



MANY HAPPY RETURNS?

What Chief People Officers are thinking now about belonging, the future of flex and the return to work.



HELLO, HOW ARE YOU TODAY?



It's nice to be asked how you are, isn't it?
It's even better when you feel the person asking genuinely wants to know and has the time to listen. It was the opener to all the conversations Laura and I had with Chief People Officers and HR Head Honchos that have informed the ideas we share with you here.

With the arrival of a global pandemic the UK Prime Minister declared 'lock down' in March 2020 and life as we knew it changed completely. For many work carried on, but it looked and felt very different, whilst others were furloughed and redundancies were made. Chief People Officers were expected to act quickly, decisively and sensitively to ensure employees had what they needed to keep delivering for customers, clients, patients and service users. There was huge pressure on 'people people' to have all the answers and keep the show on the road in the face of a complex ever-changing situation.

In June 2020, when some form of 'new normal' had been forged we invited a handful of HR leaders to tell us about what they were thinking now and their thoughts on the way ahead. We spoke to 10 smart, generous individuals – mainly in large organisations – across multiple sectors: advertising, events, manufacturing, law, accountancy, insurance, asset management, market research and media.

Sometimes it can feel lonely at the top and it's good to know what your peers are doing, especially when there's no playbook. This paper presents the five main themes that emerged from our conversations:

1. **THE NEW 'MIXED ECONOMY'** – maintaining equality of opportunity for employees regardless of where they work.
2. **STRUCTURE AND CERTAINTY** – acknowledging the need for security employees are craving, and that's difficult for HR to provide.
3. **KEEPING UP APPEARANCES** – helping employees feel comfortable with remote working.
4. **THE FUTURE OF FLEX** – continuing to modernise attitudes around flex and capitalising on the gains made during lockdown.
5. **ALL TOGETHER NOW** – healing the hurt of furlough and rekindling team connectedness to move forward with purpose.



I am enormously grateful to Laura Gelder-Roberston who conducted the majority of the conversations on behalf of The Talent Keeper Specialists. Laura is an innovation strategist and was furloughed from her organisation. In coming together to do this ethnographic study Laura felt a resurgence of passion and drive and I felt hugely supported during a time when my own team needed to step back to focus on very young families. We worked entirely over Zoom with bad hair, no make-up and often with children on our laps or at our feet. It was incredibly rewarding, really!

Best wishes,

Jessica Chivers

CEO, The Talent Keeper Specialists
talentkeepers.co.uk



THE NEW 'MIXED ECONOMY'



The 'mixed economy' describes the different choices employees are making about where they work. Many people, especially those who work in major cities such as London, are concerned about public transport and are choosing to remain working from home where that choice exists. Others are chomping at the bit to be back in the office, particularly younger workers for whom the office is a social hub as well as the place they work and who may not be able to work comfortably from home (e.g. living at home with parents, lack of space, privacy or the distraction of furloughed flatmates). A third group, the 'blenders,' desire time in the office and time at home and are formulating a view on what the ideal blend might be.



KEY QUESTIONS about the mixed economy

- How do I keep managers from an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ mindset when it comes to colleagues who are working remotely?
- How do we ensure equality of opportunity irrespective of how and where colleagues are working?
- How can we support line managers in contracting with their teams and making it work?

ACTIONS FOR HR

- Remind line managers to contract with their team about 1:1 and whole team communication - and to involve their teams in those decisions.
- Remind line managers to make fair decisions about who works on what (especially about the ‘juicy’ projects). Decisions need to be based on skill, experience and development plans, not on who’s literally in sight.



“ I don’t want people to think that their career will derail if they continue to work from home”.

“Will it mean I don’t get the juicy projects?”

“Will I be excluded from the corridor conversations and the watercooler conversations?”

“Will it mean that someone less experienced than me will get the juicy projects if I continue to work from home whilst they’re in the office?”

These are the kinds of questions people will be asking and it’s keeping me awake. My team is working with our behavioural insights team develop some nudges for line managers.

Chief People Officer,
Advertising

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“ I had one of the younger members of our London team begging me to allow her back into the office, but I couldn’t. Her flat mates have been furloughed and it’s difficult to work in that environment.

Chief People Officer, Global Events Company

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“ One colleague is renting an office which is madness when we have an office. He’s finding it really hard to work at home with two children in a small flat, so yes, we’ll be asking who wants to come back and letting those people return to the office first.

Head of HR, Asset Management Firm

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STRUCTURE & CERTAINTY



Irrespective of role, furlough or not, life stage or age, people are craving structure and certainty. For some people their place of work is as significant to them as the activity they do. It's part of their identity. Work is where they meet, collaborate and socialise. The workplace represents many microstructures, routines and rituals and their disruption has been felt as traumatic by many. People have done their best to adapt but in quite a temporary way and there's probably some discomfort around the temporary about to become permanent. The reactive work-arounds and instinctive adaptations don't quite work in many cases – we thought they'd be temporary didn't we? The flaws in the makeshift approach are starting to show and employees who wouldn't choose to be working this way (parents with young children at home, people living alone and younger workers in flatshares) are frustrated at their lack of ability to make meaningful progress. We didn't know how much we valued our work structures until they were taken away.



KEY QUESTIONS HR are grappling with about structure and certainty

- The pulse surveys are showing that people need different things – how can we figure out the way ahead when people want different things?
- How can we provide regular structure and talk time?
- There's this question of belonging – what does that mean for people if they're not in the office? Or if they're on furlough and restricted from talking to colleagues?



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We're running fortnightly European Women's network coffee mornings. It's very powerful to listen to the Vice President saying, "I'm also struggling, I have kids, One hour I'm talking strategy, the next hour I'm doing diagraphs and phonics.

**Human Resources Director,
Manufacturing**

What people crave we can't give them. They want certainty and that on this date we're back in business. We're now doing weekly 1:1s with HR, group furlough discussions and invites to Zoom socials which some have attended and some have not.

Chief People Officer, Global Events Company

Talking to my friends with kids who are working age, doing it from home, they're really struggling. A lot of what they get out of work is the social buzz and that's been taken away from them.

**Human Resources Director,
Market Research**

In an ideal world EVERYONE would have access to some 1-2-1 talk time/coaching.

HRD, Insurance

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ACTIONS FOR HR

- Invite input from everyone on when and how to connect.
- Find out what your people value most about the places they work – these ideas can feed into future plans or closures, expansions and new work-spaces.
- Keep being transparent with your people – when you don't have an answer, tell them. In the absence of certainty ask what else you can do to support them.

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Someone wrote to me and said that you've forgotten about people who live on their own – we wrote this with a number of people who do live alone because we didn't want to be patronising – I have no experience of living alone.

Chief People Officer, Advertising

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KEEPING UP APPEARANCES



Screen presenteeism is exhausting because we have to work harder to pick up on non verbal cues such as tone of voice and facial expressions. Is it even good to use webcams? What useful purpose do they serve? German academics have found that delays on videocalls can lead us to have negative views of the person we're talking to as we perceive them as less friendly or focussed.

Even before we turn our cameras on employees worry about their appearance because there's no established etiquette. Should I have put make-up on? Does my bad hair suggest I don't care? If I'm wearing gym clothes does it look like I'm slacking off? Some people aren't comfortable opening their home lives to colleagues. They feel awkward and embarrassed.

The organisations that have had success with remote working are where people have felt safe and free of judgement – where Covid haircuts, no make-up and kids wandering in and out are unremarkable. The people in these workplaces are comfortable rearranging meetings when domestic stuff happens and there's flexibility with the people they're trying to collaborate with.

These teams are characterised by trust, goodwill and compassion.



KEY QUESTIONS HR are grappling with about keeping up appearances

- How do we help our people feel comfortable with situations that are out of their control?
- How can we get the leaders to show their vulnerability and demonstrate their struggles?
- How might we develop greater empathy for how colleagues 'show up' by taking the time to understand people's different situations?

ACTIONS FOR HR

- Encourage teams to discuss their expectations of one another and show compassion.
- Remind line managers to contract with their teams about the way they're going to work together – this will need renewing as circumstances change.
- Consider a whole organization policy on webcam use – make it OK for people to turn them off after initial hellos.
- Ask senior leaders to share their struggles on 'Town Hall' calls and talk about the challenges they are facing.



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We've done a lot of work with line managers reminding them to contract with their teams on how they're going to work with their people. Some managers have done a really good job of contracting with clients too. Some people have contracted that there are certain times when they won't accept a Zoom call.

Chief People Officer, Advertising

It's very powerful to listen to the Vice President saying, 'I'm also struggling, I have kids, one hour I'm talking strategy, the next hour I'm doing diagraphs and phonics.'

Chief People Officer, Manufacturing

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We've lifted and shifted a meeting culture onto Zoom. I'm like this lone voice saying 'we need to stop working like this.'

Chief People Officer, Advertising

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It's not sustainable online because people are tired. Less is more. People can feel overwhelmed.

Head of Inclusion & Wellbeing, law Firm

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THE FUTURE OF FLEX



Companies that are 'winning' in the flex stakes seem to be hunting from the get-go for ways to make it work. They're asking themselves how can we learn from this and come back stronger? These organisations recognise the huge potential benefits for the business – profitability, sustainability, diversity and employee wellbeing.

Organisations with a traditional approach to work location have adapted quickly to home working through necessity. However, there's a fear among the HRDs in these firms that the senior leadership team will revert to expecting full office presence and the ground that's been gained around flex will be lost.

In organisations in survival mode, there's a lot of fear and an attitude that flex is only possible if you're not in fighting mode. In cultures where there is strong affective commitment people are prepared to take deeper paycuts to save the business. If you're in survival mode involve your people in the way ahead – ask what opportunities they see to be creative about fire-fighting.



KEY QUESTIONS HR are grappling with about keeping up appearances

- How can we use flexibility to drive maximum success on profitability, sustainability, diversity and employee wellbeing?
- How do we keep the senior leadership team on board, and move them into a place of advocacy for flex?
- How might maximum flexibility fuel fire fighting rather than undermine it?



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We're painting a vision of the benefits of flexibility for our Exec. We want to show how flexibility will get better business results, will allow us to retain talent, will make us more sustainable because we'll produce fewer Co2 emissions.

**Human Resources Director,
Manufacturing**

What can we learn from this?
How can we move from “working from home” to “you can work from anywhere”, a workplace of maximum flexibility?

**Human Resources Director,
Asset Management**

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I'm worried we're going to slip backwards. The Partners see home working as necessary at the moment but they're already making noises that suggest they don't see these kinds of arrangements as being desirable when there's a choice.

Human Resources Director, Accountancy

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ACTIONS FOR HR

- Identify parts of the organisation that have been particularly flexible (e.g. using pulse survey results) and ask how they've maintained a sense of belonging. These are your 'bright spots.'
- Share the stories of the 'bright spots' to inspire other teams.
- If you've got a critical mass of leaders on board with flex, there's an opportunity to ask everyone “how do you want to work now?”

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We had people offering to take deeper pay cuts than 20% because they felt guilty that they weren't working to 80% capacity.

Chief People Officer, Global Events Company

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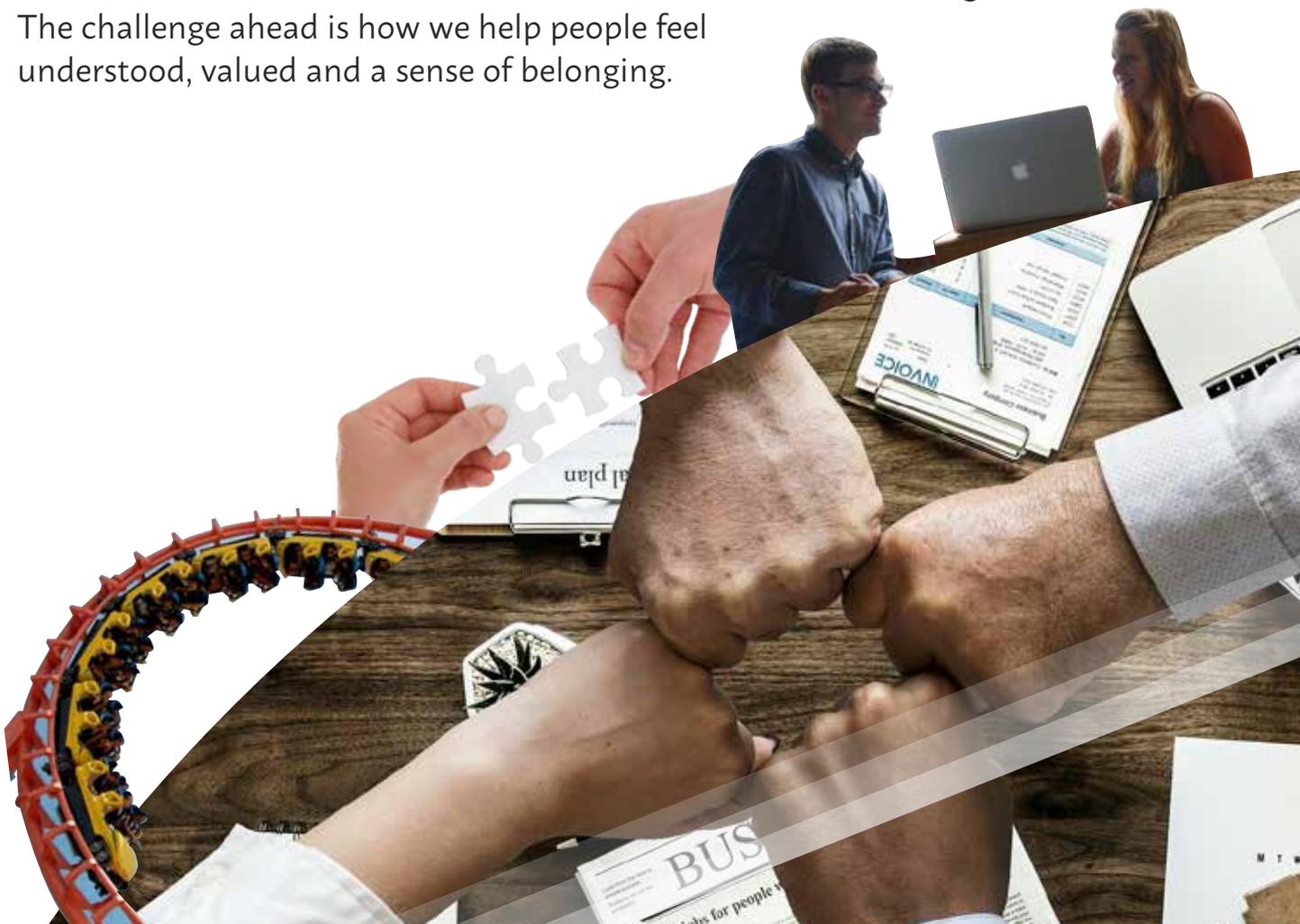
ALL TOGETHER NOW



People need to feel the arms of the organisation around them whether they've been furloughed or not and wherever they are working. This is about feeling connected, cared for and a sense of belonging. Tough business decisions were made quickly – and sometimes reflexively – about furloughing and changes to business operations. The 'trauma' everyone experienced at some level needs acknowledging and decisions explained in order to rebuild trust.

Furloughed staff remained committed and keen to contribute yet weren't allowed to engage. Many sought solace and meaning in personal development, and where budget was provided by their employer, this helped them feel they were still contributing to their organisation.

The workplace is looking and feeling different, and there are mixed emotions about returning. For many teams 'working together apart' will be the new norm for the remainder of 2020. People have ridden an emotional roller-coaster, or 'Coronacoaster,' and this needs to be acknowledged. The challenge ahead is how we help people feel understood, valued and a sense of belonging.



KEY QUESTIONS HR are asking about rebuilding trust and belonging

- How do we encourage people to tell their stories and share and be acknowledged so that they can let go and we can move forward together?
- How do we help our people process the 'trauma' and difficult experiences they've had and make them feel comfortable asking for that support?
- How do we recontract different work boundaries and with external stakeholders as well as internal?

ACTIONS FOR HR

- Create space for everyone to listen to each other and acknowledge how this exceptional moment in time has been for them.
- Find compassionate ways to help people heal, such as offering talk-time with an impartial ear and encouraging the SLT to open up and share their experiences
- Recontract with external stakeholders to broker compassion externally as well as internally.



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The decisions to furlough were much more gut instinct and instant rather than methodical, because it was so instantaneous. We hadn't got work for everybody, we looked at what work was on the table and decided who was working or not. I think that's going to be quite challenging to put aside and forget that decision.

**Human Resources Director,
Market Research**

The people who made the decisions about when to re-open the office all have big homes, no children or older children and gardens. They don't seem to have thought about those of us with young children in small London flats. I've badgered HR to re-open before 2021.

Individual in asset management

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I've said to the Leadership Team, "just be mindful of that group of people who haven't got what we have in terms of working 24/7 trying to get this done and have never been more busy" to, "ok, they're isolated, they're overthinking things, waiting for the next negative wave of information".

Chief People Officer, Events

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I just disengaged completely, I felt so upset and like there was a target on my back. I think it's important to know exactly how furlough decisions were made.

Individual furloughed from a media company

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WANT MANY HAPPY RETURNS IN YOUR ORGANISATION?



Got a question about these insights?

For more information about how we can help you keep your colleagues feeling confident, connected and cared for when they take extended leave and return to work contact:

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