

Who blinks first in the battle to get staff back in the office full time?

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The flexible working façade is beginning to crumble despite pressure to attract and retain staff, writes Betsy Williamson

The last two and a half years have fired the synapses of our business leaders in ways they could never have predicted.

Every business has had to overcome hurdles - with each obstacle coming at them harder and faster, while the finish line remains perilously out of sight.

From the pandemic and the associated physical and mental health of staff as well as the legality and practicality of working protocols, firms have landed straight into a crippling hiring crisis with a yawning talent gap.

We now find ourselves wading into a cost of living nightmare that will stretch employers' duty of care again - and all this before we've considered the nuts and bolts of running a business - the profits, losses and five year plans.

From our recent client conversations, it is the latter that is fuelling an increasing desire to get teams back to something resembling full time office working.

They're not alone. The outgoing prime minister has done his best to reverse the homeworking trend catalysed by the pandemic's measures, going as far as referring to those office-working Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays by an impolite acronym - even chiding that young people will fall in love with offices again because "Mother Nature does not like working from home".

Global business leaders are coming down hard on home-working. It has been reported that Elon Musk is demanding his workers return to the office with leaked memos laying bare his methods to force his employees at SpaceX and Tesla back towards a standard working week, reportedly telling workers that they were required to “spend a minimum of 40 hours in the office per week. Those who did not do so would be fired” and “The more senior you are, the more visible must be your presence”.

The view of our more boutique clients is that smaller businesses struggle more with the concept of remote working, given the delicate balance of limited resource versus productivity – and that teams are too small to be able to harness full capacity when people are not working together.

Client recruitment language has subtly changed tone too. Terms and language being used includes “the hybrid situation at present” and the intent is clear: increased representation in the office will be required over the longer term.

Yet pressures exist. These clients are competing for a dwindling candidate pool, with salaries in certain areas rocketing as a result. It’s causing a classic Catch-22.

For instance, within financial services, it is those with technological backgrounds, such as coders, cyber security experts and data analysts that are among the most prized. Offering flexible working can help smaller firms overcome being financially muscled out of new hires, or having existing staff poached for higher salaries, further compounding staff shortages.

Candidates are often not inclined to entertain full time office returns, put off by soaring fuel and unreliable public transport while safe in the knowledge that they hold the cards in the current candidate-driven market.

A recent Harvard Business School survey revealed that 81% either don’t want to come back at all or would prefer a hybrid model of work. Of those, 27% hope to remain working remotely full time, while 61% would prefer to work from home two to three days a week. Only 18% want to return to in-person work full time.

There is therefore a clear mismatch with executive team expectations.

It is now a case of which client blinks first in mandating full time office returns – will they trigger a movement or be left as an outlier?

The challenge of getting staff back into the office on a more full time basis should be no different than managing any other kind of organisational change that has professional *and* personal implications considered.

As anyone who runs a business or team can tell you, any type of change engenders resistance in some format at one end of the scale to buoyant enthusiasm at the other, and all the variations in between.

Business are scrambling to design [appropriate and fair policies](#), remote working frameworks and part time working schedules for those that wish to work in a hybrid manner – walking a fine line between trying to get their teams on board, via engagement and collaboration days, while desperately trying not to lose engagement with full time office based staff members.

It’s a fine balance, but how this next hurdle is navigated will almost certainly determine their long-term

viability and place in the market.

Betsy Williamson is the Founder and Managing Director of [Core-Asset Consulting](#), a recruitment company which turns over £15 million-a-year and partners with Scotland top performing investment and professional services businesses