

HRD

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ROUNDTABLE

THE NEXT NORMAL -
PREPARING FOR THE
RETURNING - RE-IMAGINING
A FUTURE WITH PEOPLE
AT ITS HEART

JOE PARKES, CHIEF HR OFFICER - ERIKS INDUSTRIAL SERVICES LTD

{ STEM SELL }

“IMAGES OF BEING KNEE DEEP IN ENGINE OIL ARE DIMINISHING,
DIVERSITY IN ENGINEERING IS FINALLY HAPPENING”

ALSO FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE

HR VALUE PROPOSITION HR is strapped to the helpdesk like a captain to a ship's wheel. How will it look post pandemic?

LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT Usually the hapless victim of cuts and compromise, L&D became a beacon, a digital lifeline in lockdown:

ORGANISATIONAL FRAMEWORK The quasi human/machine relationship will determine the biggest changes since the Industrial Revolution

MANAGING DIVERSE WORKFORCES Well into the 21st Century, revealing your sexual identity in the workplace still carries risk



BENEATH THE DIVERSITY VENEER

We have all had to adjust to the way we work and live our lives, in ways that would have seemed unbelievable just a few months ago. But the pandemic has presented particular issues for the disabled workforce. Disabled people - and people in other protected groups - have experienced particular disadvantage and have had to navigate a sea of new and uncharted obstacles, balancing working, alongside staying safe and managing pre-existing health conditions.



ARTICLE BY DIANE LIGHTFOOT, CEO - BUSINESS DISABILITY FORUM

As we look to the future, one thing is certain, our view of what a 'normal' day at work looks like, will never be the same again. The workplace has changed and so has our approach to diversity, but not all change is bad and, although we are living through difficult times, there are some positive lessons for the future. We have all had to adapt the way we work and at pace - what with shifting to working remotely, difficult decisions around furloughing employees and the cloud of a recession down the line - all together create a heady cocktail for businesses and, with people the largest cost base and the complex dynamic in the big picture - HR Directors have their work cut out. One of the early mantras of the pandemic was, "we're all in it together" but, as time has gone by, it has become evident that different and

diverse groups are not impacted equally. To name but a few from a very long list, we have seen the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on; the BAME community and in care homes, working age people with learning disabilities and complex needs, as well as the plight of older people. The Lists of 'vulnerable people' have really not helped as much as hoped, because while there is undoubtedly overlap between some groups, people who are particularly vulnerable to Coronavirus are not the same as those who are 'vulnerable' in society more generally.

We often talk about unintended consequences in policy making and this is, understandably, more prevalent when policy is made on the gallop. But the importance of equality impact analyses has been overlooked in

the rush, leaving some disabled people without the support they need - the furloughing of D&I staff, with a responsibility for adjustments, is a case in point. Going forward, we need to develop more useable equality impact procedures, which can be implemented at speed. There are subtle impacts too on ways of working because, while advances in technology have enabled businesses to function in ways they could perhaps not have imagined, it has its limitations. Different platforms offer different accessibility functions and these are improving all the time, but they cannot yet match face-to-face communication and the nuances of expression and body language, that give such important visual cues to support understanding. This impacts on people, not only those with sensory impairments, but also people who are

neurodivergent and who may struggle with ambiguity, as well as disruption to their routine. The cognitive load of learning different virtual platforms is also worth remembering, as is the very real issue of isolation - for many people, the camaraderie of social interaction is key to a rewarding work life. The term skin hunger has been coined for those who are denied physical touch whilst in isolation and perhaps face hunger is its workplace equivalent.

Other impacts are more direct, take the relaxing of the Care Act 2014 as an emergency measure, which has seen working age disabled people left without the social care support they need to work - in some cases, people need this to be up and ready, to take medication and to travel. With equality for disabled people in the workforce a long way off - pre-pandemic, the employment rates for disabled people were 50 percent, as compared to 80 percent of the UK population over all - any gains are hard won and losses even more keenly felt. We know that disabled people have been disproportionately impacted in previous financial downturns and, with a recession looming, we need to act to prevent disabled people from falling out of the workplace. It is 2020 after all - a quarter of a century since the Disability Discrimination Act and a decade since the Equality Act. We need to fight the narrative that all-too often arises during times of economic downturn and continue to promote awareness about the value disabled people bring to the workforce and the workplace. Businesses are likely to see the long-term effect of isolation, lock down and social distancing on workplace mental health and musculoskeletal issues. Working one day a week at the kitchen table may be fine, but full-time for months on end may not. For those who work with physical kit adjustments in the office, such as a sit-stand desk, ergonomic chair or adapted keyboard, the impact may well be greater and businesses which can support employees to bring these adjustments home will reap wellbeing dividends.

There are tough choices for leaders to make but, equally, there are practical steps that leaders can take to keep their workforce engaged, whilst finding new ways to deliver their business strategy and inclusion agenda. These include; great communication - information abhors a vacuum and so the more regular, transparent and, if possible, positive communications the better. Recognising and supporting mental wellbeing is also evermore important, as the stress of uncertainty is constant for all of us. Spotting the signs that someone isn't coping, at a distance, is critical, as is equipping people managers at all levels with the skills and confidence to support their teams. It's also about recognising and remembering the privilege that many of us have as leaders - not all homeworking is created equal and not everyone has a dedicated working space or optimum bandwidth. It's interesting too that, in a very short space of time, working from home has moved from being seen as a privilege for the few to the reality for the many and with it, the realisation that it has its down sides.



THE IMPORTANCE OF EQUALITY IMPACT ANALYSES HAS BEEN OVERLOOKED IN THE RUSH. LEAVING SOME DISABLED PEOPLE WITHOUT THE SUPPORT THEY NEED - THE FURLOUGHING OF D&I STAFF, WITH A RESPONSIBILITY FOR ADJUSTMENTS, IS A CASE IN POINT



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Would you say your organisation lacks diversity?



There are positives to be drawn from our experiences too, acceptance of flexible working and working from home - which are different things - greater use of technology and different working styles and ultimately, a long overdue and very welcome move to focusing on outcomes and outputs rather than presenteeism. These are all learnings we need to hold onto as and when we move closer to "business as usual". Working differently and a lasting mixed economy of office and home-based working also has a positive environmental impact, as well as supporting people who struggle with commuting to work, because of the logistics or anxiety around travel or from fatigue. There is also the potential for a lasting legacy around a kinder approach to leadership as we show more of ourselves. Letting people see inside our homes on video calls, losing what I have called our workplace "armour", is allowing ourselves to be a bit vulnerable and a bit more human. Huge businesses have pivoted overnight to mass home working and the active involvement of senior leaders in driving this change is very welcome. In our survey, 83 percent of respondents said that, how the business has responded to Covid-19 - including arranging internal communications, home working and ensuring staff have the adjustments they need - was being led by the Chief Operating Officer or Chief Executive. The figure for the same question, when applied to ensuring staff with disabilities and long-term conditions specifically, can move to home working was much lower - 31 percent said this was the direct responsibility of the COO or CEO, as compared to 69 percent for HR - this is still encouraging. CEOs and senior leaders are pivotal in driving change in this space and those who have a deeper knowledge through direct visibility of the issues facing their disabled employees, are better positioned to make a lasting and positive impact. Ninety percent of the organisations surveyed agreed that responses to Covid-19, will result in a lasting change in attitudes to flexible and home working. HR has a key role in driving this change by learning and implementing the positive lessons around working differently and, not only resisting the urge to fall back into the 'old' ways, but also taking the opportunity to champion the cause of the disabled workforce and to make the case at senior leadership level. We have made progress and we must not go back. We all have a duty to keep disability firmly on the inclusion agenda within our own organisations and we call on Government to continue to drive forward its plans to close the disability employment gap and to publish a new National Disability Strategy. The pandemic could be used as an excuse to put disability on the back burner. Instead, let's make sure it's a catalyst for lasting change. ●

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