Get ready for the new normal

General Features



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Karen Eckstein examines how businesses must address the ‘new normal’ way of working to ensure their future profitability and sustainability

Key Points

What is the issue?

Well-prepared businesses can use the changes resulting from Covid-19 to be more effective, more profitable, and secure and keep the best staff and clients.

What does it mean for me?

It's likely that you will have an opportunity to substantially reduce your capital overhead, but you will still need to invest time and money in thorough risk assessments if you are fundamentally changing the way your employees work.

What can I take away?

Many employees will welcome the chance to work from home more often, but you have a duty of care and must address problems such as lack of space or possible mental difficulties for some employees, as well as ensuring collaborative working practices between home and office workers.

People are now becoming used to working at home and significant numbers have the necessary technology in place to enable them to do so successfully. Many like the flexibility which homeworking brings, and are being encouraged by government and society to continue to work in such ways. All of this means that we are unlikely to return to life as it was before Covid-19, with people working from 9am to 5pm in offices, with long commutes, crowded trains and buses, busy offices, and office space at a premium.

Well prepared businesses can, however, use the changes to their advantage to be more effective, more profitable, and secure and keep the best staff and clients. To do so, they have to identify and address risks and issues in four areas: property, people, processes and prospects. This article considers issues relevant to property and people. In a following article, I will consider issues relevant to processes and prospects.

Property

It's likely that you will have an opportunity to reduce your capital overhead by significant amounts. Spend on office space is one of the biggest expenses, and you may have the opportunity to reduce your overheads, thereby significantly increasing your profitability without affecting productivity and turnover.

While you may not want all of your staff to work at home on a full time basis, many staff will want some flexibility, which could include homeworking for at least half of their working week. Some firms are considering asking staff to work split shifts, which could halve the office space needed. There will not be a need for one desk for each member of staff – although there would need to be an investment in office design and proper cleaning between each employee using a desk. You will also need to invest time and money in ensuring that employees working from home have the equipment and support they need as a result of these changes.

Whether you own or rent your property, there will be issues to resolve; for example, is there a break clause in your lease or can you sublet? Property advice, including legal advice, will be needed at an early stage.

Common areas: If you are in a shared building, consider who is responsible for the common areas and who will take responsibility for ensuring staff and visitor safety in those areas. Offices must comply with all government guidelines and health and safety requirements.

Transport: Consider how your staff are going to get to the office, given government recommendations that people try to avoid public transport. If you provide parking, will you increase the number of parking spaces available so that staff can drive in if they want to? Could you introduce a cycle to work scheme?

Location: As so many meetings now take place virtually, would an out of town office with lots of car parking be better than a city centre office? I think there will be a lot of decentralisation, and firms should consider increasing staffing in regional offices at the expense of a more expensive London base for some or all of their services.

Office design: There may need to be substantial changes to the office layout to take in the current and future government recommendations, and specialist advice may be needed. Would it make sense to have larger, well ventilated meeting rooms with windows? There has been a move towards having 'pods' and breakout areas in offices, but will these work in the new normal?

Paperwork: You may already scan paperwork and store it digitally; but if not, then you could be facing a large task. There is little point in retaining archived files in your office. Consider your obligations under the General Data Protection Regulations and review whether the documents need to be retained. (It is amazing how many

people retain files beyond the relevant date.) Destroy documents that can be safely destroyed and send papers that cannot be destroyed to an off-site archive. A properly managed 'clear out' of archived files could save you an awful lot of money over time, despite the upfront cost.

Workers in the office

First of all, you need to think about issues relevant to staff working in the office and the regimes that apply. Staff need to be trained on the new regulations relating to hygiene, social distancing and travel, but also on any policies specific to your firm's circumstances.

Staff may be nervous about returning to the office because of health issues, but they may also lack confidence because they have been out of the office environment for some time and may no longer feel part of the team. There may be changes; for example, to pay structures, to working practices and perhaps to how you communicate with your staff. Consider doing a 'return to work' appraisal. The flexibility that comes with the new normal will need to be taken into account, recorded and reflected in revised appraisal forms.

Team morale: It is vital that the team does not become fractured. If teams are going to work largely or partly from home on an ongoing basis, it is unlikely that the whole firm will be in the office on any one day. Work needs to be done to ensure that the culture of the firm remains, and that teams work together as much as possible with communication across the firm as a whole. Office-based staff and homeworkers must feel part of 'one team' and receive the same levels of management and investment. You will need to supervise, monitor and train people who may not be in the office at the same time as you. This may require additional investment in skills and technology. Particular consideration will need to be given to helping new joiners become part of a team which may not meet regularly.

Employment contracts: Do employment contracts allow staff to work flexibly, both in terms of hours and in terms of working from home? A review of all staff contracts should be undertaken. The firm's flexible working policy also needs to be reviewed and probably needs to be rewritten, given recent changes.

Staffing levels: There may well be redundancies or staff location issues to consider. There may be a substantial decentralisation of your staffing. Why pay

London salaries if the majority of your staff are choosing to work from home?

Physical presence: Consider issues such as introducing a staggered hours system and a staff rota, staggered lunch breaks, and how private conversations with individual staff members will be managed. Someone must be responsible for managing and monitoring who is working and when.

Storage: Even if you strive to work in a paperless office, people will still need to keep things they are working on. Each staff member will probably need an individual storage area. The use of cabinets can be a good way of creating space between desks, but make sure that storage areas are easily accessible and don't breach social distancing.

Homeworkers

We turn now to factors specifically for staff working at home. You owe the same duty of care to homeworkers as to office workers, whether this involves facilities management, IT, training, supervision, and health and social care. Most employers work hard to fulfil these responsibilities in the workplace, and have every intention of continuing to do so for homeworkers; however, the practicalities of this can sometimes be challenging.

Desk assessments: In the crisis, employees have been allowed to work from home but may not have had a proper workspace. We've all seen pictures of people working with a laptop on their knee or working at the dining room table. This is not viable in the long term. If employees are going to work from home on a regular basis, they need a proper workstation, at least a table that's at the right level. You owe a duty of care to your staff to ensure that they have a proper and safe working environment. You need a questionnaire that tests people on their working environment. It's worth taking advice from a health and safety specialist on these matters.

Confidentiality: Confidentiality is a major concern for homeworkers. You need very strict policies, which must be reviewed with a view to people working from home. For example, most people don't live on their own. Consider a couple, both accountants, who both work from home but work for different firms. How can they maintain confidentiality if they're working from different ends of the dining room table? If they need to take a phone call, how can they maintain client confidentiality?

Equipment: Most people just have a laptop, but that's not ideal if they are going to spend substantial time working from home. Do staff need a proper keyboard, monitor, and a printer/scanner? You may need to issue staff with a small home shredder and/or a locked cabinet to be used for all the firm's equipment and papers. This will increase your overheads, but show that you have given proper attention to confidentiality. You may also need to help people with home broadband and Wi-Fi; video conferencing and accessing some cloud systems or office servers can use up a lot of bandwidth.

Managing homeworkers: It is important to ensure that homeworkers remain part of the team and feel included and motivated when they are working from home. You must make plans to ensure that staff are included in online meetings and physical meetings (where appropriate) on a client basis and on a more 'social' basis so they feel part of the firm. There are a number of risk issues inherent with homeworking, including levels of work performance and the mental wellbeing of employees. Monitoring standards of work is important: would you know if an employee is not meeting deadlines or has not considered all the issues in a case.

Mental health: Perhaps even more important are the issues related to mental health. Inevitably, some employees will find homeworking difficult because they simply miss the community of being in an office environment. However, they may face other serious problems, such as difficulties with childcare and home schooling, living alone and a lack of access to outside space. You must monitor homeworkers for stress and other mental and physical health problems. They may even face basic practical difficulties, such as not being able to go shopping due to self-isolation. Would you know if someone is struggling or is just quite simply 'not themselves'? In an office environment, where you sit next to someone, you would notice if they were not quite right, and would pick up on it. When your only contact is remote, whether by email or video link, how can you tell if someone is in difficulties? Would you even know if they haven't started work on a particular day? Planned regular supervision and monitoring is needed to ensure that work is properly executed, and that staff are feeling well, and are properly managed, supervised and looked after. It may be appropriate for some staff members to be primarily based in the office.

Training: Whilst formal training can quite easily be undertaken digitally, a lot of training takes place informally. Junior employees largely working from home will not gain the breadth of experience they would have done if sharing an office with more experienced staff. Encourage regular informal chats, case discussions and perhaps

case studies, and allow junior staff to 'sit in' on as many meetings as possible to gain that informal breadth of experience.

In the next article, I cover issues relating to processes and prospects to enable you to prepare for a return to the 'new normal'.