

The Mass Migration to Remote Working

COVID-19 has forced organisations to quickly change how they and their workforces operate. Business leaders share their responses to the challenge with **David Hobbs**





COVID-19 forced organisations into an existential reappraisal of how they operate. The speed and ingenuity with which businesses have responded has been admirable as they deal with the enormous challenges around keeping people safe and leading them remotely.

Tania Cabrera, Relationship Manager at Criticaleye, says organisations must pay particular attention to their home-based workforces in order to maintain productivity as well as ensuring cohesion.

“Organisations are not only having to tackle the technical challenges posed by home-working,” **Tania** says. “A rapidly expanding remote workforce requires updated policies with guidance on time management, GDPR and structuring the working day at home, as well as advice on mental and physical health.”

“Ultimately, employees need to feel comfortable and safe in their new working environment; confident they are getting the support they need.”

Dave Pattman, Managing Director for Customer Experience at global consulting and services business Gobeyond Partners, has been working with an organisation that has moved thousands of individual contact centre workers to home-based environments. “We’re rolling off the end of the business continuity phase – the actual physical act of getting contact centre workers into an ‘at home’ environment – and moving into the operational phase. That’s about how operations can work remotely and how team leaders can motivate their people.”

“There is a future here that doesn’t return to the old normal. I think the model of having a permanent ‘at-home’ capability will be more prevalent”

There are concerns about productivity levels and the quality of service that can be delivered when employees are working from home en-masse. “We’re really trying to help businesses move away from a command-and-control psychology, where their data tells them if their remote employees are working as hard as they would be in an office environment, and start to put in place other ideas about how to genuinely motivate people and care for them remotely,” he comments.

Steve Burnett is Managing Director at RM Education, a software and services provider to the education market which has needed to change

its operating model because of the nationwide school closures. “Rapidly everybody was able to work from home. We had practiced closing down office locations beforehand to assess the overall impact.

“Staff adapted very quickly with prolific adoption of technology, such as Microsoft Teams. There was some early resistance to video, but they soon became comfortable communicating naturally through the technology.”

Of course, employers have some difficult decisions to make where it’s not possible to have everyone working from home. **Luke Kingsnorth**, CEO at Charles Tyrwhitt Shirts, says that the company has been as open as possible when addressing employee and customer concerns: “We’ve been very clear that we will follow government guidelines to the letter. We are keeping our warehouse open, but the message to our teams and customers has been that we are 100 percent focused on safety and any time we have doubts about that we will shut down operations.

“Humans adapt very quickly to new situations. People are being productive and finding new routines, utilising Whatsapp and Microsoft Teams, as well as email and phone calls – essentially they are finding ways to communicate.

“The resilience of the team on the mental health front has also been really impressive. People have become more isolated but are coping with it well.” >



Caring for One Another

The physical and mental health of employees has to be a top priority during this crisis. “There is still a lot to learn and be more proactive about with regards to employee safety,”

Dave says. “When we’re asking people to go into an office environment for a key service, we know there is heightened anxiety amongst those people.

“On the other hand, you also have to be very cognisant of employees’ home situations – whether or not there are young children or the broadband infrastructure is in place to allow for remote working, for example.”

He stresses the importance of the team leader role and checking in with individuals and teams. “We’ve found the biggest influence of people’s mental health has been the communication from team leaders rather than more senior managers,” he adds.

Customers are also behaving differently and looking to new ways of interacting with businesses, as **Steve** acknowledges. “We’ve had to develop a new operating model for each individual school. The constant is that all schools are expected to provide learning remotely, so they need IT services to run. Initially, we saw a massive spike in customers wanting support but that is now settling into a new normal.

“We’ve got a new dashboard, a new operating model and we can measure productivity. We now have a grip on customer behaviour as it stands today, but we also have to

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think about the new customer journey [going forwards] very quickly because needs are changing.”

Simon Burckhardt, Chair of Support to Win and NED of a Czech-based business process outsourcing company, also expects to see major changes in the way customers are serviced. “Businesses will be more sophisticated in how they utilise different types of communication platforms for different types of customers,” he says.

“Use of video will definitely start to expand, and I think we are already seeing some permanent shifts. It will be an interesting mixture – video for some complex and high-value customers

alongside highly-programmed mass AI or CPaaS [Communications Platform as a Service] operations for the low-value transactional activity.”

Dave agrees that change is underway. “Having the capacity to open up new forms of customer engagement when you get significant and rapid unplanned spikes in demand is coming to the fore. I think we will see use of AI, chatbots and other automated applications in those environments.

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This article is based on a Criticleye Conference Call, *Ensuring Customer Engagement and Service Delivery*.

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