Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 29:   Transitioning back to the office

Speakers: Afshan Iqbal and Lucy Gordon

Afshan: Welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm Afshan Iqbal, a doctoral researcher here at the Leeds University Business School.

Lucy: And I'm Lucy Gordon, a director at Walker Morris, in the employment team.

Afshan: Thank you, Lucy, for joining us today. As we all know, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has meant that so many more people have been working from home and have continued to do so for the past year, including people that wouldn't normally work from home, or have never done so before. So, what this now means is we have to start to look ahead as we are now starting to think about what it would mean for the future workplace and how we manage to transition back to the office after being at home for so long. So, Lucy, tell me a little bit about your experiences of working from home during the pandemic.

Lucy: Yes, absolutely. Thank you. I was quite lucky in the fact that I already worked from home prior to the pandemic. So, I was already quite familiar with, you know, having to have equipment at home, having a desk, I was already very well set up for that. I think the biggest thing, particularly for a lot of law firms, in the sudden shift to working from home, is the fact that, actually, particularly within firms like Walker Morris, you have a spread of different experience. So, you have paralegals, you have trainees, associates, all the way up to directors and partners. And actually, a key part of what we do is working together as teams and that was the element, I think, that was probably the hardest for people to get used to overnight. That when you're used to seeing people face to face and you're able to work together collaboratively on projects, it is sometimes harder to do that from a distance and working remotely. And I think the whole experience has really enabled, particularly firms like Walker Morris, to really advance their technologies and their ability to work together remotely in a very, very short space of time.

Afshan: That's great. Of course, as you've said, people have missed the spontaneous interactions and the collaborations that they would have had with one another in the office. So, how do you think

people have adapted to the shift towards more virtual communication?

Lucy: So, I think it's really placed a very important emphasis on communication and on making sure that everybody takes the time to communicate. I think when you are face to face, it's a lot easier to, perhaps, almost forget the importance of good communication. It's a lot easier to communicate when you can see somebody. So, in terms of body language, you know, that type of thing. And actually, I think what it's done is to put a real emphasis for most people in the firm on making the effort to communicate. It has to be something positive that you do. And what we've done is, in particular, things that most business will have done.

So, things like making sure we have regular team catch ups, so we have a kind of formal team meeting every week where we talk about work related matters. But then we also have informal catch ups every week that are more to do with just chatting to each other from a social perspective, understanding what is going on in each other's lives. And really keeping that chain of communication going, not just relying on non-verbal forms of communication like emails, messaging, but actually making sure that you do… it's very old fashioned but pick up the phone. You don't pick up the phone, you log in on Teams or whatever. But making sure that we do actually speak to each other, and often on video because, again, you know, seeing each other on video just enables you to communicate better, you get that body language back into conversation and communication again, even if it is just from the waist up.

Afshan: Yes, I think that's a really important point that you've touched upon, that where this whole online setup of using Teams and Zoom, you know, the video interactions allowing us to see each other, we can see body language and facial expressions, and I think that's really important because otherwise we would have just stuck to communicating by email as the default. Which would have been so easy to do because it was the norm even when we were in the office. But, you know, tone is often lost when it comes to emails and it can lead to misinterpretations, especially when we're communicating from afar. So, I guess one good thing about this way of working has highlighted that we're really very fortunate to have had the appropriate technology in place to be able to help us adapt to new ways of communicating at work. So, it's almost like bringing the office environment into our homes as a good way to not feel like we're missing out as

much. So, I guess we can say that that's worked out really well, but what do you think could have perhaps worked a little bit better?

Lucy: I think you've really touched upon it there, actually, in terms of talking about bringing the office into your home, you know? That has massive advantages, so like we say, talking about communication, enabling that. It also helps from the perspective, many people who were perhaps struggling with home schooling, that level of flexibility in looking after children and perhaps the relatives as well. But I think the problem for a lot of people has been actually been having boundaries between their work and their home life. So, you know, it's something that is very, very hard to manage when your laptop is there, it's always available, it's very, very difficult to switch off at the end of the day. You don't have that physical separation of leaving the office or having a commute. And I think that has been hard for a lot of people, particularly being lawyers, it's very, very easy to work long hours and having to have a bit of discipline about making sure that, you know, you do switch off, you go and get some exercise, you do spend time with family and do things to relax. It's very important, and actually I think that's one of the things that people have found the hardest.

Afshan: Yes, I think that's a really important thing that you've mentioned there, that the boundaries between work life and home life have become so blurred. It's become almost difficult to distinguish the two or separate the two. So, how do you think we can support our employees and colleagues more to help with finding a healthier balance between work and home?

Lucy: So, I think it's something that is really important for employers, and particularly at Walker Morris, we had a number of initiatives, we were, sort of, thinking very much about making sure that people did use their ability to go out and take exercise. So, we were looking at various different challenges that you could complete as a team, a lot of just reminding people to do that, to go out, get fresh air, get some exercise. I think it is about setting good habits as well, so, you know, setting personal boundaries in terms of saying things like, well I will aim to, you know, switch my laptop off at this time. If I need to check emails later I will check them at this time. About having those personal boundaries in place.

It's important for employers to support employees, but I think it also has to be incumbent on the employee to do what works for

them as well. I mean, I know from my personal perspective, working through lockdown and home schooling two small children, you know, there would be times during the day that I would obviously be home schooling them, and then, perhaps, making up some of that time in the evenings with working a bit later. Now, that worked for me. It worked incredibly well for me, but there may be people for whom that type of flexibility doesn't work and they want the rigour of a slightly more structured sort of nine to five day. It's all about having that kind of personal responsibility, I think, for doing what works for you.

Afshan: Again, yes, I think that's a really valid point. And it's also important to recognise that the level of self-awareness in terms of understanding how well we work as individuals, so what routines and structures might work best for you, but it's also then important to communicate that as well. So, for instance, like you've mentioned there, where time… where there have times where you were busy with home schooling, I think it's important to be able to manage those expectations with your colleagues and your employers, just to let them know that you're perhaps not going to be as available during these hours because of x, y, z reasons, you know? It helps to let them know what to expect from you and to be reassured that the tasks will get done. So, I think it's really important to have that communication and to ensure that it is essentially a two way street.

So, yes, I think that's a really, really good point about managing personal boundaries. Another interesting thing that this whole situation has thrown into the mix is that of onboarding new members of staff. So, where previously, you know, interviews and induction processes have all been done in person, and then you start a new job and it's your first day, you turn up to the office and you meet the whole team, and you do the walk about and all of that, you know? That's not necessarily going to be the case for everyone now going forward, and it certainly won't have been the case during the pandemic over the past year. So, what are your experiences around that, and how do you think this will work as we start to move forward?

Lucy: Yes. Well, I'm actually a bit of a guinea pig in that respect because I joined Walker Morris in lockdown, I think it was lockdown two, it was November last year. So, I actually had, kind of, my interviews were held in the summer when things had relaxed a little bit and we were able to do socially distanced interviews. So, I did actually get to meet a couple of people then. But my actual onboarding, my induction, everything was done

virtually in lockdown number two. So, it worked really well for me, I have to say. I think the Walker Morris systems are all geared for being able to do things virtually. I think the one thing that I did find difficult, and I think most people would do, is just getting to know your colleagues, and everybody was incredibly welcoming, really, really nice feel and culture to the firm, but it's not the same as, kind of, meeting people face to face.

So, it's actually only in the past, sort of, few weeks I have been able, again, socially distanced, to meet some of my colleagues. And I think it does make a difference when you can meet people in person. One of the things that we would always joke about was that I had no idea how tall anybody was. So, actually, you know, it's strange to meet somebody in person and, sort of thing, oh, okay, that's what you look like. The other thing is, obviously, a lot of people can look slightly different when you meet them in person. If they're not wearing their glasses, or they, you know, shaved off some facial hair or something like that. We had a lot of individuals who were growing very long beards in lockdown, and sometimes, sort of, seeing those people in person it's a little bit hard to recognise them again. So, once of the thing that I found quite hard in actually meeting people now, is recognising people from Teams and Zoom calls. It can be quite awkward, you know, you can sort of see somebody across the room in a large office and think, do I know that person or don't I? So, that has been a little bit, sort of, strange coming back to seeing people in person again.

But going back to the onboarding process, as I say, it's something that I think employers really do have to think about. It's the first impression that somebody gets of a company, so it's really important, I think, to try to sell the culture of company and of a firm through that onboarding process. I've seen a lot of really great initiatives from a number of employers, I work as an employment lawyer, so seeing what other businesses do is a really great opportunity for me. But I've seen a lot of businesses who've done these wonderful, kind of, joining packs that will be sent to individual's homes, so they will have some merchandise, some nice food, guides to who are the, kind of, key people that they need to get to know in their first few weeks. Things like maps of the office so that when they do get to go back into the office they know where to go, you know, silly things like where the loos are because there probably won't be somebody in the office to give them a guided tour. You know, all of those types of thing, I think they can really, really help. And obviously doing the

virtual calls, that's the best way to, kind of, get to know people. But I think it can be a seamless process, it's just incumbent on the employer to put the effort in to make sure that they are really doing everything they can to bring people on board in a positive manner.

Afshan: Fantastic. I think, especially around having the joining packs, I mean, who would have thought that we'd have to include instructions directing people towards where the toilets are and the fire exits and things like that? You know, really important things that we wouldn't think about normally because you can just show somebody where all of that is. And also when we're working from home, well we know where our toilets are and where our kitchen is, you know? So, again, we've now got to be mindful of these things, because once we do start to eventually go back to the office, there is potentially going to be a number of new employees that will never have even visited that office before. So, you know, they won't know things like that, they won't know what floor their desk is on, or where the printing facilities are things like that.

So, yes, you've made a really crucial point there, that it is incumbent upon employers to ensure that they are as welcoming as possible, and providing new staff with as much information as possible to help them get settled into their new office environment. So, thank you so much for sharing that. So, now, as we start to transition back into the… well, as we start to transition back into working in the office a bit more, and, like you've mentioned, you've been back in a few times over the past few weeks, what do you think it's going to start to look like for Walker Morris as more people start to return to the office?

Lucy: So, it's really interesting, actually, because I think, particularly the approach that the firm has taken is to take things very much, kind of, step by step. So, obviously, you know, the legal advice at the moment is that you should be working from home where you can, but if you need to work in an office space then you can do that. The arrangements that Walker Morris has put in place are very, very good should you need to go into the office. We have a very comprehensive one way system which is quite complicated to follow, again, for a new starter when you're learning where things are in the building and also having to abide by a one way system, it can be quite confusing. But we've got these good arrangements in place.

The firm has been really great with supporting employees in terms of looking at the roadmap and potentially when people can get back into the office in a more frequent way. But actually, they've been very supportive and have said, you know, for the moment, you know, we trust you, it's for you as individuals to work out what works for you. And that's to be held as discussions, we were talking before about communication, really important to manage the communication and the expectations, but it's very much, you know, speak to your team, what works for your team, what's going to work for you, and for some people that will be, going forward, spending more time in the office. I think the office is going to take on a slightly new role, I think, it's very much seen as a privilege to be able to go into an office and collaborate and communicate with your colleagues face to face. And I think people will really relish those days that they do spend in the office.

I think there will be some people who would like to go back into the office five days a week, there are others that that won't work for them, but I think those that do go into the office will be using that time in the office to work collaboratively and cooperatively with colleagues rather than, you know, it just being head down at a desk. It's very clear that you can do that element of your work from home, but the bit that is harder is things like supervision of other members of the team, giving feedback, working on projects together, and I think there will be this sort of culture back in the office of, you know, everybody, sort of, going in there to communicate and work together. I think a lot of businesses have invested a lot of money over the past few years in making workspaces more collaborative with the initial trend that we had about working from home, but I think the pandemic has simply accelerated that so that now those offices who have invested in those, sort of, team working spaces will really start to see the benefit of them now.

Afshan: Yes, that's great. I mean it's almost like we're, sort of, in this experimental phase of trying to understand this… almost how this hybrid working model is going to work, and that might be a little bit of a trial and error for a few months as well, but it's great to see that, like you said, the whole getting your head down, the high concentration work and all of that sort of stuff can be done at home on your own, but it's actually where we need to work on projects collaboratively where we might start to see that the office is being used more for those sorts of… types of work. And also, to be seen as a bit more of a social hub, you know, as a

way to collaborate and interact with other colleagues. So, it will be really interesting to see how this starts to take shape as we start to trial hybrid models a little bit more. So, just finally, then, I guess, from an employment law perspective, is there anything that you think that we need to be more mindful of as employees and as employers?

Lucy: Yes, there is a number of things, and luckily that's partly what keeps me in a job. So, I think there are two main things that employers really need to be thinking about. One, as we've talked about already, kind of, mental health of employees and making sure that whilst they are working from home they're not, sort of, out of sight and out of mind. The pandemic has obviously had a massive impact on every individual but from different perspectives, maybe some are suffering with grief, others obviously had home schooling, some employees may have long COVID. There are all those types of issues that employers need to be thinking about, and I think a lot of employers had already invested quite heavily in the mental health of their employees prior to the pandemic, but again I think that's been accelerated and there is a real need to make sure that employers have good support in place. So, whether that is mental health first aiders, you know, employee assistance schemes, counselling available, all of those types of things are important but equally the culture of a business is vital in terms of setting the right culture so that people know that they have the support there when they need it. I mean, speaking there, just also about long COVID, you know, one of the great benefits of having a hybrid working model is actually that it can enable, perhaps, people who suffer from disabilities to have a more flexible model. And again, that's something that employers can really embrace as we move forward.

I think the second real key thing that employers need to do is to be thinking about diversity as well. There have been a number of reports that actually increased flexible working and hybrid working could result in, sort of, the position and the progression of women in the workplace going backwards, which is obviously not something that anyone wants to see happen. And I think it's really important for employers to bear that in mind when looking at these structures, and make sure that actually there isn't the potential for that to happen, to put measures in place to make sure that women aren't by default moving into positions that maybe aren't as, sort of, successful or progressive for them. So, those are the two key things, I think, mental health and diversity

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for women. But I know a lot of employers have already got really successful programmes in place for those and I think it's just, again, accelerated the need for those to be in place.

Afshan: Thank you. You've provided us with some really, really valuable insights there, so thank you so much for that, Lucy, and it's been an absolute pleasure talking to you today.

Lucy: Thank you, I've really enjoyed it, it's been a pleasure talking to you as well. Thanks Afshan.

Afshan: And if you'd like to know more about the project, more details can be found in the show notes. Thank you very much for listening.