Beyond Covid-19:
Research Insights into a New World of Work.

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Executive Summary

At the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, organisations pivoted to a range of Flexible Working Options (FWOs), predominantly working from home. In the months that followed various media have suggested that organisations and their employees may wish to retain some of these new ways of working. Simultaneously however, others detail the challenges encountered when engaging in FWOs for organisations and employees alike. This report presents the findings of a national online survey implemented in July 2020, investigating employee experiences of working from home during this time and, as organisations contemplate a return to the workplace, employee and management views on what this workplace of the future should be like.

This research was commissioned by OMT Global. The survey was targeted at employees and managers working in small, medium and large organisations across all business sectors. There were 590 respondents, 45.5% were employees and 54.5% were managers.

The study aims to highlight for organisational leaders the challenges and opportunities arising from this experience. Findings will inform emerging trends and input up to date knowledge into the management approaches, policies and practices which should shape the future of work.

Key Findings

The survey findings illustrate both positive and negative experiences of employees during Covid-19 and identify some key areas of concern for organisations going forward. Overall, employees experienced support and understanding from their line managers, with a majority valuing the flexibility afforded them around their working hours. There has also been an increase among some employees in the sense of value and loyalty they have towards their organisation, with analysis showing that the role of managers is crucial in this regard.

However, findings also identify some areas of concern for organisations. Many employees feel a sense of disconnect from the organisation and report reduced levels of wellbeing. There are also mixed findings on the impact of home working (and the pandemic challenge generally) on work productivity. Furthermore, managers are concerned about the need to review and adapt existing human resource policies, practices and other supports which they feel are required to help them lead and manage their teams through this new way of working. Throughout the findings there is clear expectation that the way we work will now shift, not just

in response to coping with a virus, but in response to a social need to create and sustain a 'new world of work' which embraces a more flexible approach to working. A more detailed summary of these findings follows.

Employee Engagement

A disconnect between employees, their teams and organisation was evident:

- 51.3% of employees feel less connected to their teams since Covid-19. 50.4% of managers also reported that their teams feel less connected to their teams.

- 40.2% of employees reported feeling disconnected from their organisation. In addition, 47.9% of managers find their employees are disconnected from the organisation.

- Employees and managers express concerns that the social aspect of work will significantly diminish going forward impacting team spirit and opportunities to collaborate. Specifically, opportunities to engage in innovative and strategic activities and articulate their ideas or concerns up through the organisation is highlighted.

Employee Wellbeing

Employee wellbeing is a concern for both employees and managers:

- 60.1% of employees feel increased levels of stress since the onset of Covid-19. 64.3% of managers reported that employees expressed increased stress levels.

- 31.5% of employees feel that their quality of life is worse now than it was before Covid-19.

- The wellbeing level of female employees is of particular concern with 66.7% of women reporting increased levels of stress in comparison to 44.9% of men.
  - o 48.5% of women are experiencing difficulties balancing work and home in comparison to 34.5% of men.
  - o Issues of caring responsibilities and returning to work is a greater concern for women (43.8%) in comparison to men (30%)

- Managers feel they need support on how to manage the wellbeing of their team members. They need more tools and techniques from the organisation to help enhance wellbeing, motivation and morale.

- 35.2% of employees believe their organisation is not actively dedicated to enhancing their wellbeing. 38.3% of managers feel the organisation could do more to support employees.

- Perceptions of the organisation's dedication to employee wellbeing are related to wellbeing activities implemented by the organisation, the support of managers in managing stress and the perception that managers genuinely care.

Senior Management Disconnect

A clear difference in perceptions between middle management and senior management has emerged regarding both how employees are coping and how the organisation has handled Covid-19.

- 40.2% of middle managers say that employees have expressed that their quality of life is worse since Covid-19. This is in comparison to only 25.5% of senior managers.

- 18.6% of senior managers saying employees have not expressed any changes to stress levels and 15.7% claiming employees expressed reduced levels of stress. Only 10.3% of middle managers feel the same.

- 55% of senior managers believe the organisation values employees more since Covid-19. Significantly fewer middle managers, 43.4%, agreed.

- 82.3% of senior managers said that the organisation genuinely cares about employee wellbeing. This is in stark contrast to 66 % of middle managers.

- 49.5% of senior managers were more likely to agree that employees felt included in decision making around the organisation's response to Covid-19, in comparison to 37.6% of middle managers.

The New World of Work

The findings indicate that the desired future of work for a majority of employees will be in the form of what employees are calling the 'new normal', centred on a blend of working from home and being onsite:

- 68.7% of employees would prefer a blend of working from home and being onsite. 85.8% of managers said that this is the option their employees want also.

- 73.8% of employees and 78.5% of managers have already been informed by their organisations that this new approach of blended work will be continued into the future.

- Employees however highlight a number of key concerns related to their health and safety on the days when they have to return to the workplace. They also identify the need for the organisation to review and possibly develop new policies on FWO practices and onsite work practices. Clarification about the boundaries of Flexible Working Options and the need for specific FWOs training and resources for managers was also raised.

Health and Safety

As a blended working option is the most popular with those surveyed, this also raised some concerns about onsite working practices in a Covid-19 context:

- 60.7% of employees are concerned about their safety in returning to the workplace.

- 79.5% of managers feel that this is a concern of their employees.

- A sense of concern is evident over the attitudes of others to the safety measures imposed was also identified.

Organisational Support
- 69.6% of employees felt that their managers were supportive during the crisis.
- 84.6 % of employees felt that their manager demonstrated understanding.
- 66.5% of employees expressed that they were afforded flexibility with their working hours since the onset of Covid-19.
- 34.9% of managers felt that their organisations could have done more to support employees during Covid-19.

Organisational Loyalty
- 29.1% of employees feel more valued by their organisations now than they did before Covid-19, with 34% feeling more loyal.
- 16.1% of employees feel less valued by their organisations following Covid-19, with 15.6% feeling less loyal.
- Feeling supported by managers, being included in the decision making around the organisation's response to Covid-19 and trusting leaders to make the right decisions have a moderately positive effect on feeling more valued and loyal since Covid-19.

Key Recommendations

These findings illustrate a clear desire by employees and their managers for a new way of working. The hope expressed in this research is that more FWOs, specifically working from home blended with onsite activity, will become a cornerstone of workplaces into the future. Nevertheless, considering the issues employees have experienced during Covid-19 and the range of supports they have requested as their organisations embrace this new way of working, the following key recommendations are made:

Organisational Leadership

The findings suggest that both managers and employees desire a more flexible way of working into the future, however some of the findings point to a lack of clarity around how new Flexible Working Options will operate in practice. This proposes the need for organisational level intervention as, while FWOs have many benefits, they will have a significant impact on the business operating model. Leading a more remote or agile workforce is a new direction for many in leadership positions and its impact on business operating models should not be underestimated. Therefore, the typical strategic change interventions of bottom-up feedback,

leadership strategy reviews, ongoing clear and consistent top-down communications and then a plan for how changing work practices will be policy-driven, implemented in practice and then supported by new management approaches, resources and training solutions is required. This study shows that assumptions that everything will fall into place are to be avoided.

Introducing FWOs will not just be about a new workforce operating model. It will also require leaders and managers to question the organisation's work culture, leadership and management style, and traditional perspectives of FWOs. There is evidence that, prior to Covid-19, many organisations did not encourage FWOs (Leslie et al., 2012). The sudden shift in organisational norms needs to be discussed in full if the new FWO policies and practices are to be successfully implemented.

Review and Development of HRM Policies and Practices

Most organisations today have a broad range of Human Resource Management policies and practices; however these have typically been designed and delivered in a face to face environment. Adapting policies and practices to fit with this new world of working with a blend of employees being onsite and working from home is required. These would likely include Recruitment & Selection, Performance Management, Learning and Development and Grievance and Disciplinary policy and practice. This process should be undertaken in tandem with the Organisational Leadership and Management piece outlined above to ensure that managers have made sense of the new way of working and are comfortable supporting and managing their employees in this manner.

Employee Wellbeing Strategy

While there have been considerable stresses associated with working from home during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, organisations cannot assume these will recede anytime soon. While FWOs themselves are often perceived as a route to wellbeing, and they are for many, they also present many challenges such as finding the right life-work balance, feelings of social isolation, and coping with work decision-making and problem-solving alone. Furthermore, many existing wellbeing initiatives employed by organisations may only be available on-site. It will be important for organisations to view wellbeing as a key strategy for this new world of work (as opposed to 'just another' HR policy or practice). This will require new and innovative wellbeing interventions, management development to promote and implement them and ongoing employee engagement and review to ensure they are having the appropriate impact.

Health and Safety

Working within a 'Covid Context' is likely for the foreseeable future. Beyond this particular virus however, many argue that Workplace Health and Safety has forever taken on a new level of significance. This study finds that many managers and employees are very concerned about their safety when they return to the workplace. Short-term measures implemented to government guidelines in recent months now require a more longer-term review in order to establish new organisational norms around Health & Safety. Like all other policies and practices then, management development, broad communication and ongoing measurement and review are required to ensure successful implementation.

Middle Management Review

Throughout all previous recommendations it is clear that the role of management has been central to operations during this pandemic, they offer the organisation the clearest insights being positioned between the strategic and the routine of operations. As such, they are a vital cog in realising this new world of work. While this study did not solicit management opinion of their personal circumstances, it is likely they have experienced similar challenges, if not to a higher degree than their teams reported. As such, engaging the management group in a reflective review of this period in the organisations journey would act as a catalyst as that journey continues. Making sense of what happened, the speedy decisions made, what worked and didn't work, what next etc. is a critical piece in ensuring all other recommendations are fully understood, supported, resourced and appropriately implemented going forward.

1.0 Introduction

Covid-19 has presented one of the biggest crises to face people and organisations in generations. It has forced accelerated changes to the way people organise, manage and work, bringing the future of work to now. Despite the ready availability of technology to engage with a range of Flexible Working Options (FWOs), pre-Covid many organisations and their managers had a preference for more traditional models of work where the management of employees required their presence in the workplace. From an employee perspective, prior to Covid-19 many were hesitant to request FWOs as those who did were perceived by management as less engaged (Leslie et al., 2012, McDonald et al., 2007). While there is a significant body of evidence that FWOs lead to increased engagement, motivation and wellbeing and do not negatively impact performance, until recently, the reality for many employees was that they were available in name only. Today however, organisations the world over have pivoted to a Remote Working Model wherever possible. This has required organisations and their employees to fast-track, accept and implement a broad range of decisions on workplace processes and infrastructure. While such swift change was necessary at the time, as we move beyond the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic and consider what a return to 'normal work' might look like, it is critical for organisations to consider the policies, practices and management approaches which will shape this new world of work.

OMT Global commissioned the Department of Work and Employment Studies at the Kemmy Business School, University of Limerick, to undertake a national survey on employee experiences, and management perceptions of employee experiences, on what worked, didn't work and what next resulting from this shift in work practices during Covid-19. This research was co-funded by the Enterprise Ireland Innovation Voucher Scheme.

The survey explored the following key research questions:
1. How have employees experienced work during Covid-19?
2. What are employee perceptions of their organisation's response to Covid-19?
3. Has Covid-19 and working from home affected employee productivity, engagement and wellbeing?
4. What is the impact of the organisation's response on employee values and loyalty?
5. How do employees feel about returning to the workplace?
6. What should the future of work look like?
7. Are managers confident in their ability to manage their teams in a new world of work?

This report highlights the key findings from the survey and provides critical insights into the work policies, practices and management approaches which will be important as we engage in a new world of work.

The main body of this report outlines the key themes emerging from the research questions. These are:

- Organisational Support and Flexibility
- Productivity and Workload
- Employee Engagement: Disconnect from Team and Organisation
- Feeling Valued and Organisational Loyalty
- Organisational Leadership
- Employee Wellbeing
- The New World of Work: HRM Policies and Practices, Learning, Development and Resources, Health and Safety

The report also explores perception differences between Employees, Line/Middle Managers and Senior Managers and Gender Differences.

2.0 Methodology and Participant Profile

The research survey was comprised of a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions. Implemented via Qualtrics, participants were targeted through OMT Global's client database, the researchers' own business network, and then generally through LinkedIn between June 30th and July 20th, 2020. A total of 590 survey responses were received.

The participant profile is as follows:

Gender:

- Male - 39.3%
- Female - 60.7%

Organisation Size:

- Micro: 0-10 employees - 18%
- Small to Medium: 10-250 employees - 33.7%
- Large: 250+ employees - 48.4%

Level in the Organisation:

- Employee - 45.5%
- Line/Middle Management – 26.7%
- Senior Management – 27.8%

3.0 Research Findings

3.1 Organisational Support and Flexibility

Organisations and their managers were forced to react to the restrictions enforced during Covid-19, which meant that a large proportion of the workforce had to work from home when they would normally work onsite. The survey results indicate that managers generally responded to the changes in a way that was perceived as both supportive and understanding by their employees. Over two thirds (69.6%) of employees felt that their managers were supportive during the crisis while a further 84.6 % of employees felt that their manager demonstrated understanding. In addition to understanding, 66.5% of employees expressed that they were afforded flexibility with their working hours since the onset of Covid-19. This is important as the report also highlights an important relationship between an employees' sense of value and loyalty and their perceptions of their manager and organisation. Given the importance of perceptions of organisational empathy, warmth and conscientiousness to employee loyalty during times of change (Chun, 2009), it is concerning that while there was a sense of support, 34.9% of managers felt that their organisations could have done more to support employees during Covid-19.

3.2 Productivity and Workload

The survey analysis identified productivity and workload as an important theme in both the quantitative and qualitative responses. The findings on productivity are mixed. 37% of employees feel more productive working from home. This is supported by managers, of whom 36.2% noted increased productivity for their employees. In contrast, 21.1% of employees feel less productive with 19.4% of managers expressing that they have noticed that their employees are less productive since they began working from home. The qualitative responses on the impact of returning to the workplace on productivity were also mixed. Some are concerned that their productivity will be negatively impacted due to more interruptions in the office environment than at home, as well as the impact of new health and safety measures. While others feel returning to the workplace will enhance productivity due to less distractions at home. Nevertheless, managing employee performance and productivity in an environment where at least part of your team will be working virtually for a share of the working week, is a key challenge for managers in the aftermath of Covid-19 (Cascio, 2000).

These findings highlight the fact that every employee is different, and every home environment is different. Furthermore, concerns were also expressed about how a new blended world of work, some days at home and some onsite, is likely to impact the fair distribution of work across teams. Employees feel that if teams are split between home and onsite, then there may be an unfair distribution of the workload to those in direct contact with their managers. This finding mirrors evidence in the literature to date that those working from home are perceived as less productive (Leslie et al., 2012) and highlights the mixed perceptions which prevail around FWOs even within this one study. It will be important to explore, understand, challenge and influence these perceptions among leaders, managers and employees as we develop this new world of work.

3.3 Employee Engagement - Disconnect from Team and Organisation

The analysis of the survey responses highlighted some interesting findings in the area of team and organisation disconnect. Over a third (35.7%) of employees reported that they found it difficult to engage as a team when working remotely. In addition, over half of employees (51.3%) feel less connected to their teams since the onset of Covid-19. These difficulties were supported by manager responses with 27.5% saying their employees experienced difficulties working as a virtual team and 50.4% saying their employees feel less connected to their teams.

As well as disconnect with teams, two in five employees (40.2%) reported feeling disconnected from their organisation. Alarmingly, a larger proportion of managers, 47.9%, feel that their employees are disconnected from the organisation. Statistical relationship analyses, illustrated in table 1, showed that there is a strong relationship between those who feel disconnected to their teams and those who feel disconnected to their organisations. The findings from the survey support arguments in the literature that team connectedness can impact engagement with the organisation. Prior to Covid-19, a majority of the participants had minimal exposure to working from home, however, now, engaging with a team while working virtually presents more challenges than face to face and requires a different level of leadership from line managers (Kayworth and Leidner, 2000).

In line with these findings, qualitative responses indicate that employees are concerned about trying to stay connected with their team members. With the likelihood of a majority of workplaces having teams spread between home and onsite, there are concerns that the social aspect of work will have greatly diminished. Some people cited 'feeling out of the loop' as a concern with the new way of working. The lack of ability to brainstorm was also given as a

concern. This has the potential to have major implications for emergent strategy and decision making in organisations.

Managers also highlighted connectedness within teams as a concern. There is a concern around how teams will operate going forward and if that will impact team spirit and collaboration. One manager highlighted how the majority of their team felt lonely while working from home. Employees feeling lonely is a concern as, while it is difficult to say just how long this pandemic will necessitate working from home, it could be their reality until after winter 2020 or even longer. To add to this, there is a large proportion of respondents, 34% of employees and 55.6% of managers, who feel that the changes made to working practices during Covid-19 are long-term changes. Therefore, as organisations now reflect on the learnings of the Covid-19 pivot to remote working, these employee experiences should be central to the design of new HRM policies and practices so that the benefits are secured and the challenges off-set with management support and other key resources.

Other difficulties encountered while working from home during Covid-19 included issues balancing work and home responsibilities. Just under half of employees (44.5%) faced issues balancing work and home responsibilities, while 63.7% of managers said their employees had informed them of issues around same. It is likely that childcare and other care challenges will abate with the peak of the pandemic, however the life-work balance challenge will remain. Interestingly, FWOs are often seen as a panacea to life-work balance but this is not the case. Previous research points to employees working longer hours when working from home and struggling to disconnect at the end of the day. These issues are addressed in more detail in the next section on Employee Wellbeing.

When it comes to internet connectivity, over one third of employees (38.4%) experienced issues, while over half of managers (56%) said their employees reported concerns about internet connectivity issues. Interestingly, the relationship between these issues and disconnect with the team and organisation are not strongly related.

Table 1 - Relationships between disconnect from team and organisation

Factor	Factor	Strength (r value)*
I feel disconnect from my organisation while working from home	I feel less connected to my team than I was before Covid-19	.571**

*r =.10-.29 weak relationship; r = .30 - .49 moderate relationship; r = .50 – 1.0 strong relationship

** Significance p<0.05

3.4 Feeling Valued and Organisational Loyalty

While the expression of disconnect from teams and organisations is a concern, 56.6% of employees say they have always felt valued by their organisation. Notably however, this study finds that Covid-19 has actually had a positive impact on the sense of value and loyalty towards their organisation among approximately one third of employees surveyed. 29.1% feel more valued by their organisation now than they did before Covid-19, with 34% feeling more loyal.

As illustrated in table 2, it appears that perceptions of one's manager have a stronger impact on feeling valued than perceptions of the organisation. For employees who have always felt valued, there is a strong relationship between having always felt valued and the manager doing a good job handling Covid-19, feeling included in the decision-making process around the organisation's response to Covid-19 and trusting leaders to make the right decisions.

Of those who feel more valued in their organisation since Covid-19, there is a moderate relationship with manager check-ins, feeling supported by managers, feeling included in the decision making around the organisation's response to Covid-19 and trusting the leaders to make the right decisions. Managers checking in regularly, particularly for personal rather than purely work reasons, are moderately positively related to feeling more valued, while managers checking in only for work related issues has a negative relationship with feeling more valued. These relationships are important to acknowledge because even though it is a minority, there are still 16.1% of employees feeling less valued by their organisations following Covid-19, with 15.6% feeling less loyal. These findings highlight the importance of the role of line managers in an employee's experience and supports arguments made in the literature illustrating the impact that a manager's style; how they set goals, give feedback, build team cohesiveness, express flexibility and empathy towards team member; could potentially have on the experiences of their employees going forward (Kayworth and Leidner, 2000).

A similar argument can be made for organisational loyalty as a moderate positive relationship exists between feeling more loyal to the organisation since Covid-19, the manager checking in to see how employees are doing personally and being included in decision making. Interestingly, the relationship between perceptions of the organisation doing a good job and organisational loyalty is slightly stronger than with feeling valued by the organisation. This highlights the importance of the manager-employee relationship where managers' knowledge of how employees are feeling needs to influence the design of any related interventions.

Table 2 - Relationships between values, loyalty and management/organisation approach.

Factor	Factor	Strength (r value)*
I have always felt valued in my organisation	My organisation has done a good job at handling Covid-19	.478**
	My manager has done a good job at handling Covid-19	.537**
	I feel included in the decision-making process around the organisation's response to Covid-19	.571**
	I trust my leaders to make the right decisions	.632**
I feel more valued in my organisation since Covid-19	My organisation has done a good job at handling Covid-19	.388**
	My manager has done a good job at handling Covid-19	.469**
	My manager has checked in with me regularly during Covid-19	.393**
	My manager only checked in with me when there was a work-related need	-.306**
	My manager checked in with me just to see how I am doing personally	.329
	I feel supported by my manager	.450**
	I was actively encouraged to reach out to my manager if there were any issues	.323**
	My manager was understanding during the crisis	.419**
	I feel included in the decision-making process around the organisation's response to Covid-19	.467**
	I trust my leaders to make the right decisions	.461**
I feel more loyal to the organisation since Covid-19	My organisation has done a good job at handling Covid-19	.442**
	My manager has done a good job at handling Covid-19	.429**
	My manager checked in with me just to see how I am doing personally	.435**
	I feel included in the decision-making process around the organisation's response to Covid-19	.406**

*r =.10-.29 weak relationship; r = .30 - .49 moderate relationship; r = .50 – 1.0 strong relationship

** Significance p<0.05

3.5 Organisational Leadership

While the previous section highlighted the importance of the role of line managers when it comes to the sense of value and loyalty of employees, there is also evidence that organisational leadership is a critical component. Table 2 shows how trust in leaders, the perception that the organisation has done a good job and feeling included in decision making are all related to value and loyalty. However, survey findings indicate that the organisation's leadership response during the pandemic could have been more high profile. Managers highlighted a need for greater levels of organisational and leadership communication and clarity on the organisation's strategy since Covid-19. They also report a need for clearer direction and greater levels of understanding, trust and support from the top leadership team. This indicates that, regardless of any positive decisions or progressive actions made by leadership teams in coping with the pandemic, managers in general do not feel sufficiently supported at this time. In turn however, findings indicate they appear to be supporting their teams appropriately, a fact which only further highlights their critical role during Covid-19 and into the future as organisations seek to develop a new world of work.

It is also very important to note that, at the time of completing the survey, 44.3% of employees did not feel included in the decision-making process around the organisation's response to Covid-19 and 35.8% of employees had not yet been informed of their organisations plans for returning to the workplace. This places significant pressure on line managers to support and guide their teams through such uncertainties, particularly when they can relate to such critical life issues as pay or organising childcare. With one third of the respondents of this study unclear about what the future holds, a significant and comprehensive response from the leadership of many organisations is urgently required. While many leaders themselves may be unclear as to what lies ahead, supporting managers to deal with such uncertainty and sharing the leaderships view around this uncertainty with employees is the best course of action to reduce stress and help set expectations into the future.

3.6 Employee Wellbeing

It should come as no surprise that employee wellbeing was another area of concern highlighted in the survey responses. 60.1% of employees feel increased levels of stress since the onset of Covid-19. This is supported by 64.3% of managers reporting that employees have expressed increased stress levels. Almost a third (31.5%) of employees feel their quality of life is worse now than it was before Covid-19. There is a sense among over a third (35.2%) of employees that the organisation is not actively dedicated to enhancing their wellbeing. In the qualitative

responses, many highlighted their concern for their wellbeing and stress levels, some saying they worry about returning to the workplace, with many others struggling to stay positive. Interestingly, concern was also expressed about having to return to the workplace at any time in the future now that they had become accustomed to working remotely. These responses indicate the need for careful and considerate planning as to who, when and how individuals and groups of employees are 're-introduced' to the workplace.

While 58.8% of managers feel their organisation is dedicated to employee wellbeing, 38.3% feel the organisation could do more to support employees. Employee wellbeing is repeatedly noted as a concern by managers in a range of open-ended questions throughout the survey. Managers call for support in how to understand and assist with employee morale, motivation and wellbeing. They identify a need for an increase in the range of remote wellbeing interventions available in the organisation, and training in how to recognise employee issues and implement appropriate interventions.

The call from managers for more resources to support employee wellbeing is supported by the analysis of the survey responses. As shown in table 3, the perception that the organisation is dedicated to employee wellbeing has a strong positive relationship to activities held and interventions made to improve employee wellbeing, and how the organisation or manager has supported employees in managing their stress. Once again, the findings reinforce the importance of the manager's role. There is a strong relationship between the manager genuinely caring about employees and how the same employees view the organisation's efforts to maintain their employees' wellbeing.

Table 3 – Factors that impact perception on how the organisation is dedicated to employee wellbeing.

Factor	Factor	Strength (r value)*
My organisation is actively dedicated to my wellbeing	Before Covid-19 my organisation held activities to improve employee wellbeing	.632**
	During Covid-19 my organisation held activities to improve employee wellbeing	.477**
	My employer/manager has supported me in managing my stress	.521**
	My manager genuinely cares about me	.518**

r =.10-.29 weak relationship; r = .30 - .49 moderate relationship; r = .50 − 1.0 strong relationship
** Significance p<0.05

3.7 The New World of Work

The changes to the way people work as a result of Covid-19 is, in the words of the respondents to this survey, 'the new normal'. When asked about their work preferences as society moves beyond the peak of the pandemic, a majority of employees, 68.7%, would prefer a blend of working from home and being onsite. 85.8% of managers support this finding. Not only is it what employees want, 73.8% of employees and 78.5% of managers indicated this blend of working from home and onsite has already been communicated as their organisation's preference for a new world of work into the future. Contrary to these findings however, 37.7% of employees and 25.8% of managers feel that the changes made due to Covid-19 are only temporary, thereby indicated their concern that their organisations will not embrace their desire for more Flexible Working Options into the future.

Despite welcoming a new blended form of work, it also generates new concerns for employees. While many are just recently adjusting to the changes that Covid-19 forced, employees are concerned about the adjustments that are going to have to be made when returning onsite, specifically in relation to organisational expectations around new office protocols and dynamics. There is a sense that there are going to be new restrictions and new work practices, meaning the way they did things before will no longer be facilitated. Managers highlighted similar concerns. In particular, they highlight concerns around the potential changes that this new way of working will evoke to the culture of the organisation. The 'way we do things around here' is changing and managers feel there needs to be time invested in enhancing the organisations culture as it moves with the new normal. Managers were also concerned that the new way of working might not align directly to the organisation's existing business operating model, again requiring some attention from the senior leadership team. Thus, while many aspects of this new world of Flexible Working Options is welcomed, it also brings uncertainties which necessitates a review of existing work practices, the policies and HR practices which support them, associated learning, development and resourcing needs and, finally, other Covid-19 specific concerns related to health and safety when onsite. These will be discussed in the following subsections.

3.7.1 Revision of Human Resource Management Policies and Practices

Managers were asked what supports they would need going forward to help with managing their teams. In the responses managers have called for a revision of all work practices to 'align them' with this new way of working. While the exact nature of these work practices is outside the scope of this survey, it is clear that managers are currently relying on a broad range of policies and practices that are designed for employees who are primarily onsite. Managing teams remotely may require actions that these policies don't facilitate. The following policies were specifically mentioned; performance management, learning and development, reward management and conflict resolution. Some managers also cited employment law as a concern which is not surprising considering the duty of care to employees when faced with a grievance or disciplinary situation. With the shift to a blended range of FWOs likely into the future, not forgetting that this survey found over 78% of organisations have already indicated this to be the case, managers express serious concerns about the impact these new ways of working may have on employee rights as well as discipline and grievance procedures. These concerns of managers are important to heed as research indicates that a move to virtual teams requires managers to not only find new ways to communicate, but to engage with basic management principles in a new work environment, requiring improved management skills (Cascio, 2000). A comprehensive review of all HRM policies and practices across the full employee life-cycle is the best course of action for organisations.

3.7.2 Flexible Work Options

Unsurprisingly, the work practices that received considerable attention from participants were those related to FWOs. Given the changes to the world of work, there is a sense that organisations are going to engage with more flexible work practices going forward, with 73.8% of employees and 78.5% of managers agreeing with this. While we previously mentioned that a majority of employees were satisfied with the flexibility of their working hours during the crisis, the qualitative responses indicate that flexibility is a large concern for both employees and managers going forward. The concept of employee flexibility means different things to different people. Respondents here referred to working time flexibility, flexibility to choose onsite days and managers having the freedom to make decisions about the flexibility of their own teams. However, FWOs also include part-time working, compressed working weeks, reduced hours and flexible start and finish times.

A large share of respondents are concerned that management might not be as flexible as they would wish for into the future. Some are worried that management might be reluctant to

facilitate working from home even on a part-time basis. Others expressed concern that where there will be a blended approach returning to work, there will be limited flexibility on the days that they are required to be onsite. From a manager's point of view, they desire the autonomy to be given the freedom to be flexible with their teams on working from home and on-site. They want to be given the authority to make decisions around flexibility. As mentioned previously, 37.7% of employees and 25.8% of managers feel that the changes made due to Covid-19 are only temporary, thereby indicating their concern that their organisations will not embrace their desire for more Flexible Working Options into the future. This requires careful review by organisations.

In line with flexibility is the concern around managing home and work. Respondents were asked to respond on a scale on whether they agree to disagree with the following statement "[I have/employees have expressed] concerns regarding managing a return to the workplace and caring responsibilities". 39.9% of employees are concerned about balancing work and caring responsibilities if they are required to return to work. Moreover, 77.4% of managers have had employees express such concerns to them. The concern is supported by the qualitative responses with a large proportion of respondents citing childcare issues or 'juggling children at home and work', as an issue for them. Some respondents highlighted the concern of finding safe childcare options. Others are concerned at losing time with their families that they had gained while working from home. FWOs have previously been found to have significant positive impacts for increasing the participation of women in the workplace and should be carefully considered as a HR practice likely to increase gender diversity in a new world of work (Chung and Van der Horst, 2018).

Another concern that emerged from the qualitative responses, from both an employee and manager perspective, was the return to commuting. Respondents feel that long commutes take a lot of time out their day, some as much as three hours a day. Some cite traffic as an issue and see the commute as time wasted. Others are concerned about the safety of having to take public transport. These concerns would add to the argument of the development of FWOs.

Thus, while transport and childcare options re-open and a return to school has been promised by the government during the writing of this report, the findings of this study suggest that the experience of Covid-19 has shaped societies views of life-work balance. Again, this societal shift needs to be recognised by organisations and should influence their HR Strategy, Employer Brand and Organisational Culture into the future.

3.7.3 Learning and Development

One of the most common themes throughout the responses was the need for more training on dealing with the changes that Covid-19 have brought about. The literature highlights the importance of line managers in linking HRM/management practices and performance outcomes (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007), hence if the context of management practices changes, so too do the requirements from managers. Furthermore, the analysis in section 3.3 highlighted the fact that line managers are crucial to the way in which employees view and experience the organisation however this study suggests they struggle to articulate the exact training they now require. This only highlights the unprecedented nature of the pivot imposed by this pandemic, managers have been managing through the unknown in recent months. Additionally, it also likely highlights the cultural shift they have experienced where many an organisation had previously actively discouraged or at least failed to proactively promote FWOs to their employees.

The need for development around coaching and mentoring was mentioned by some but, despite their inability to fully articulate their learning and development needs within the scope of this survey, findings clearly show people management capabilities have never been more critical, so this deserves further exploration. It will be vital for organisations that their managers are central to the aforementioned review of HR policies and practices across the full employee lifecycle. This should be followed by a full assessment of their learning and development needs around communicating, implementing and supporting this range of policies and practices in the longer-term.

3.7.4 Resources

In addition to a full review of HR policies and practices and any associated learning and development needs, another support that managers require going forward are resources. Some managers raise issues around a lack of appropriate budgets and time. Others highlight the need for additional staff to cope with the workload. However, the most frequently cited need for resources is in the area of IT, specifically the hardware and software required for remote working. Upgrades to software around video conferencing and internet connectivity were of particular importance. Many also requested additional resources for establishing a suitable home office space. Calls were also made for improvements in video conferencing

systems and internet connectivity. There is also a sense that organisations should support employees in setting up a suitable environment at home should remote working remain.

3.7.5 Health and Safety

Findings in this study show that 60.7% of employees are concerned about their health and safety on returning to the workplace. In addition, 79.5% of managers feel that this is a concern. Such concerns were frequently raised in the open-ended questions with repeated references to health, safety and social distancing in the workplace. Employees are concerned about contracting and spreading the virus, but primarily concerned over a potential lack of compliance among colleagues with the new hygiene and social distancing measures. This is also a concern for some who refer to the number of visitors that would frequent their workplace daily. Others are concerned about the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) when they are required to interact with customers or visitors. Another concern raised in relation to this theme was the use of shared public spaces at the workplace such as the canteen, kitchen and bathrooms. In addition to these general health concerns, a majority of respondents are specifically concerned that social distancing measures will just not be complied with, some claiming their office spaces are too small to facilitate distancing, while others are concerned because they are in an open plan office. It will be important for organisations to address these issues but equally important to address them in line with their business operating models and the impact of longer-term compliance on the day-to-day operations of the business. The findings here point to the close linkages between health and safety, FWOs, HR policies and practices, the role of managers, the decisions leaders need to make and, most importantly, how these same leaders communicate and manage this process across their organisations.

3.8 Middle Management Insights

Given the findings outlined in section 3.0, that actions of managers have more of an impact on employees feeling valued than the actions of the organisation, the differences between the perceptions of middle and senior management were explored. Table 4 reports the combined percentages for each type of manager for either the agree or strongly agree options on the items. This analysis was only run for items which showed to be statistically different.

Table 4 – Significant differences in perceptions between middle and senior management

Item	Line/Middle Manager (% Agree + Strongly Agree)	Senior Manager (% Agree + Strongly Agree)
Employees have been provided with all the necessary materials and equipment in order to perform effectively from home	54.4%	66.6%
Working hours have been flexible throughout the crisis	79%	90.6%
Managers were understanding during the crisis	89.1%	95.3%
Managers checked in regularly	78.2%	89%
Managers only checked in when a need	28%	13.5%
Employees felt included in decision-making process around the organisation's response to Covid-19	37.6%	49.5%
The organisation has done a good job at handling covid-19	80.2%	89.9%
Employees have always felt valued	53.4%	66.9%
Employees feel less valued	16.8%	6.4%
Employees have expressed quality of life is better since Covid-19	27.8%	37.3%
Employees have expressed quality of life is worse since Covid-19	40.2%	25.5%
Employees have expressed quality of life is the same since Covid-19	6.2%	12.8%
Employees have not expressed any changes to stress levels since the onset of Covid-19	10.3%	18.6%
Organisation genuinely cares about employee wellbeing	66%	82.3%
Employees have expressed reduced stress levels since the onset of Covid-19	10.3%	15.7%
The organisation values employees more since Covid-19	43.4%	55%
The organisation values employees less since Covid-19	10.8%	2%

As can be seen from the table, some of the bigger differences in perceptions between middle and senior management relate to issues where frequent interactions with employees have led to specific insights for their immediate managers. For example, 40.2% of middle managers say that employees have expressed that their quality of life is worse since Covid-19. This is in comparison to 25.5% of senior managers. In contrast, when the question was flipped to see if employee quality of life was better since the onset of Covid-19, senior managers responded more favourable with 37.3% agreeing in comparison to 27.8% of middle managers. A similar pattern emerged for questions on stress, with 18.6% of senior managers saying employees have

not expressed any changes to stress levels and 15.7% claiming employees expressed reduced levels of stress. This is in comparison to only 10.3% of middle management agreeing that there has been no change to stress levels and a further 10.3% claiming employees expressed reduced levels of stress. The remainder (79.4%) of managers feeling their teams had at least some increased level of stress since Covid-19.

When it came to questions about how the organisation had handled Covid-19, senior managers responded notably more favourably. 55% of senior managers believe the organisation values employees more since Covid-19. Significantly fewer middle managers, 43.4%, agreed. Interestingly, 10.8% of middle managers agree that the organisation values employees less since Covid-19 in comparison to only 2% of senior managers. Similarly, 82.3% of senior managers said that the organisation genuinely cares about employee wellbeing. This is in stark contrast to 66 % of middle managers. Senior managers also were more likely to agree (49.5%) that employees felt included in decision making around the organisation's response to Covid-19, in comparison to 37.6% of middle managers. There was also a 9.7% difference between middle (80.2%) and senior management (89.9%) on agreeing that the organisation has done a good job at handling the Covid-19 situation. Senior management also have a more favourable view on the provision of necessary equipment to employees (66.6%) the flexibility of working hours (90.6%), in comparison to 54.4% and 79% respectively for middle managers. With middle management likely to be engaging in more frequent interactions with their teams, these findings indicate that senior management are not fully in touch with the views of their employees and managers. While this disconnect between leadership and management perceptions is a concern in and of itself, it is also a concern into the future. As new forms of work emerge from this pandemic, the organisation's leadership also need to consider what leadership looks like for a more agile workforce where FWOs become a more accepted practice.

3.9 Gender Differences

While not an initial aim of the study, there were some notable differences in experiences between male and female employees which are worth reporting.

- 48.5% of women are experiencing difficulties balancing work and home in comparison to 34.5% of men.
- Issues of caring responsibilities and returning to work is a greater concern for women (43.8%) in comparison to men (30%)
- 66.7% of women report increased levels of stress in comparison to 44.9% of men.

- More men (85.3%) than women (59.4%) feel that there will be greater flexibility at work into the future.

These findings likely reflect the increased care-load that women experience in society in general. Maybe, when considered in tandem with the findings that all employees feel changes to the way we work are likely to remain, now is an opportunity for organisations to fully address such gender imbalances with specific wellbeing and FWO supports for women and greater promotion of FWOs among male employees where uptake can often be lower.

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study are important as they portray the experiences of employees during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, further explicated through the perceptions of the management community who sought to resource and support them during this time. We show how many employees felt well supported by these managers, felt they were at least as (if not more) productive working from home, experienced appropriate levels of work flexibility where needed, and generally continue to feel valued by and loyal to their organisations.

However, employees also expressed a sense of disconnect from their teams and organisations, increased levels of stress and, for many, found it challenging to find an appropriate life-work balance while working from home. These findings were fully supported by their managers. Interestingly, the role of their managers around employee wellbeing emerged as a significant finding and is further evidenced in the divergent views between middle and senior managers with the former, typically more frequently engaged with their teams, appearing to be more aware of the realities and challenges experienced by employees during the pandemic. Findings therefore highlight the importance of the role of middle managers during the pandemic but also their importance in shaping the new world of work for this study clearly shows that a new world of work is desired by employees.

Findings reflect the societal shift in perspectives of work, workplaces and work-life balance. While the majority of organisations have already indicated that they expect to retain many of the changes implemented on the back of the pandemic, careful consideration is now required as we design this new world of work. This starts at the top of organisations as leaders must now embark on a strategic process of reframing the organisational culture, work model and all the associated HR policies and practices which are impacted at every stage of the employee lifecycle. Ensuring they are connected to their employees' experiences and expectations will be vital during this process. Middle managers should be central to this strategizing as, not only

are they closer to employees and the business operation, they will also be fundamental in implementing the changes.

Of significant importance are the findings that mixed views still prevail in organisations around what and how much of the work changes will be retained going forward. This is important as Flexible Work Options have an interesting history. Lauded as the future of work and a panacea for issues around life-work balance and gender diversity on the one hand, they frequently lack promotion and management support on the other. What is clear however is that now is the time for organisations to take stock, reflect on the recent experiences and decide what to do next. To this end the following recommendations are presented.

4.1 Organisational Leadership

It is clear that both managers and employees desire a more flexible way of working into the future, however some of the findings point to a lack of clarity around how new FWOs will operate in practice. This suggests the need for organisational level intervention as, while FWOs have many benefits, they will have a significant impact on the business operating model.

This will depend on the business sector. Manufacturing and customer facing roles may find the introduction of FWOs requires more planning and co-ordination as compared to office-based, non-customer facing roles. Transformative organisational change will not be a new experience for most organisations. However, leading a more remote or agile workforce is a new direction for many in leadership positions and its impact on business operating models should not be underestimated. Therefore, the typical strategic change interventions of bottom-up feedback, leadership strategy reviews, ongoing clear and consistent top-down communications and then a plan for how changing work practices will be policy-driven, implemented in practice and then supported by new management approaches, resources and training solutions is required. This study shows that assumptions that everything will fall into place are to be avoided. This is further highlighted by the disconnect between senior management and management perceptions of employee experiences during the peak of the pandemic. Involving middle management in this process therefore will be vital as they are key lynchpin for the organisation, positioned as they are between the strategic and the routine (Wooldridge et al., 2008, Balogun, 2003).

In today's world the work of strategy is less about writing strategic plans and more about developing strategic capability through embedding the practice of strategizing in the day-to-day of the organisation (Sull and Eisenhardt, 2015). Embracing strategy as the ability to make sense of recent events, engage in discourse with middle managers to understand where to next

and developing key practices to ensure successful implementation of these strategic changes will be vital (Kieran et al., 2020).

Introducing FWOs will not just be about a new workforce operating model. It will also require leaders and managers to question the organisation's work culture, leadership and management style, and traditional perspectives of FWOs. There is evidence that, prior to Covid-19, many organisations did not encourage FWOs (Leslie et al., 2012). The sudden shift in organisational norms needs to be discussed in full if the new FWO policies and practices are to be successfully implemented. There is significant evidence to show the benefits of FWOs for organisations. Studies have found they lead to increased employee loyalty and organisational commitment (Roehling et al., 2001, Grover and Crooker, 1995), decreased absenteeism (Dalton and Mesch, 1990), they have a positive impact on the Employer Brand with increased ability to attract and retain employees (Branine, 2003, Rau and Hyland, 2002) and typically lead to increased productivity (Eaton, 2003, Konrad and Mangel, 2000, Bélanger, 1999), financial performance and quality (Dex et al., 2001). However, they also present challenges for employees leading to blurred work boundaries and at times work intensification and stress (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010).

Thus, the challenge for Organisational Leadership is not just to devise the new work operating model in conjunction with their middle managers, but then ensure the appropriate HR policies and practices, development and resources are in place to successfully embed the new workforce operating model.

4.2 Review and Development of HRM Policies and Practices

Most organisations today have a broad range of Human Resource Management policies and practices; however these have typically been designed and delivered in a face to face environment. Adapting policies and practices related to all stages of the employee lifecycle is required. These would likely include Recruitment & Selection, Performance Management, Learning and Development and Grievance and Disciplinary policy and practice.

Of course the FWO policies and practices themselves also need careful consideration as they include but are not limited to just working from home. Other options such as compressed working weeks, part-time hours, reduced hours and flexible hours should be explored. This process should be undertaken in tandem with the Organisational Leadership and Management piece outlined above to ensure that managers have made sense of the new way of working and are comfortable supporting and managing their employees in this manner. This sense making component is vital for middle management as research has illustrated that

employees' experiences of people management style are the crucial link between HRM practices and performance outcomes (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007).

4.3 Employee Wellbeing Strategy

While there have been considerable stresses associated with working from home during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, organisations cannot assume these will recede anytime soon. While FWOs themselves are often perceived as a route to wellbeing, and they are for many, they also present many challenges such as finding the right life-work balance, feelings of social isolation, and coping with work decision-making and problem-solving alone. Furthermore, many existing wellbeing initiatives employed by organisations may only be available on-site. It will be important for organisations to view wellbeing as a key strategy for this new world of work (as opposed to 'just another' HR policy or practice). This will require new and innovative wellbeing interventions, management development to promote and implement them and ongoing employee engagement and review to ensure they are having the appropriate impact.

4.4 Health and Safety

Working within a 'Covid Context' is likely for the foreseeable future. Beyond this particular virus however, many argue that Workplace Health and Safety has forever taken on a new level of significance. This study finds that many managers and employees are very concerned about their safety when they return to the workplace. Short-term measures implemented to government guidelines in recent months now require a more longer-term review in order to establish new organisational norms around Health & Safety. Like all other policies and practices then, management development, broad communication and ongoing measurement and review are required to ensure successful implementation.

4.5 Middle Management Review

Throughout all previous recommendations it is clear that the role of management has been central to operations during this pandemic, they offer the organisation the clearest insights being positioned between the strategic and the routine of operations (Harding et al., 2014). As such, they are a vital cog in realising this new world of work. While this study did not solicit management opinion of their personal circumstances, it is likely they have experienced similar challenges, if not to a higher degree than their teams reported. As such, engaging the management group in a reflective review of this period in the organisations journey would act as a catalyst as that journey continues. Making sense of what happened, the speedy decisions made, what worked and didn't work, what next etc. is a critical piece in ensuring all other

recommendations are fully understood, supported, resourced and appropriately implemented going forward (Kieran et al., 2020, Kieran et al., 2019).

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