RETURNING TO THE NEW WORLD OF WORK
A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR BUSINESS LEADERS

A Robert Walters Group Company

ROBERT WALTERS

Contents

Introduction

There is no doubt Covid-19 is the biggest event to have shocked the business world since the global financial crisis. In a tremendous effort of maintaining business continuity while at the same time ensuring their staff's safety, organisations made swift changes to the way they work. This led to the biggest remote work experiment in history.

Now we are at a point where many organisations are beginning to imagine life after lockdown. Amid unprecedented global job losses, concerns about transport infrastructure and the continuing need for workplace social distancing, businesses are launching plans to return to the office. But when they do, what will the new world of work look like?

Robert Walters surveyed over 2000 global organisations to ask exactly this. We wanted to understand how businesses responded to Covid-19, what they really think about remote working, how they plan to return to the office and - most importantly - what their vision is for the new world of work.

Whilst it is hard to look beyond the next six months, due to the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, this guide is designed to give business leaders an overview of organisations' collective learnings. It also provides an insight into what options are available in the short to medium-term, whilst the long-term future of work is being considered.
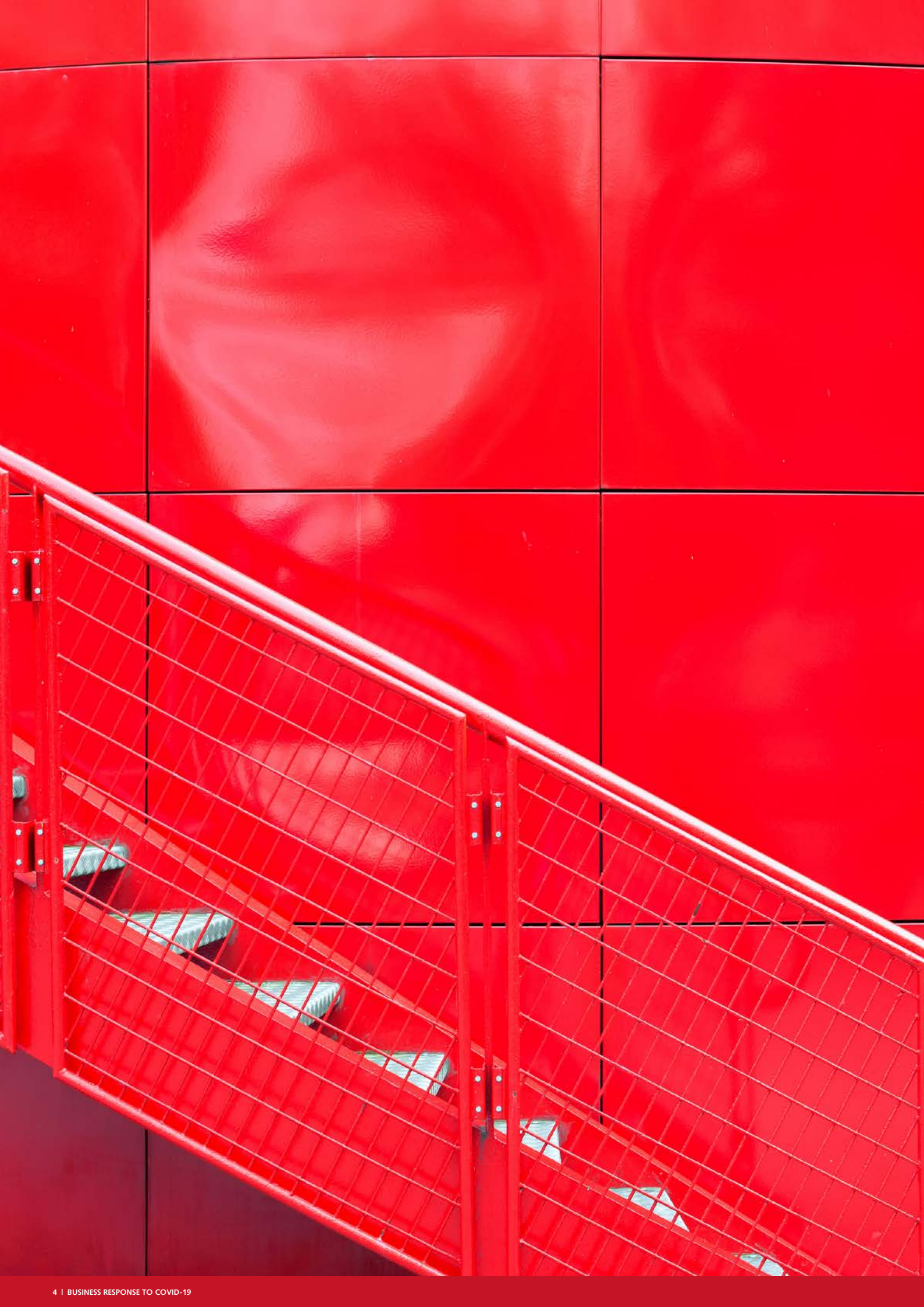
Business response to Covid-19

With the Covid-19 crisis shutting down large parts of the economy in many countries, companies had to adjust their revenue expectations and, in some instances, work out how to prevent losses.

Maintaining a healthy cash flow and saving costs were businesses' main priorities, which had an immediate impact on HR and recruitment strategies. 50% of businesses' surveyed implemented headcount freezes and paused all hiring activity. 20% terminated temporary or fixed-term employee contracts, and 12% made permanent staff redundant. Covid-19 did spark the need for additional staff in some areas, such as logistics and legal, but only in 16% of the organisations surveyed.

23% of companies made use of government unemployment schemes, but this wasn't the only short-term cost-cutting measure. 24% encouraged their employees to take annual leave and 15% asked their staff to reduce their working hours.

Staff wellbeing

The outbreak of Covid-19 resulted in a spike in anxiety among workers, caused by fears about job safety, health concerns and changes in people's caregiver responsibilities.

Most organisations put measures in place to support the mental health of their employees in this period of radical change. 83% organised regular business updates from executives to keep employees feeling connected and informed. 61% gave their employees access to webinars or blogs about how to improve physical and mental health when working remotely. 40% went even further by paying for new office equipment to help employees set up an adequate working environment in their homes.

52% gave their staff access to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to help them cope with the new circumstances. Online learning also increased, with 51% of organisations setting up access to online courses.

Recognising the challenges of balancing working from home with family life, 70% of employers allowed their staff to work flexible hours.

The transition to remote working

A smooth relocation for most businesses

Companies all over the world acted fast to initiate remote working programmes. For most of them the transition was seamless, with 47% moving employees to a remote work environment within two days and only 7% taking more than a week.

The biggest challenge in relocating staff was getting the required IT hardware in place – a struggle for more than half of companies surveyed. This was followed by IT infrastructure and security, a point of concern for 33% of organisations.

Staff engaged from home

The experience of working from home full time was a positive one for most workers. 54% of them noticed a positive effect on their mental health, rating the increased flexibility in working hours, not having to commute and working from the comfort of their own home as the determining factors contributing to their wellbeing. The lack of physical interaction with team members was the most difficult consequence to get used to, with 38% of professionals indicating this as having a negative impact on their mental health, but most found a way to keep in touch with their peers. Over two-thirds of professionals speak to their colleagues at least once a day when working from home, using group chats and one-to-one video calls as the main channels of communication.

Increased productivity

Maintaining employee output at a stable level during lockdown was a major worry for most organisations, according to our research. However, while most had to turn to a non-designated workspace, such as a kitchen table or living room, many professionals felt their productivity rose.

Although 23% of professionals did report lower productivity whilst working from home, 32% said their productivity remained the same and 45% believe that they got more work done when working from home. This is confirmed by their employers, with 78% of employers seeing equal or increased productivity during the lockdown. Not having to commute is the main reason for increased productivity, with 29% of workers using this time to fit some extra work into their schedules. A better ability to focus on the task at hand, without being distracted by colleagues, boosted productivity for 65% of employees.

88%
of workers would appreciate a more flexible approach to working from home

Expectations for the near future

Will businesses use the lockdown as a dress rehearsal for embedding workplace flexibility into the new way of work? And would their employees applaud this decision? The answer to both is yes, for the most part. 88% of workers would appreciate a more flexible approach to working from home, most of them opting for a few days per week (40%) to a couple of times per month (27%). Luckily for them, 86% of organisations either already offered workplace flexibility, or are planning to do so after Covid-19 restrictions.

Although more flexibility to work from home is clearly at the top of the list of employees' expectations after Covid-19, half of workers indicate that additional investment in IT technology is needed for this. In addition, a third of employees expect to get more autonomy and trust from the management team.

Most organisations endorse their employees' desire to work towards a more modern management style. 64% of companies state that their leaders should focus more on output than on time spent.

"I think we are able to work from home effectively because we've done it face to face before. We built a foundation and I think it's part of human nature. Can we do things more flexibly? Absolutely. When I look at the extent to which people commute and the toll it takes on their work life balance, I think we can come up with better solutions."

Sundar Pichai, CEO of Alphabet

Working models for the short to medium term

After a few months of working from home, most people have now found their new normal. At the same time, many companies are now planning for a safe return to the office. However, what that office environment will look like will depend on the strategies implemented.

We discuss several options organisations can use when planning their return to the office.

1. A full return to the office

14% of companies indicate that they will choose not to adopt a more flexible work approach after Covid-19. The most traditional route of the four, companies choosing a full return to the office will need to closely monitor government regulations while increasing office attendance.

A staggered return of employees is a must while social distancing rules are in place. 39% of companies plan to split their employees into different shifts based on specific criteria, such as job function. 38% will use importance to business continuity as the criteria for staff returning. Safety is not only a concern while people are in the office. The use of public transportation can also put people at risk. 35% of companies will therefore allow workers to travel outside of peak hours.

2. Partly flexible

86% of companies want to offer remote working to a greater or lesser degree after Covid-19. A partly flexible approach is favoured by most workers. 40% of professionals would opt to work at home at least one day per week. 27% of employees would like to limit working from home to a few days per month.

There are different ways of keeping workplace flexibility in place, such as creating smaller work groups so that people only come into the office for specific meetings or projects. This would result in people working from home a fixed number of days per week, or letting people book in office time based on their own needs.

> **"In the right roles and with the right people, flex does offer tremendous productivity improvement. It gives people time to process properly, and it gets them out of the office in terms of being bogged down in day-to-day admin. So there is more thought leadership that comes to the table, and that's where your creativity and innovation come in."**
>
> **Ken Matos, Director of People Science at Culture Amp**

3. Permanent flexibility for some

Moving entire teams to a remote working model can allow businesses to reduce their office space, resulting in significant cost savings. Personal preferences and working personalities aside, some jobs can be more easily carried out from home than others. An analysis of which roles transitioned smoothly to remote working can help in deciding which teams or functions can permanently be carried out from home. Based on our research, designers are most eager to work from home permanently (37%), followed by IT professionals (30%), and professionals in telephone customer service roles (27%). People in these departments do not need their colleagues next to them on any given day.

Professionals least interested in working from home on a permanent basis are HR professionals (11%) and people in admin and business support roles (16%).

4. A fully remote workforce

Companies that have adopted a 100% remote model can mostly be found in the tech sector, with Gitlab, Zapier and Automatic leading the way, but not many organisations are expected to take the leap and drastically change to a fully remote working model. Those that do cite cost savings from less office space and the ability to recruit beyond a narrow geographical area, as the main motivators.

Providing clarity

Once an approach has been chosen, it is key to set new ground rules and clearly communicate these to all employees. Keep communication two-way and continue to monitor the effects of previously made decisions on both employee health safety and mental wellbeing. Make sure you can explain why certain employees have different privileges than others. It is vital to realise that it is going to take time to adjust to the new situation. Some of your employees may have caregiver responsibilities that they cannot change from one day to another. Others may find it difficult to focus in an office environment after months of working from home. Empathy, transparency and clear communication are key in creating a smooth transition for everyone involved.

38%
will use importance to business continuity as main criteria for staff returning to the office

A safe return to the office

Returning to the office will be a massive step forward towards economic recovery and returning to business as usual. Organisations are required to carefully plan out a set of measures for the office. Things to consider include:

Equipment:
- Masks, face visors and disposable gloves to be distributed to all employees
- Temperature checks at the entrance
- Hand sanitiser stations

Common spaces:
- One-way corridors to minimise people crossing each other
- Directional floor markings
- Single-occupancy restrooms
- Elevator occupancy policies
- Plexiglass walls between desks
- Empty spaces between desks
- Closing onsite cafeterias and other shared spaces

Schedules and restrictions:
- Staggered work shifts to lower office occupancy
- Adapting working hours to avoid people commuting during peak hours
- Prohibiting access to external visitors
- A clear policy for employees with symptoms

Cleaning:
- Regular and clearly documented deep cleaning procedures
- Clean desk policy

Options for returning to the office

A clear and transparent plan for returning to the office is vital to ensure employees are confident that their employer is treating their health and safety with the upmost importance. Based on our research here are some of the phases that are being considered by different organisations.

Depending on the current health situation in your country, your organisation can start the plan in the phase that is most applicable.

Opening up offices

Offices are prepared to be compliant with all Covid-19 restrictions. Employees can volunteer to return part-time. Returnees can book office days with their HR department, to ensure office occupancy stays below 25%. Permission is granted on a first come, first served basis. People using public transportation for their commute can continue to work from home.

Phase 1

Rotational teams

Once government restrictions are eased and office occupancy can be increased, employees can be split up into rotational teams that come to the office on different days. Everyone is still free to continue to work from home, but employees are expected to inform their manager and HR department of their desire to do so. Office occupancy is kept under 50%.

Phase 2

Flexible hours

Flexible working hours are implemented to ensure travel is safe for employees commuting on public transport, allowing office access to all employees at some point during this phase. Office occupancy in phase 3 remains below 50%.

Phase 3

Increased office occupancy

Employees are encouraged to return to the office a fixed number of days per week, but those with health concerns are encouraged to stay at home. Occupancy increases to 75%.

Phase 4

Full return to the office

All staff are encouraged to return to the office. However, greater flexibility to work from home on an ad hoc basis stays in place, governed by comprehensive guidelines. Occupancy increases to 90%.

Phase 5

A sneak peek into the future of work

Covid-19 has challenged some of the preconceived views on employee productivity in the office. With a large share of the global workforce successfully working from home, it's brought into question the rigid office schedules and working policies most organisations are governed by. So, what will this mean for the future of work?

We discuss potential changes in three main areas of work.

1. The office

37% of organisations consider a downsize in office space

Pre Covid-19 some companies were considered role models due to their innovative offices. Companies, especially in the tech field, seemed to find themselves in an office battle, trying to differentiate themselves by offering luxuries such as baristas, onsite gyms and game rooms. What all these offices have in common, is that they are based on an open office plan. This layout allows for little space between workers. Some experts say that the open floor plan can be redesigned to ensure employees' safety. Others say the pandemic is the final straw for the open office. Health risks aside, for those workers that feel more productive when working from home, a move away from open office plans could be beneficial. However, it must be remembered that a remote working model and a more closed office style doesn't suit all personality types or business models.

Downsizing office space could be another workplace trend in the aftermath of Covid-19. Currently, 37% of organisations are considering a reduction in the size of their premises.
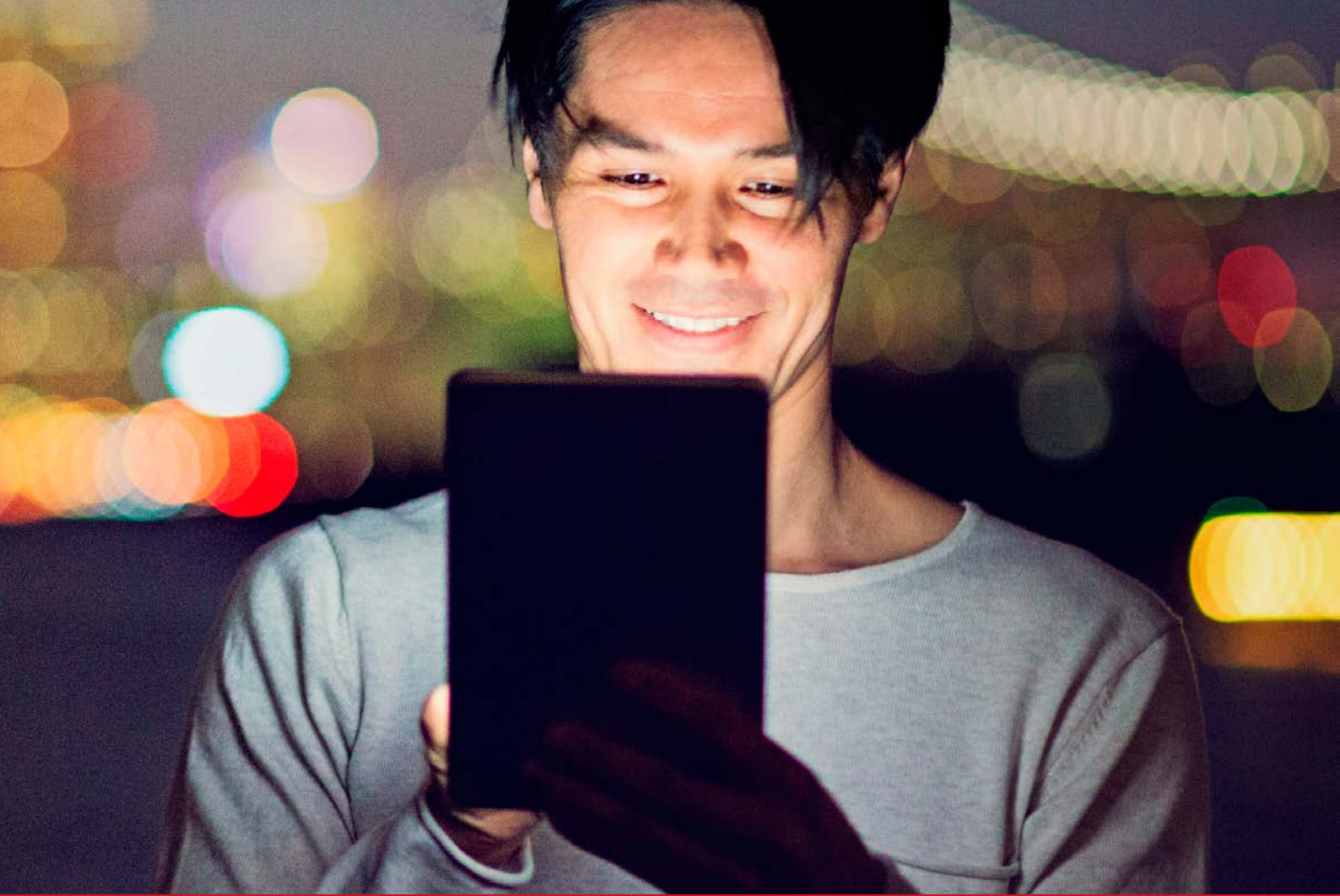
2. Remote working

26% of employees were not allowed to work from home before Covid-19, but 88% expect more flexibility to do so after the pandemic ends

Covid-19 launched the world's largest remote working experiment. Traditional business processes and working practices evolved in a matter of days as employees were forced to work remotely overnight. Business leaders' biggest fear was a decrease in productivity, but 32% of professionals surveyed believed that their productivity remained stable, and 45% saw their output increase.

In light of these findings businesses may have to re-evaluate their working models, indeed 73% of businesses surveyed plan to allow more frequent working from home. Should organisations introduce more flexible working practices, then it is vital that guidelines and rules are established, as 56% of employees feel that current policies lack clarity. IT infrastructure is another area that requires change, as 30% of employees feel that their IT systems are not adequate for remote working.

Whilst greater working flexibility is here to stay, business leaders have been advised to proceed with caution, as many commentators emphasise the importance of face to face relationships and communication to workplace dynamics.

3. Leadership

64% of employees believe that leaders need to focus more on outcomes rather than time spent

Our survey shows that during the lockdown, 72% of managers were measuring their team's productivity based on the volume of tasks completed. At the same time, 48% used the more traditional measure of hours worked. For remote working to be a success in the new world of work it is important that leaders can shift to a results-oriented mindset and use achieved goals as the barometer for success. For many organisations this can be challenging, as 59% of employers surveyed believe their senior leaders prefer more traditional ways of working.

Organisations recognise the need for new skills among their leaders:

- 67% of respondents feel their leaders could show more empathy towards their employees' work-life balance
- 58% would like their leaders to have a better understanding of technology with regards to remote working
- 55% think their leaders should improve their communication skills
- 45% feel their leaders should move from a top down approach towards more collaboration.

Recruitment in the new world of work

The crisis has prompted an avalanche of digital innovation – a point now so commonly agreed upon that it almost sounds like a cliché.

Recruitment is an area that will not be untouched by the wave of change. Whether companies are driven by cutting costs, saving time, or the hope of delivering improved customer journeys to their potential future employees, we can expect to see a rise in remote interviewing, remote assessment, and remote onboarding, to compliment the traditional recruitment process.

Remote interviewing

Video interviewing is the most established practice in the remote hiring journey. The technology has been around the longest and has been widely adopted by large companies, as it means saving a vast amount of time and travel costs.

Of our survey respondents, 40% already have video interview solutions in place. A further 50% are interested in adopting this kind of technology.

Video interviewing is a busy segment of the HR tech marketplace. Across the Robert Walters Group, we have relationships with a range of video interviewing technologies:

Sonru is one of the most established providers in the market. They provide robust on-demand and live interviewing, backed up with an excellent team of customer support specialists who work hard with you to ensure seamless delivery.

Spark Hire and Odro are newer market entrants, but they both offer reasonably priced, attractive solutions.

Whilst video interviewing technology is definitely improving it's still a long way off being able to replicate the benefits of meeting a prospective employee face to face and building a relationship. As a result, the aim is to compliment the recruitment process not overhaul it.
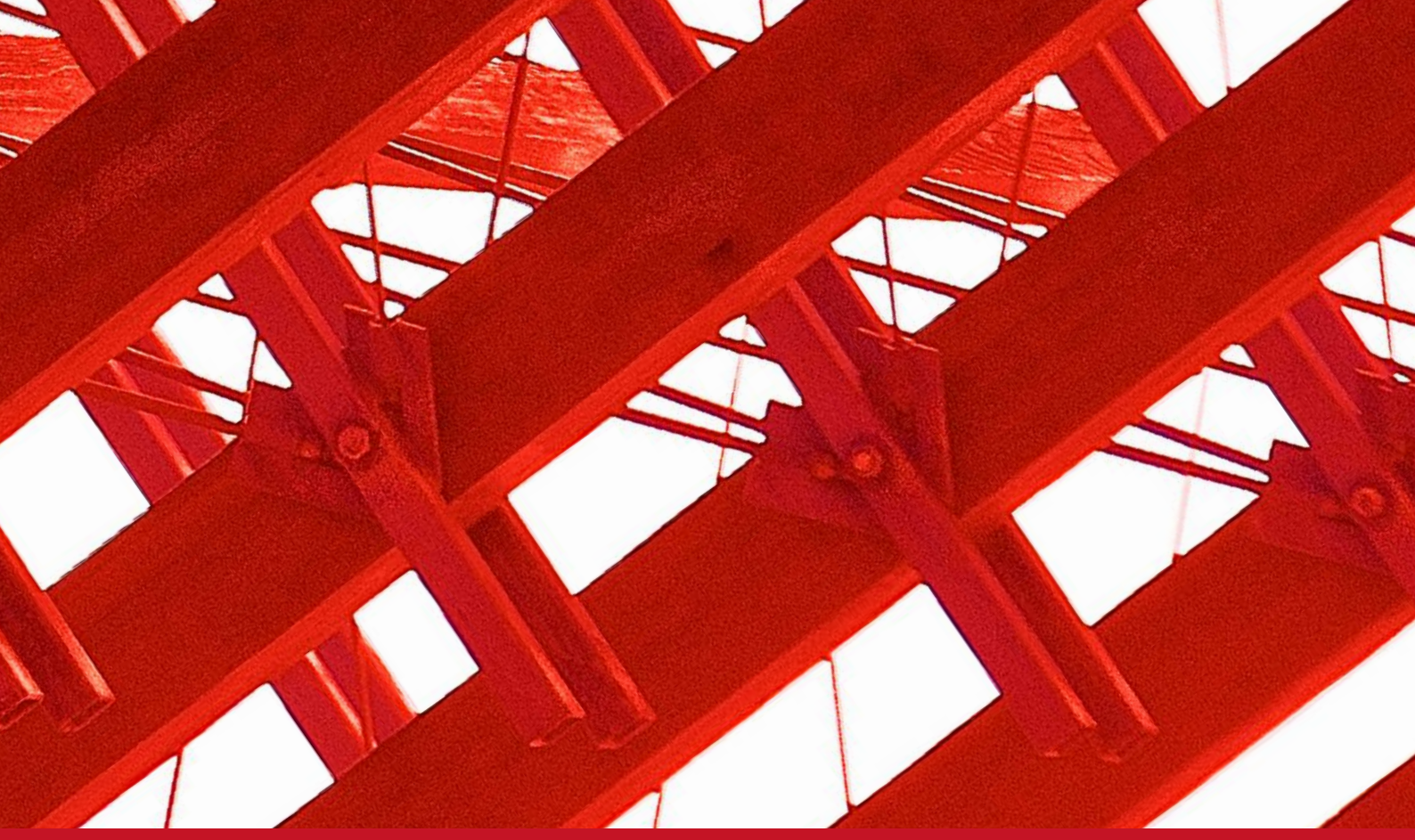
Remote assessment

The world of assessment centres and psychometric tests has changed. Online and mobile solutions that delight candidates and reflect favourably on your employer brand are now the norm. Advancements in gamification make it possible to identify a surprising number of behavioural traits from sophisticated game play. There are personality assessments that can help individuals and teams collaborate more effectively and culture and team fit can be analysed in moments.

The benefits of digital assessments go beyond simply increasing accuracy. It can now include improved diversity and combat recruiter biases. But this is only a glimpse of what can be achieved by taking the innovative approach that nearly 50% of our survey respondents intend to explore.

The benefits of remote assessment are:

- **Reduction in time to hire** – replacing traditional face-to-face technical skill validation with digital assessment can radically reduce the amount of hiring manager time required during the interview process.
- **Improved employer brand perception** – candidates who took part in gamified assessments with our clients reported a more favourable impression of these clients' brands.
- **Diversity** – digital skills assessments focus entirely on a candidate's ability. Factors that may be subject to unconscious biases, such as age and gender, do not come into play.

Remote Onboarding

Remote onboarding is the digitisation of the offer management, welcome and induction of new employees and contractors. Remote onboarding is one of the less commonly implemented remote solutions, with just under a quarter of survey respondents currently offering it.

The benefits of face to face relationships mean that an organisation's preference is for face to face onboarding, however, it's interesting to see that 50% of companies are open to exploring how remote onboarding can benefit their businesses after the pandemic.

Robert Walters has a wealth of experience in remote onboarding. On the next page you can find a comprehensive overview of our online resources on this topic.

Recruitment tech

Utilising your current tech stack in the new world of work

If you're a smaller company with less resource to implement enterprise-wide solutions, but still want to offer incredible onboarding experiences to your new employees, there's a lot you can do with the tech you already have in stack, combined with a little creativity.

The table below shows which common parts of the onboarding process can be digitised with well-known or free apps.

Process	Tech		Feature
Contract management	DocuSign	HELLOSIGN	E-signature
Welcome pack	SharePoint	we transfer	Content distribution
Welcome videos	vimeo	YouTube	Private and hidden bespoke welcome videos
121's and mentoring	Microsoft Teams	ZOOM	Video conferencing
Meeting scheduling	Bookings	ScheduleOnce	Smart self-scheduling
Team collaboration	Microsoft Teams	slack	Channels (group chat) and 121 messaging
Wellness and perks	Vitality	perkbox	Remote health services on demand

Download our e-Guides

Remote Onboarding Guide – the UK & AUS perspective:

From strategies to engage hires during notice periods, leveraging technology for remote onboarding, to mapping out an 'at home' induction, learn key tips for a smooth digital onboarding.

✈ Download

Getting remote onboarding right - a US perspective in collaboration with Range:

- How to handle paperwork, hardware and company swag.
- Help your new hire become immersed into company culture.
- How to overcommunicate using the appropriate channels.
- Learn the importance of feedback.
- Take note in potential problems that may arise.

✈ Download

Our partner techs:

PowerHouse Hub

R A N G E

Watch on-demand webinar insights

Remote Onboarding Insights from Companies that Practice – A UK perspective:

Watch on-demand for unique insights from Barclays, Slalom, Thames Waters and Kelkoo Group into how leading businesses create and implement remote onboarding programmes that keep new employees engaged.

✈ On-demand

Creating Great Onboarding Experiences – A US perspective:

We partnered with Range, a leader in team success software, to bring you a webinar incorporating great insider tips from our own talent team, as well as insight from companies such as Webflow and LifeLabs Learning.

✈ On-demand

Digital Onboarding – the Innovative perspective:

With techs like PowerHouse Hub you can develop an enterprise level, seamless remote onboarding solution. Learn how in this on-demand webinar. Or get tips on how to use your existing tech stack to offer candidates a great experience.

✈ On-demand

About the research

In April 2020, Robert Walters surveyed 5220 professionals across 31 countries worldwide on their experience with regards to working from home during Covid-19 and their expectations for the workplace after the pandemic. Respondents work in accounting & finance (23%), IT & technology (18%), banking & financial services (10%), administration & business support (8%), marketing & advertising (6%), HR (5%), sales (5%), legal, engineering (3%) and other fields (22 %). 82% of respondents were working from home at the time of taking the survey.

In research among organisational leaders, conducted in May 2020, Robert Walters surveyed 2177 C-suite professionals, directors, hiring managers, HR managers and business owners on their experiences with regards to business continuity during Covid-19, and their outlook on the near future of work. Respondents work in 31 countries worldwide, in banking & financial services (18%), manufacturing (10%), technology (9%), HR (8%), retail and FMCG (8%), health (4%), services (4%), legal (3%), engineering (3%) and other (33%). 23% of respondents work in multinational corporations, 21% in large corporations (+1000 employees), 10% in medium-sized companies (500+ employees), 44% in small companies (>500 employees) and 2% in micro-businesses and startups.

Robert Walters is a global, specialist professional recruitment consultancy.

Over the last 35 years the business has grown and so has our ambition. We now operate across 31 countries and employ over 3,900 people. It's a powerful success story built on the strength of our people. Organisations rely on us to find high-quality professionals for a range of specialist roles. Professionals who are looking for a new role, whether it's on a permanent, interim or contract basis, trust us to find them their ideal job.

Our core recruitment disciplines are:
• Accountancy & Finance
• Banking
• Engineering
• HR
• Legal
• Sales
• Marketing
• Secretarial & Support
• Supply Chain & Procurement
• Technology

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