

CREATIVITY & THE IMPACT OF A CRISIS

**WHAT HAS CHANGED
IN AGENCY LEADERS'
PERSPECTIVES?**



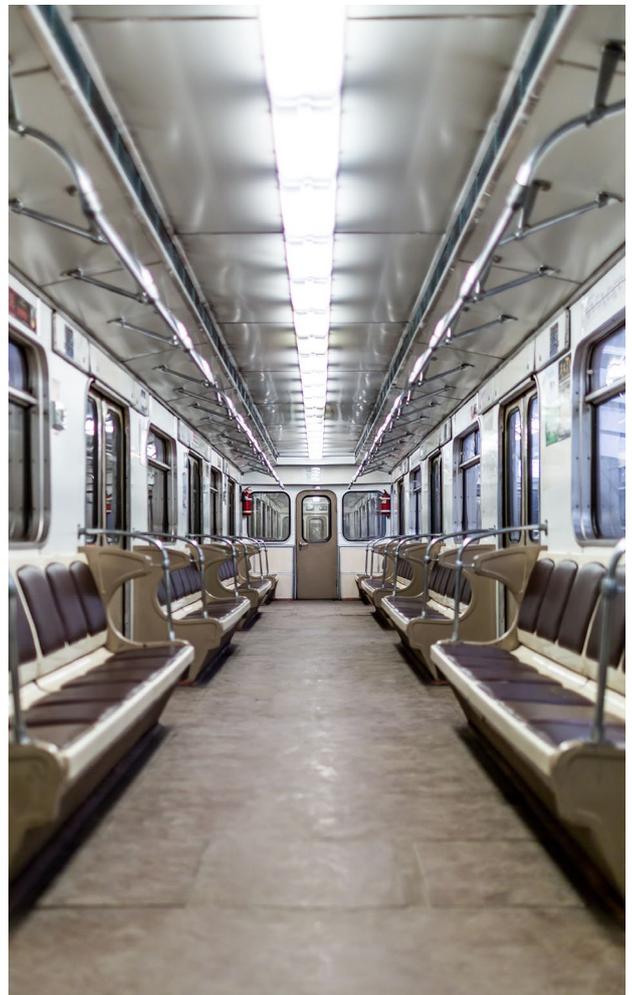
WHAT LESSONS HAVE WE LEARNED AND ARE WE NOW BETTER EQUIPPED FOR THE FUTURE?

Out of adversity can come opportunity – and for many agencies, the global pandemic brought about fundamental changes to working life as we knew it.

An overhaul of presenteeism in the workplace has been a long time coming. However, no one could have predicted how the pandemic might change the world of work irreversibly.

Startups, global enterprises, public sector businesses, and agencies alike had to find a way to survive during the work from home mandate inflicted upon us in the spring of 2020. Until then, it's fair to say mass reticence towards home working was still rife, with some businesses and industries more open to the opportunities remote working might afford.

Facebook thought leader and strategist Andy Childs claimed that a decade of digital growth had been compressed into just a few months. Now, as **42% of small businesses** alone claim that they are more reliant on technology and **86% of UK bosses believe remote working will endure**, agency leaders must weigh up their options in the wake of the pandemic.



THE CURSE OF THE

**NEW
NORMAL**



Bandied around as we progressed from banana bread baking to TikTok's fetishized feta pasta, the term 'new normal' became a sticking point for many.

In a state of limbo, businesses held employees at bay as brick-and-mortar offices lay dormant. A 'new normal' became a vague and intangible concept, failing to give comfort to many and, at best, giving false hope to those wanting life to go back to the glory days of watercooler catch-ups with colleagues and general office camaraderie.

The benefits of home working became particularly divisive as remote working becomes less imperative. David Solomon, the CEO of Goldman Sachs, states: **"it's not a new normal. It's an aberration that we're going to correct as soon as possible"**.



Jeremy Stern, CEO of PromoVeritas agreed, saying: **"If I'm honest, I prefer to see 'the whites of their eyes' when it comes to my team. I think it is beneficial to be together, to bounce ideas around and for people to just be aware of other people's conversations, maybe chip in with guidance or experience, and for younger members of the team to learn from more experienced colleagues."**

As many workers look forward to heading back to the office, many others have become devout advocates for home working. So how can agency leaders decide what the new version of their workplace should look like?

TAPPING INTO RESILIENCE FOR A NEW WAY OF WORKING

It has been a buzzword throughout the pandemic, but resilience is one thing many businesses have come out the other end with. Even as we watch the worst of the pandemic subside, we have to acknowledge that the working future is not something that is likely to be pre-determined. Even as it feels we are transitioning into a recovery stage of the pandemic, things are unlikely to ever return to those pre-coronavirus days, but **change is a good thing, and it's up to us to shape the future together.**

We've been speaking to agencies across the sector about resilience, how they coped when COVID-19 struck and how those changes might affect their plans for the future – leaving them ready to move on and build a bigger and better future.

Josh Harrison, Commercial Director at Taxi Studio, explained: "We have to be comfortable with not knowing what is around the corner. It's about preparedness rather than predicting. The world was turned upside down overnight, and we had to respond to that instantly."



Those that reacted quickly and embraced the technology at their disposal were the businesses that bounced back and found the process least disruptive, arming them with the tools and robustness they will need in the wake of the global pandemic.

For many businesses now looking to the future of a hybrid or fully virtual workplace, technology is set to play an indispensable role.



EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY IN A FUTURE HYBRID WORKPLACE

We know that personal interaction, both with clients and colleagues, is fundamental to good working relationships. The ideal scenario is to be in the same room, with different disciplines working together via an exchange of ideas, brainstorming and simply absorbing the energy of one another in a way that simply isn't going to happen the same way on a Zoom call.

However, the expectation that employees will all want to return to the office full time now seems unlikely. That means innovation and creative thinking has never been more paramount for forward-thinking creative agencies.

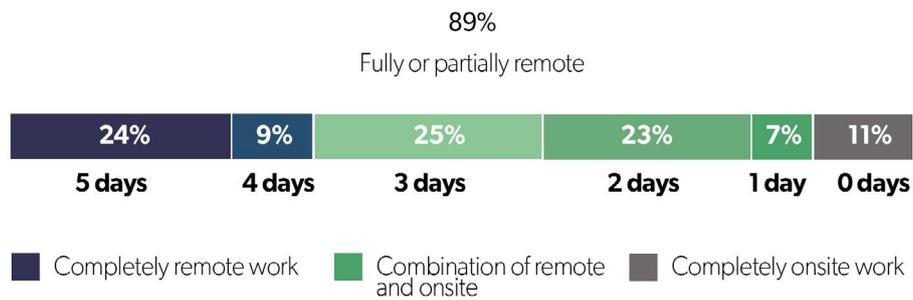
A recent BCG study, in which 209,000 people across 190 countries were surveyed, indicated that:

"89% of respondents wanted to work remotely, either full time or for some of the time."

The survey, which also unveiled a sweet spot of three remote days in a five-day week, backs up the call for businesses to move to a more hybrid model of working as we navigate the future of the workplace.

Exhibit 7 – The Future: How People Would Work if Given a Choice

How many days per week people would like to work from home, by percentage of respondents



Source: 2020 BCG/The Network proprietary web survey and analysis.

Agency leaders will need to adopt a new culture, underpinned by unwavering trust in the dedication of their employees, supported by the best technology and solutions that meet the needs of their team.

For Meet and Potato, a specialist events agency with a forecast £3m turnover centred upon the staging of live events, changing their approach and making use of technology to adapt to the environment was a make or break for the future of their business operations.

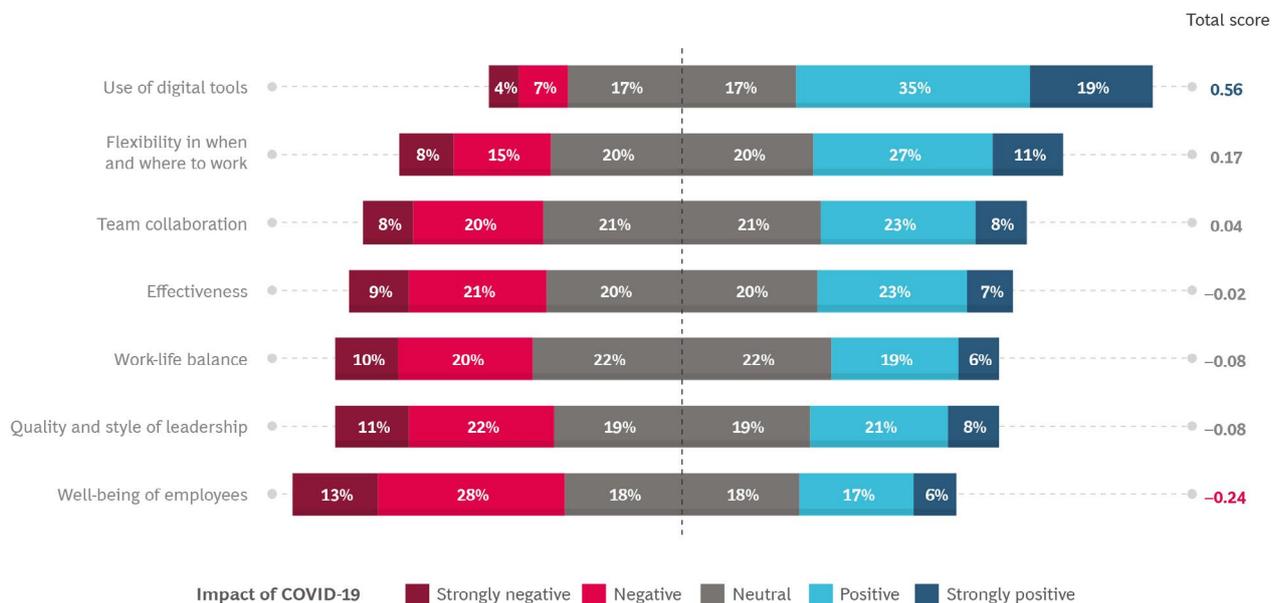
The same BCG research went on to indicate the pandemic’s impact on different areas of workplace culture.

Unsurprisingly, the survey reveals a hugely positive impact on the overall use of digital tools. However, we can’t ignore the adverse influence it has seemingly had on the wellbeing of employees.



Jon Kelly, Director at Meet and Potato explained: *“I have been banging the drum for technology for some time now, wishing people would make more use of what we had, and often wonder at what we could have done in the past if we had all made full use of what was available to us without having to be forced into it.”*

Exhibit 10 - COVID-19’s Impact on Different Areas of Work





NURTURING A WORKPLACE COMMUNITY & RETAINING TALENT

While many businesses simply did what they could to survive, biding their time during lockdown restrictions, many actively embraced the idea that this was not a temporary situation, planning for a future that would look a whole lot different to the brick-and-mortar workplace as we knew it.

But focusing solely on technology meant wellbeing and work-life balance was in jeopardy. With instant messaging tools and mobile apps resulting in an 'always on' mindset, many employees have found a lack of a physical commute means switching off is more challenging. In an environment where burnout is rife, agencies need to shine the light back on employee wellbeing if we are to retain and engage new talent.

One such industry leader with a healthy attitude towards employee wellbeing and balance is Peter Mountstevens, Chief Creative Officer and Managing Partner at Taylor Herring: **"The rise of connected, flexible working we have seen during COVID-19 will herald a bright new era for PR agencies and comms departments. I hope to see an end to presenteeism culture and a far stronger focus on people and outputs."**

Likewise, Meet and Potato is embracing the need to alter an archaic perspective on traditional working hours. Jon Kelly explained: **"From my point of view, as long as the work is done, we have to be understanding and flexible about how people plan their days. Employers need to trust people and see the benefits of being flexible, and the success of how that has worked will have implications for us long term."**

Taxi Studio has also adopted a more wholesome attitude towards remote work, according to Josh Harrison, who said: **"I've never really got on board**

with 'returning to normal' as I don't think I've ever had a 'normal' day at work, things always change, and we have to adapt and move forward. Whilst we're still working remotely in some form or another, what matters is ensuring the team are connected, supported, happy and above all safe."

As many agencies sought to nurture a better work-life balance while working remotely, some actively adopted innovative new policies and methods to keep their team connected but also allow for quality downtime too. One such agency continuing to do this well is the financial services specialist agency, TeamSpirit. We spoke to Emma Evans from TeamSpirit about how they upheld their namesake during the pandemic and looking forward, transitioning into a hybrid model environment.

"We kept our Friday night drinks on zoom, and every month or so, we would send a little home package delivery to all our employees, so we made sure that people had little snack packets just to let them know that we were still thinking of them."

We also introduced a meeting free hour every day, so every day we'd block out peoples diaries to try and encourage as many of our teams to get some screen-free time, to go out, to get some exercise, to really try and promote that health and wellbeing."

Whether it's introducing a policy of no meeting days, whereby employees can say no to meetings on specific days, avoid zoom fatigue, and make time for deep work, or allowing flexible hours so staff can work according to when they know they can be most productive, agencies must channel their creativity to encourage a happier, healthier workforce with better prospects for longevity.



EMERGING STRONGER

Companies that embraced technology and adapted will be the ones to emerge from the pandemic stronger and more viable. Those who turned a worrying situation into a positive experience to allow for long-term business continuity will reap the rewards.

Similarly, those who react well to the external market, to answer the challenges their own clients face and, in turn, help them to make their new approach work will be the ones to emerge into a healthy future. Josh Harrison at Taxi Studio said:



"We're always tweaking our offer to an ever-changing landscape. That hasn't changed with COVID. What is different with the current situation is that for the first time in most of our lifetimes, we are

all affected by something, regardless of agency, client, country or time zone, so it's about being extra supportive to our clients with this in mind. Now more than ever, we have to bring clarity to the chaos and prove ourselves the experts we are."

The adversity of the pandemic helped the industry to focus on what was available, what they had at their disposal to shape their future, and many found that

not only was all the functionality there, but workers were also as diligent, enthusiastic and methodical at home as they had been in the office.

The silver lining of months spent in the darkness of a pandemic is that the industry has embraced change, reached new levels of agility and gained a new perspective on what is possible. What's more, in the past year, workers have learned more about their work-life balance and how they work at their best – so employers must let them continue to build on that.

While life may never quite return to what it was before, there's no doubt that the industry will continue to be innovative, forward-thinking and creative because that is where our strengths lie.

Whatever effects agencies have seen, pivoting their offering to meet their own needs and those of their clients, seeing working practices change, or merely adapting to our own version of this 'new normal', the key lesson we have learned is that we can work from home when we need to. We can trust people. We can be flexible. We have resilience.

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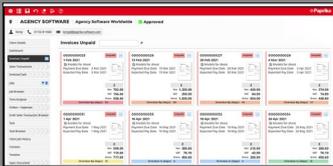
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