

# Did You See COVID-19 Coming?

## No? Neither did we; or anyone in fact. What lessons have we learnt in Reward & Wellbeing in the face of COVID-19 and the start to this new decade?

In a job interview five years ago had you been asked where you will be in five years – well, I am quite sure not a single one of us would have responded, 'I will be working from home all day, everyday; communicating to people solely via screen; my groceries are primarily delivered to my door by someone in a mask; and most insightfully, the price of a toilet roll will exceed that of a litre of petrol!'

In fact, had we been asked in January if this is what June would look like, we would never have guessed or planned for it. However, what we all need to do is take a step back and appreciate we have survived the first six months of potentially the most impactful year in our life times, and we are far stronger for it.

Universally, the HR profession has picked up its collective petticoats and pulled up its socks and made good. We have supported employers and managers at a loss of what to do, employees at a loss of direction, colleagues bewildered and distressed, and gathered everyone up, and cared. Did we know the answers? Absolutely not, and we still don't – but we found the confidence and leant on our resilience; and more than anything else – we did the best we could.

Our primary focus at Brunel at the outset of COVID-19 was around the wellbeing of our employees and students – as this is always our focus it was already habit and therefore we come to Lesson 1 – lean on your strengths.

Immediately, we knew there was one thing needed more than anything else – Communication. Even when you don't know what to say and don't have the answers, admit it and be clear. Where we can offer advice and direction, make that clear too. Building resources and signposting whatever we could helped our employees know what we knew, what they needed to do, and where they could get help. This was a focus in the early days of lockdown and still remains an asset that we update as new developments occur and our response changes to keep abreast of the changing landscape. Most important is to keep these communications honest – Lesson 2 – value the importance of communication, but ensure it is honest and earnest, if you don't know, admit it. That's the only way to engender confidence in what you are communicating.

From the perspective of my team, Reward & Wellbeing, we had two obvious challenges,

the first was Furlough. In February furlough sounded like something a farmer ploughed in his field, or something that measured how far a horse ran, but at the very least it was an 'F' word that even the most worldly wise of us had not heard. By March it was a new term that we had a whole new definition for, and by April we were talking to employees about their not being at work, whilst they were (already) not at work because of the lockdown, and still being paid. The University made a decision at the outset of considering applying furlough, that any employees on furlough would continue to receive 100% of their salary, i.e. that we would

top up the 20%. However, because this was such a new concept, and the very nature of people's insecurity and concern, no amount of discussions gave peace of mind that this wasn't the future potential devastation of their employment. Equally, at that time, it would have been inappropriate to give assurances on the long-term when there was no long-term information. Lesson 3 – sometimes no amount of discussion or explanation is enough for people to have the answers for their own peace of mind, which says more about their peace of mind than anything you can say, so accepting the limit of your control is paramount.

Our second challenge was the wellbeing of our employees. My team are amazing, and took immediate action to compliment the general University communications with wellbeing focused communications. Some of the activities we initiated in the face of the early days of lockdown included:

- Creating an additional section on our already bursting wellbeing web pages about working at home; DSE and how to make the best of it all
- Providing information about managing teams remotely
- Promoting the access and availability of hitherto unknown products, like Zoom and Teams, as well as reminding about Skype for Business and even emails as forms of keeping in contact
- Updating our Employee Assistance Programme page, to ensure it was current and accessible, and keeping this updated as our EAP partner provided materials.

Then furlough was implemented!! We had a population of employees that were no longer 'working', which we appreciated for some would be an immense challenge, so we re-directed some of our communications and included more information around:

- Keeping fit, and exercise at home
- Keeping busy – with creative ideas for new hobbies and activities like links to virtual museum tours
- New personal development opportunities, providing access and links so employees could seek out things they could learn – both work related, like IT skills and personally related
- More support for managers, who would now be working with some colleagues, and also maintaining engagement with other colleagues unable to work.

We also recognised we had a number of employees that were carers and parents, so promoted the policies and guidance that support them, coaching the managers to

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offer flexibility – re-directing the focus to getting the job done, and if it was easier to do it at 10pm when the children were asleep, then that's job done!

The web pages were, at the peak of the lock down, updated almost daily; and the team continue to update them at least weekly to ensure they are current and offer any new opportunities for support and wellbeing that we can possibly source. We had a lot, as we are a really great employer, but we decided there is no limit that is too much. During these unprecedented times, if we can get something that only helps one person then that's enough to make it worthwhile. This highlights our Lesson 4 – you will never, ever, be told by your employees that you have too much wellbeing in place. People may claim they cannot find it, or that it's not something they need – but they won't tell you that you have more than enough.

On the subject of Wellbeing, it is also important that we bring this a little closer to home. Human Resources have been busy over the last four months, there is no dispute to that. By the very nature of what we do, we care, and there should be no challenge to that either. But, I would say that we all too often forget to put ourselves first in our priority lists, and we really need to do that

too. All the resilience and confidence in the world that we encourage from other people will not help us, we need our own little pot too. This is why Lesson 5 – my last, but most important lesson – is look after yourself; take care of you! Remember when you get on a plane (if you remember those distant memories of travelling), you are told to ensure your own mask is on before you help others. Well this is true in life too, except for HR practitioners we wear capes not masks, because we are super heros.

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