by not having to commute.

## Returning to the workplace

There have not been formal discussions about a total return just yet, but they are likely to continue as is for the time being. They have made arrangements for people to be in the office throughout, such as those in production roles and those who opt to come in, so they have measures in place already.

As a member of their HR team explains:

*We're going to continue as we are. I think it's almost as if we've already put that in place; we've been doing it almost from day one, so not really. We're aware it's going to happen but there isn't really much that will change for now. I suppose the biggest problem if everyone wants to come back to work, we can't have them all back at work at the same time. At the moment it works because people are on rotas or working from home. That's something we just need to continue to manage, really. Line managers are doing that; they're looking after their departments. They know which staff will be in and which are working at home, if they're not working. It's all being managed quite well so far.*

## Health and wellbeing

It hasn't had any increase in absence levels since going into lockdown but it is concerned about the impact that not being in work might have on people's mental health. They do consistently advertise to staff to speak to their manager or HR if they have a problem, plus they have access to an employee assistance programme.

## Recycling company

This recycling business employs around 190 people on permanent contracts, increasing headcount to around 250 by using zero-hours contracts to scale up depending on business demand. The business was doing 'reasonably well' before the pandemic, according to the HR business partner. Since the pandemic started, the company hasn't lost any contracts, although there are now issues with cash flow.

### New resourcing models

The majority of office staff have worked mainly from home since the outbreak. The company carried out a careful one-to-one consultation with each employee to determine what they would need in terms of technology. Staff can't use their own laptops due to security risks, and every employee has a work phone.

A very small number of staff have continued to work in the office, but this has to be agreed with line management. Some staff come in one day a week – mainly because those with children find it hard to concentrate at home.

The company's lorry drivers have remained out on the road throughout. It's hard to socially distance these workers, who normally work in teams of two. A lot of the teams have been split down to a single driver, and the company also cohorts teams, by keeping the same teams working together.

The company has furloughed two employees who work in media roles, but it's envisaged they would be back in work soon.

### Health and safety

The company started an early planning process to ensure that health and safety measures were implemented onsite. This included securing PPE and hand sanitisers as well as protocols for use of communal areas. The cleaners have been working 'around the clock' to ensure a high level of cleanliness, and the health and safety manager has implemented strict social distancing measures, including moving some workstations into corridors.

### Protecting vulnerable employees

Because of the lack of clarity in government guidance for people with underlying health conditions and their risk from COVID-19, the HR manager has spent a lot of time carrying out his own research into the level of risk for certain employees. It's only since the pandemic that the company has become aware that some have chronic health conditions, for example five drivers who are taking arthritis immunisation drugs.

The HR manager has turned himself 'into a public health adviser', researching people's conditions and giving advice to help protect vulnerable employees from infection.

The company generally has a strict approach to absence, but believes if someone is 'genuinely sick, you're sick'. But the HR manager keeps in constant touch with all absent employees, and as a point of policy phones anyone who is off sick on a daily basis.

The HR manager has concerns about how the health crisis is affecting some employees' mental health. The company has a helpline that is part of the benefits package, where they can phone

and speak confidentially to a medical professional. There is a marked increase in the number of people who have accessed the helpline since the virus outbreak.

### Homeworking means higher productivity

Before the pandemic, no employees worked from home. The move to full-time homeworking has resulted in pros and cons for both employees and the business.

On the downside, a lot of homeworkers have had to turn their bedrooms into offices, and many experience difficulties balancing homeworking with childcare.

On the plus side, *'when the people are actually at home and they've got themselves sorted out, the productivity is higher,'* says the HR manager. Some are even dressing for work because they feel more ready for work and it sends a message to the family that they are working.

The company would be open to increased homeworking in the future, and has moved from a more traditional, lack of trust approach because of the high productivity from homeworking it is witnessing. It's also clear there are fewer interruptions for many people working from home compared with office life.

### Employee voice

The new ways of working have undermined the informal lines of communication that were previously a strong feature of the company culture. As the HR manager says: *'the internal communication... has just been lost.'* This has especially affected the drivers out on the road, who are *'missing the staff noticeboard, the word of mouth, of what's going on in the business'*.

There's concern on the part of the business and employees about the continuing uncertainty of the situation. This makes it impossible to plan ahead and the company is very much in firefighting mode.

The company is very aware of employee concerns about the ongoing situation, with many worried about losing their jobs. It has had to stop overtime, with a lot of employees living hand to mouth. However, so far the company has not seriously thought about making redundancies, and most employees just seem relieved to still have a job.

## Small business in Scotland

This small business based in Scotland has been able to continue operating through the pandemic thanks to the owner's flexible approach to managing people and a shift to homeworking.

### Employment levels

The business, which employs 13 people on a mix of full- and part-time contracts, has furloughed three people, with the rest working flexibly from home. The business owner said that the furlough scheme had definitely saved the firm from having to make redundancies since the start of the lockdown.

The firm is not topping up salaries for the furloughed staff above the 80% provided by the Government because of the cost of the other benefits employees receive, including a generous employer pension contribution, life and medical insurance.

The firm is planning to bring one consultant and one administrator back to work from furlough to work reduced hours.

The business owner has taken a cut in his salary and is freezing the salaries of all other staff, but despite these measures thinks he might have to make at least one or two employees redundant in the future. However, he is still exploring options on how to avoid this.

### Homeworking and childcare

The business was fairly well prepared for the pandemic as it had a business continuity plan in place, but it had to invest in new laptops for three members of staff and ask the IT support company it uses to update some of its systems.

The company is very supportive of its people with childcare responsibilities because of the attitude of the owner. He believes that enabling people to put their family first will make the business stronger.

*The ones who have got children, I'm saying, 'You work the hours that you want to work. If you've got to do stuff with kids in the morning, do stuff with kids in the morning. If you want to work at two o'clock in the morning, I don't care.' I'm giving them the flexibility so they can plan their life around the important things, which is family.*

### Impact on productivity

On balance, the business owner believes the shift to more homeworking has increased productivity, commenting *'there's a bit less distraction that they have, there's a bit less chat going on, the productivity has probably increased slightly.'* He also doesn't think that working remotely has undermined collaboration or agility because the business has always operated on a culture of empowerment, which means people can make decisions without having to always have them signed off from the centre.

Looking forward, the business owner has made it clear that people can continue to work from home more than they did prior to lockdown. He commented: *'I've already said to them that,*

*when we come back, people who want to work from home, they want to do it once a week, twice a week, they can do it. I'm fully flexible in how people want to work.'*

### **Returning to the workplace**

The business has not yet started to discuss a return to the workplace because, following a meeting with staff, it was clear they were enjoying working from home, with no particular interest in returning to the office. The business owner thinks it will be possible to use the office space differently to ensure people can socially distance at two metres when they do return to the workplace.

### **Training**

Employees are encouraged to study for additional qualifications where they would like to and it will help them do their jobs. For example, one of its consultants is doing an advanced qualification in pensions. The business also funds and provides access to shorter online courses for staff. The training used by the firm tends to be online because of the time demands of being out of the office for face-to-face courses. The owner believes there may be more scope for staff to do more learning online now they are working from home because they potentially have more time to do so.

### **Health and wellbeing**

The business owner is very aware of the need to support staff's mental wellbeing and, with the team leader, is in contact with every member of staff twice a week officially, and usually another two or three times unofficially.

The firm was swift to enable staff to work from home when the impact of the pandemic became apparent because of concerns raised by staff about their health or because they were living with someone who was elderly or more vulnerable.

There is a WhatsApp group called Banter that helps connect people and is used to ensure that people can receive support or help if needed. The company also provides private medical insurance that includes access to a helpline if anyone needs to use it.

### **Financial wellbeing**

The company does not do anything specifically to support people's financial wellbeing. However, this issue was taken into account when the company made decisions about furloughing staff. The business owner had conversations about how people would cope with the drop in income if they were furloughed to ensure they could manage and only furloughed staff if they could afford the drop in salary.

### **Government support**

In terms of government support, the business owner would like to see the JRS extended to the end of the year and for small firms to be eligible for one-off grants to cover the cost of making the workplace safe when people come back to the office.

## Construction and support services firm

This company, based in the east of England, provides control systems software and chemical dosing for the water industry and employs about 100 people. It reports that it has not had to make any redundancies or put anyone on furlough so far.

### Employment levels

However, the company is facing further uncertainty in addition to the impact of COVID-19 because it is dependent on five-year asset management programmes (AMPs). These are common in the water industry and the most recent one ended in March.

As a result, all recruitment had been frozen anyway as it can take six or seven months after the start of a new AMP before work starts to pick up.

Looking ahead it is not clear yet whether any redundancies will be needed but this will be more down to the nature of the next AMP and how much work it generates rather than COVID-19.

### Homeworking and safe working protocols

As the company's services are critical to the water industry, all its employees are categorised as key workers. Many are involved in manufacturing control and chemical dosing equipment and have had to continue attending the workplace. The company has split shifts for those working in its manufacturing facility, with one shift operating from 6am to 2pm and one from 2pm to 10pm. This has reduced the number of workers in the facility at any one time and allowed it to ensure social distancing protocols are met.

The rest of the company's staff transitioned to working from home with few problems arising from this. This is despite very few people typically working from home before the pandemic, with one director estimating that perhaps 1% of staff worked from home regularly before lockdown, typically if they had to attend a training course for part of the day.

Some senior managers were initially sceptical that people would work from home as productively as in the office. However, in practice, the shift to homeworking has gone well, with the firm using Microsoft Teams videoconferencing technology to keep people in touch with each other and maintain teamworking.

There is an expectation that there will be a big increase in demand from employees to be able to work more from home after lockdown has ended, as people have benefited from reduced commuting times and enhanced work-life balance.

However, the interviewee was sceptical if the company would seek to meet this new demand with changes in working practices longer term.

### Impact of homeworking on productivity

The interviewee felt that it was difficult to estimate the effect of the increase in homeworking on productivity because the business has been affected by difficulties accessing materials and

equipment since lockdown. The biggest difficulty the company faced in continuing to operate in lockdown was because of key suppliers of parts shutting down, resulting in late delivery for some clients.

In addition, as referenced above, business activity has been affected by the end of the most recent five-year AMP and the usual hiatus that occurs before the next one starts to drive activity and new business.

The interviewee highlighted the additional management time to engage people via Teams and 'bring people in', commenting, *'it is not the same as going for a cup of coffee.'* He also cited loneliness being an issue for some people.

At the time of the interview, there were no plans to require people who have been working from home to return to the office.

### **Training**

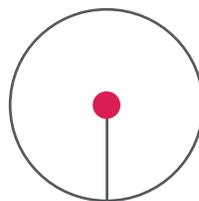
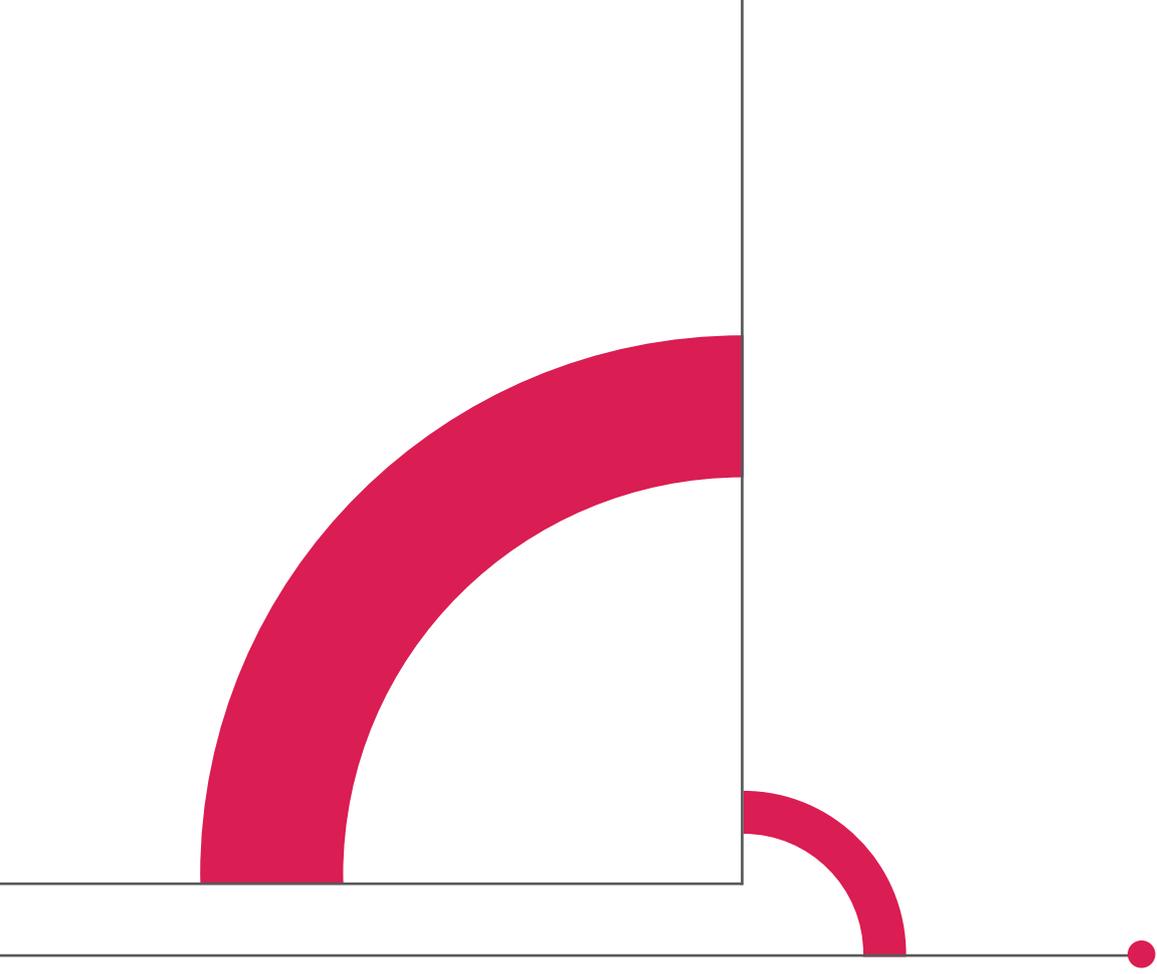
The firm's training is mainly focused on compliance, for example, virtual courses on clean site and hygiene that employees have to have. Employees have to be certified to even visit a water site and ensure there is no cross-contamination, say, if someone has been working on sewerage one day then a water purification site the next.

Beyond compliance-based training, the company provides little in the way of skills development or training opportunities for workers.

### **Health and wellbeing**

So far about a fifth of staff have taken time off due to self-isolating, but no one has reported having caught COVID-19. Staff receive their normal pay if they have to take time off sick or self-isolate.

However, the interviewee said there is a wider problem in the organisation with work-related stress beyond the challenges and anxieties caused by the pandemic as a result of poor pay, lack of staff and bad management. This has contributed to high annual staff turnover levels of 20–25%, which further exacerbates problems with wellbeing according to the business owner.



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