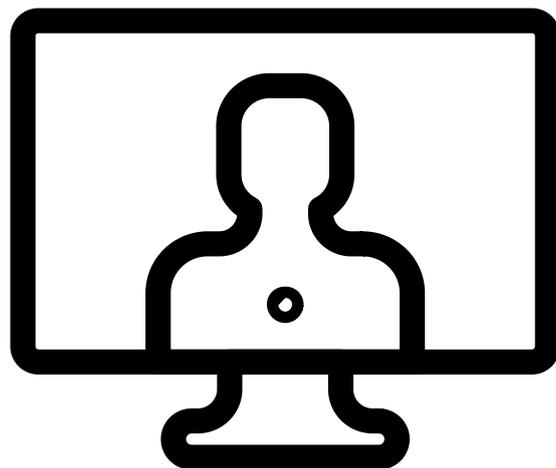


COVID-19: ISOLATION NATION

**AN STUDY INTO HOW BUSINESSES ARE
RESPONDING TO THE CRISIS**



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact across the globe in terms of health, business and the economy. The outbreak has already seen global markets plummet, and the UK has experienced its worst societal disruptions since the second World War. And yet, according to Prime Minister Boris Johnson (the first world-leader to become infected with the virus), things are still likely to get worse before they get better.

In fact, experts have predicted that lockdown restrictions will be in place for at least another six months and the amount of deaths could hit 20,000 in the UK alone.

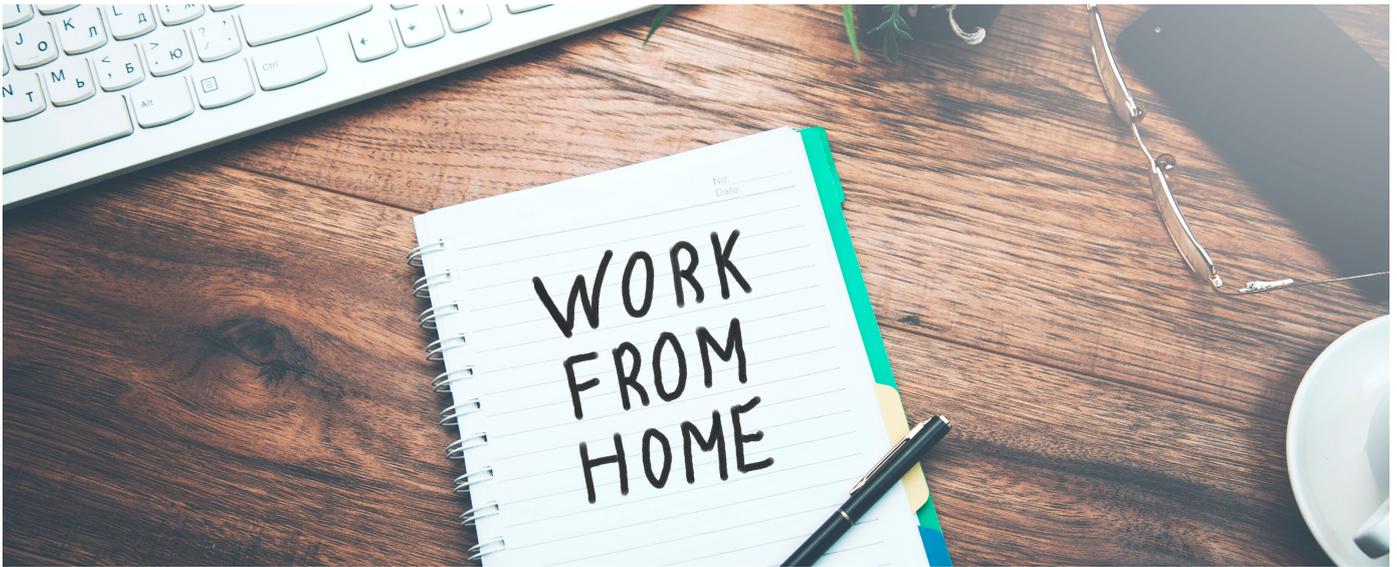
Recent statistical analysis has suggested that the coronavirus pandemic could cut UK economic output by an unprecedented 15% in Q2 of 2020 and unemployment could more than double.

The worst recession since the financial crisis of 2008 is now all but unavoidable, and COVID-19 will continue to have deep repercussions and implications for businesses across the UK. Both in terms of economic performance and internal operations, all businesses are having to face a series of drastic changes in order to adapt to this unprecedented situation.

One of the key changes already implemented by thousands of businesses across the world, is the transition to remote working. Whilst flexible and remote working is a trend which has grown steadily in popularity in the last few years, the threat of COVID-19 has forced a majority of British businesses to implement new working-from-home structures with immediate affect.



ISOLATION NATION



Unfortunately, the urgency of this pandemic has not allowed many businesses the time to trial or research remote-working strategies and are struggling to cope with drastic changes made to internal proceedings over just a week or two.

What's more, many organisations are not equipped with the necessary tech skills or understanding to operate remote working technology which is inevitably required for smooth operations and communication. In fact, a recent poll found that more than a quarter of senior decision makers believe their company lacks skilled workers to manage 'widespread and long-term remote working for staff'. Meanwhile, four in ten businesses intend to increase their IT and tech investment to support their employees working in home isolation.

This research paper aims to explore the impact, so-far, of a brand new company culture, implementation of new technology and attitudes to remote working from a range of key decision makers in different sized businesses across the UK.

The purpose of this report is to offer recommendations and analysis into suitable, popular and the most effective methods or adapting to this unprecedented situation in order to ultimately stay safe, remain productive, and protect jobs.

METHODOLOGY

The Parliament Street research team wanted to assess and examine the challenges facing companies and how they are adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In collaboration with independent polling company, Censuswide, Parliament Street researchers surveyed 200 senior decision-makers in large and medium sized business in the UK.

The first set of questions posed to those surveyed were pertaining to companies attitude to the sudden and compulsory shift of company culture, including remote working, using personal devices for work and adapting to the change in technology requirement.

The second set of questions analyse the problems and challenges already facing companies and workers who are now working-from-home – such challenges include a lack of IT infrastructure and inexperience in managing complex teams using new technology.

The final set of questions investigate the different strategies, policies and culture already employed by different companies.

This report analyses each of set of questions with its own dedicated chapter, followed by a key summary detailing recommendations for effective adoption of a brand new company culture and unseen operational technology.



ADAPTING TO THE CRISIS

The survey of 200 senior decision makers first revealed some of the measures already implemented by some organisations in order to help them adapt to the COVID-19 situation.

58% of companies have already ordered extra laptops, mobiles and tablet computers due to the coronavirus pandemic. Worryingly, 33% have done so without upgrading security procedures. This suggest there is a clear need for security awareness and digital skills educations amongst employees and board members who may not be aware of the extra due diligence and safety efforts required for remote working.

Fortunately, 38% are conducting digital skills training via video conference with staff to get them up to speed on remote working. These video conferences will range from everything from cyber security essentials to basic operation tutorials – whilst not ideal, the training sessions are a good compromise between instant, safe, secure working and ensuring employees are caught up to speed on technology they will be using as much as possible in such a short space of time.

Alternatively, the survey found that 34% of businesses have hired external IT support to cope with the demands of a 100% remote working workforce.

This can be a great short-term solution to ensure that new IT strategies are managed and implemented by a team of experts. However, as the COVID–19 situation escalates over the coming months, continuous external IT support may not be a financially suitable option for all businesses.

38%

CONDUCT DIGITAL SKILLS
TRAINING ONLINE

58%

HAVE ORDERED EXTRA
LAPTOPS, TABLETS AND
MOBILES

34%

HAVE HIRED IN EXTERNAL IT
SUPPORT



CHALLENGES AHEAD

For those workers who have already committed to remote or flexible working as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the next series of questions examine some of the issues and challenges workers have faced.

Over one-quarter (27%) of those surveyed said their CEO has yet to address employees, via video link or any other digital methods, to update them on their company's response to COVID-19. As predicted, one of the negative side effects for sudden culture change is the affect on company communication, and regular updates from decision makers, board members or even managers is evidently one of the first communication lines to suffer.

Technical difficulties are also a key disruptor for remote workers, even in organisations which have attempted to keep good communication levels in tact. For example, 31% have experienced their video conferencing system crashing at least once during a crucial meeting. This can occur due to outdated technology, or a broadband speed which is no longer equipped for the influx of home working.

Over one in five (21%) have had problems with payroll processes and expect delays with end of month payments due to the current pandemic situation. This is likely the case for a number of reasons, one of which being that some decision makers have deprioritised employee pay structures in favour of more essential processes necessary to the survival of their organisation or department.

Finally, over one-third of senior decision makers say their team members have expressed fears around their mental health since switching to 100% remote working. A change in daily routine combined with extremely uncertain times will inevitably lead to ongoing stress and mental health concerns for employees who feel uncomfortable in this new situation, stressed about the possibility of remaining afloat financially, or even who feel lonely working remotely and without the assistance of an office environment and interpersonal communication.

REMOTE WORKING CULTURE

There are number of key strategies which have been adopted by companies to ensure employees can adapt to a new remote working culture. For example, 42% have introduced online quizzes and team tasks to build company culture whilst everyone is remote working. This can be a great way of keeping an entire team in touch and ensuring that an office environment is replicated as much as is possible from a remote setting.

Furthermore, 27% have conducted annual performance reviews and announced promotions via video conference. This is just a testament to some of the ways in which video conferencing will be used by businesses in the following months in quarantine, and we can expect all business and strategy meetings to now take place via video conference calling.

Interestingly, almost one quarter (24%) of senior decision makers have already considered giving notice on the lease or rent of their office space with plans to downsize or adopt permanent remote or flexible working once the COVID-19 crisis is over. Having only been operating in quarantine for a relatively short amount of time we can expect the amount of companies to see remote working as a feasible option to increase dramatically over the coming months.

24%

ARE CONSIDERING GIVING
NOTICE ON OFFICE BUILDINGS

27%

HAVE CONDUCTED ANNUAL
PERFORMANCE REVIEWS VIA
VIDEO LINK

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It's clear that the extremely rapid turnaround in businesses who have been forced to adopt remote working internal operations has led to some delays and setbacks in terms of acclimatising to an unprecedented situation.

Companies should eventually adapt to this new situation, which is set to afflict the country for no less than six months (much longer when referring to the ongoing economic impact COVID-19 will have on the country). Until then, and as a direct result of some of the key findings in this report, some recommendations for adapting to remote working are as follows:

WE PROPOSE

Proficient training for new technology – Whilst it's clear that training procedures have been carried in some organisations, it is essential that all workers are fully-equipped with the skills to understand and operate new, cloud-enabled software, infrastructure and applications, and ensure that they are well-trained in cyber security measures in order to ensure that they are not the victim of a cyber attack or accidentally expose important company information.

Building a renewed sense of company culture – The COVID-19 situation is not going to be a short-term ordeal, and organisations must adapt to this new way of working. Effective methods of ensuring that workers are inspired, and company culture is managed, is through continuous communication, via video conferencing, phone calls, messaging services, as well as online quizzes and cloud-enabled team tasks.

Balancing safety with productivity – In order to remain safe in these testing times, remote working is an inevitability for most organisations. Whilst maintaining productivity and profitability seems impossible, the good news is that there are a vast number of technology options, experts and services designed to help companies manage operations and weather the increasingly volatile storm set to afflict the country for the foreseeable future.

