Introduction

Every organisation, large and small, was, is, and will continue to be affected by Coronavirus. In the short term, business models have been stress tested like never before and there’s a very human impact – employees are concerned about their wellbeing, their finances and the future.

But Coronavirus is also accelerating the future and showing us the art of the possible. In terms of change programmes, digital transformation and flexible working initiatives, many organisations have made more progress during the last few months, than the last few years.

This report summarises how the most effective HR leaders are maintaining employee engagement through the crisis; using it as an opportunity to reflect and shape their cultures; and are seizing the opportunities it presents.

By continually listening, they are making data-driven decisions that reinforce their purpose and belonging.

They also understand that the legacy of Coronavirus will be a different world of work. A world where employees’ expectations are different; where HR and talent programmes must be re-focused; the employee experience revaluated, and where new leadership competencies are required.

How organisations listen to their people, prioritise their culture and create this lasting change, will largely determine how quickly and effectively they bounce back.

Steven Frost
Founder and CEO, WorkBuzz
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Forward-thinking organisations are consciously managing their response to the crisis, leading from the front and engaging their people. Broadly speaking, their actions can be grouped into three phases:

1. Managing the Crisis
   - Forced lockdown & remote working
   - Rapid rollout of digital tech
   - Defining leadership moment with critical communications

2. Shaping Your ‘New Normal’
   - Prolonged period of social distancing
   - Wellbeing & collaboration challenges
   - Gradual return to work & offices

3. Creating Lasting Change
   - Significant changes to consumer behaviour, demand, and business strategy
   - Shifting employee expectations
   - Refocused HR & talent programmes

How they listen to their people, manage change and prioritise their culture will have a lasting impact on how quickly and well organisations bounce back.
Phase 1
Managing the Crisis

Coronavirus is having an unprecedented impact on both organisations and their employees.

Initially, many businesses viewed Coronavirus as an outbreak limited to China. This quickly escalated, with the biggest impact on how we live and work since World War II.

47% of UK adults say their mental health has been affected.
Employees are being affected in different ways - creating different personas or segments can help you consider all your people

Top Issues on Employees’ Minds

- **Job Security**: 54%
- **Personal Health**: 38%
- **Childcare and Home Schooling**: 17%
- **Personal Finances**: 15%
- **Remote Work**: 13%
- **Viability of Employer**: 12%
- **Stress and Mental Health**: 9%
- **Work Life Balance**: 8%
- **Family Health**: 8%
- **Productivity**: 7%
- **Social Isolation**: 5%
- **Managing Schedule**: 4%


Top 4 Issues
- Financial Security
- Health & Wellbeing
- Family
- Productivity and Work
Phase 2

Shaping Your ‘New Normal’

There is likely to be a prolonged period of social distancing – ‘work’ will continue to feel and operate very differently.

If employees could choose, what would their ideal working patterns be?

Do they feel comfortable returning to their normal place of work? During a poll by Ipsos Mori in May 2020, only 47% said they did.

What are the biggest barriers, like childcare or concerns about social distancing, that could prevent employees from returning?

Rather than just adapt to the ‘New Normal’, shape it. You have a unique opportunity to design what this looks like for your company.

Are changes to your working practices being clearly communicated and embedded?

How do you support employees juggling childcare?
Recognising the importance of leaders at a time of crisis, key workers, providing specialised home care for the elderly.

Resilience and Mindfulness

Home Instead Senior Care – Wellbeing, Resilience and Mindfulness

Home Instead has over ten thousand employees, who are key workers, providing specialised home care for the elderly. Recognising the importance of leaders at a time of crisis, Home Instead invested in external group coaching sessions and webinars around resilience. For CAREGivers, it launched a Wellbeing Toolkit to provide practical advice and guidance on issues like handling finances and home schooling, organised group sessions with a Mindfulness Coach and ran podcasts to help colleagues better understand their emotional reactions.

Here are some best practice examples:

**Home Instead Senior Care – Wellbeing, Resilience and Mindfulness**

On the whole, most companies have stepped up, showing real leadership:

- 9 in 10 employees say they are being kept informed of how their organisation is responding to the pandemic
- 84% feel supported by their manager
- 86% trust their leadership to make decisions that protect them and their colleagues

**FMUK – Safely Reopening Manufacturing Plants**

Futaba Manufacturing UK Ltd (FMUK) is a Japanese automotive manufacturer with plants in Burnley and Foston. These were temporarily closed when the lockdown was announced. Before reopening in May, FMUK introduced pulse surveys to get feedback on their response to the crisis so far and to better understand employees concerns about returning to the workplace, once restrictions were lifted. Listening to their feedback, plants were reopened on a phased basis, new safety measures implemented and a ‘new normal’ induction programme rolled out. A few weeks after reopening, FMUK’s next pulse asked for feedback on how well controls were embedded, with employees able to make any further suggestions.

“**Wellbeing sits at the heart of everything that we do, whether it’s for our clients or people. Because we have a programme in place, we were in a strong position as we went into the pandemic but recognised the need to increase the support to our CAREGivers and office teams who were very much on the frontline. Our WorkBuzz wellbeing pulse reassured us that we’re getting it right, with 92% of colleagues saying they feel safe at work.**”

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Karen Dakin, Head of People

“**I was sceptical at first about running a survey about Coronavirus, but WorkBuzz understood what we were looking for, and how feedback could help us. The platform analyses your feedback and presents it back in a way that’s simple to understand – which makes it actionable. Now we’ve started our partnership with WorkBuzz, I’m even more excited to work with them on our engagement survey.**”

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John Bawak, HR General Manager
haysmacintyre – Understanding Future Flexible Working Expectations

haysmacintyre is an award-winning firm of chartered accountants and tax advisors. With its 300+ employees and partners working remotely, it introduced regular pulse surveys to firstly understand how people were coping at home – both in terms of their mental health and equipment to do their job. Secondly, thinking about the future, haysmacintyre was able to learn about the appetite for continuing to work from home or work flexibly, and the main concern for their people – the commute into their central London office. The partners and staff at haysmacintyre continue to work remotely and make plans about how they would return to work and reduce concerns around the commute into their office. They are now also looking at how they can continue bringing a sense of community to their remote workforce through social events and more people-focused communications.

— “Pulse staff surveys will be the future. Frequent, short surveys help us keep taking the temperature of our partners and staff, especially when we’re working flexibly. It’s a great way to get a comprehensive understanding about how people are feeling when you’re not in the same location all the time.” —

Anna Bennett,
Charities Partner

haysmacintyre

XP Power – Tracking the Employee Experience During Unprecedented Change

XP Power is a leading provider of power solutions, with offices throughout Asia, Europe and North America and manufacturing facilities around the world. At the time of its annual engagement survey in January 2020, production facilities in China and Vietnam had already been affected by Coronavirus.

To support its global medical customers, XP Power needed to respond quickly and get production re-started. It promptly implemented strict infection control protocols for locations where workers needed to work onsite, and remote working for office-based colleagues, minimising disruption and the impact on its customers. To underpin this, it utilised pulse surveys to measure employees’ perceptions of leadership, management and communication from all locations.

— “At a time of unprecedented concern for people all over the world, the WorkBuzz platform has enabled us to quickly engage directly with a very wide range of employees. We were able to demonstrate that local and global leadership teams were listening to their experiences and keen to support, using the results to improve the employee experience.” —

Bekkie Scales,
European HR Director

XP Power
Phase 3
Creating Lasting Change

Even after a vaccine is found and social distancing is over, the world will never be the same again.

Business models must adapt to changing consumer habits and demand

- **Growing demand:**
  - Home centric
  - Online shopping
  - Health

- **Falling demand:**
  - Travel & tourism
  - Traditional retail
  - Automotive

Offices become collaboration centres

The world’s biggest working from home experiment, has largely proved successful and bosses like Jes Staley at Barclays, have very publicly questioned whether big, expensive offices are a thing of the past. Whilst home-working can be more effective for focused work, nothing quite replaces face-to-face for collaboration, so offices will need to adapt.

Changing expectations

Employers which continue to offer a lack of flexible working or only recruit from their local area will dramatically narrow their talent pool.

Agile working

The enforced lockdown demonstrated how nimble and innovative we can be. There will be a surge of tech-enabled collaboration, communication and education.

Focus on costs

Many companies affected by falling demand will look to reduce costs. According to Gartner, one of the big things that happened in the 2008/09 recession was organisations “pulled out all sorts of layers of middle management” making it harder to get promoted.

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When written in Chinese, the word ‘crisis’ is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity.

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John F. Kennedy

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What Top Performing Organisations Are Doing Differently

The organisations that have adapted best to the challenges and opportunities presented by Coronavirus have done five key things:

A) Continuous Listening

Problem
- Unprecedented change, creating unique challenges for companies and employees
- Leaders have less visibility of the impact of change, how employees are feeling, and how they’re maintaining their culture

Solution
Listening to your employees and getting regular feedback:
- Shows you care and identifies any groups of employees which need more support
- Enables you to make data-driven people decisions
- Track your culture and effectively manage change

HS2 – Using Employee Voice to Shape Priorities
HS2 is one of Europe's most demanding and exciting transport projects, with 1,600 employees. Within days of the lockdown, HS2 pivoted, replacing its annual employee engagement survey with wellbeing pulse surveys, initially run every six weeks. The goal was to track its culture in real-time and identify ways to better support its people and their wellbeing, during enforced working from home.

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The insight helped determine what more we needed to do to help our people get through the pandemic together. We rolled out financial wellbeing webinars; embedded a new wellbeing module in our leadership training and made it easier for colleagues to order the right equipment to work remotely. We started to see immediate results - our response rates and wellbeing scores improved, with 85% of employees feeling supported by their manager.

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Neil Hayward, HR Director
HS2
B) Enable Effective Working

Problem
- Many companies have rapidly accelerated their digital agenda, rolling out new tools like Zoom to enable home working.
- But it’s much more than simply providing the tools – it’s how they’re used and how you maintain your culture virtually.
- In an office, much communication and collaboration happens organically, whereas it’s easy for virtual meetings to become transactional and more task-focused.

Solution
- Invest in training to help managers become better remote leaders – they may need to step in and proactively establish new ways of working. For example, encouraging time for virtual fun like team quizzes, ensuring they always turn on their camera during video calls and identifying colleagues that need more support.
- In your employee pulse survey, learn which of your managers need more support by asking questions like:
  - I have enough contact with my manager.
  - How is remote working impacting your productivity?
  - In terms of remote working, how could we work more effectively?

C) Reinforce Purpose & Belonging

Problem
- Many employees are looking to their employer for guidance, worried about their wellbeing and job security.
- How organisations respond is a defining leadership moment.

Solution
- Be open about the challenges that the company is facing and be human – talk about how you’re personally adjusting to the new challenges.
- Outline your plan to get through the crisis and as CEO, communicate directly with your workforce. Listen to their concerns and show you care.
- Look for opportunities to reinforce your culture and values, by linking your response and plan to your mission.

The University of Wales Trinity St David – Reinforcing Values Through Storytelling

The Vice Chancellor was keen to use its first wellbeing pulse to draw out positive stories reflecting the pride felt working for the University throughout the pandemic. WorkBuzz asked colleagues to share a story which made them proud to work for the University during these challenging times. Over 280 stories were shared and celebrated, many linking to the University’s values of Collaboration and Creativity, including the pride felt by colleagues pulling together to support the production of ventilators for the NHS.

The CEO is now the Chief Empathy Officer.

Josh Bersin

Reinforcing Values Through Storytelling
The University of Wales Trinity St David
D) Values Based Decisions

In the age of social media, internal is the new external. Difficult decisions may need to be made, but how they are made and communicated, will have a lasting impact on your employer brand.

Let’s look at two companies, both having to make a large proportion of their workforce redundant, but going about this in very different ways:

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**Bird – Two Minute Zoom Call**

Went viral for all the wrong reasons, after laying off 400+ workers through a two-minute, “inhumane” Zoom call. [You can listen to this here](#)

This attracted hundreds of comments on social media and Glassdoor:

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**Airbnb – From The Heart**

With revenues falling 50% in 2020, Airbnb made the tough decision to layoff a quarter of its workforce, but received much praise for how this was managed:

- Transparent, decisive and human communication from their CEO about the challenges Airbnb was facing
- Explained their headcount reductions in context of their future strategy
- Offered generous severance packages including continued health care insurance
- Established Alumni Talent Directory and Placement Teams, helping employees to find new roles
- To help with job searching, Airbnb allowed these people to keep their Apple laptops

Now is the time to lead with integrity. It’s time to build trust through clear, consistent and transparent communications; to recognise people for going above and beyond; to care; to show vulnerability, and to share stories that connect people in meaningful ways. This human-first approach to leadership is vital for maintaining your emotional connection with employees during difficult times.

Dawn Smedley, Culture and Engagement Consultant, WorkBuzz
E) Realign HR Priorities

With a lasting impact on business models, strategy and employees’ expectations, HR must realign its strategic priorities.

**Reevaluate The Employee Experience**
Coronavirus has accelerated the future: in two months most organisations have achieved what they would normally do in two years; most employees will expect more flexible working and demand better collaboration tools and online learning.

**Refocused HR and Talent Programmes**
Given the impact on business models, consumer demand, and strategic priorities, many organisations will need to restructure and there may be fewer opportunities for promotion. Employers will need to find creative ways of meeting employees’ career advancement needs.

**Prioritising the Human Connection**
Ping pong tables and endless perks don’t drive engagement. The crisis has reminded us that great leaders, clear comms, supportive managers and developing a meaningful connection to a bigger purpose, help create the environment where people choose to be engaged.

**New Competencies**
To be successful in a post Coronavirus world, companies like Disney are radically rethinking their leadership development programmes and now focus on empathy, resilience, caring, and safety (source: Bersin). What do your leaders need to be successful in the future?

**Talent Sourcing**
With specialist skills in short supply, more companies will create distributed teams tapping into overseas talent hubs.

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**Summary**

Coronavirus is providing unique challenges for organisations and employee engagement – business models are being stress tested and there is unprecedented change. But it’s also creating opportunities for HR to step up, accelerate the future and shape their new normal.

Organisations that bounceback fastest will use regular employee feedback to make data driven people decisions, prioritise their culture, adjust to new expectations and create lasting change.
Free Pulse Survey

During unprecedented change and times of uncertainty, listening to your employees has never been more important.

Getting objective feedback enables you to make data driven people decisions and:

• Identify employees’ concerns about returning to their usual place of work
• Prioritise how you support your colleagues and shape your wellbeing strategy
• Measure how social distancing in the workplace and new ways of working are embedding
• Track employee engagement and your culture, so you bounce back faster

That’s why we’re offering free access to all companies, not-for-profits, and government organisations, to our Coronavirus Pulse survey:

✓ Quick to set up and five minutes for employees to complete
✓ GDPR compliant and your results are confidential
✓ No cost / no catch - we’re just trying to do our bit to help

FIND OUT MORE

“ We’ve gained some really useful insights from our staff and will be making some immediate changes in response to their feedback.

Sara Mills
Learning and Development Manager, UWTSD
Example Pulse Survey Questions

Here are some tried-and-tested questions for your next pulse survey. We recommend selecting 10-15 which are most appropriate for the challenges your organisation is currently facing.

**Leadership:**
- I trust our leadership team to make decisions that protect me and my colleagues
- I’m kept informed of how our company is responding to the Coronavirus pandemic
- I’m proud of how my company has responded to the Coronavirus pandemic
- I’m confident that our company will continue to take the right steps to see us through the Coronavirus pandemic
- Leadership visibly role model the behaviour they’ve asked of us since Coronavirus

**My Manager:**
- I feel supported by my manager
- I have enough contact with my manager
- My manager cares about me as a person
- My manager has communicated what is expected of me
- Any changes made to our working practices have been communicated clearly

**Wellbeing:**
- How would you rate your wellbeing right now?
- I feel safe at work
- My company cares about my wellbeing
- My company has taken appropriate steps to ensure I’m safe at work
- My company supports me to balance my work and caring responsibilities

**Home working:**
- Since working from home, has your productivity improved / stayed the same / declined? [Follow up] Why?
- Has working from home affected your productivity?
- I have the equipment and technology that I need to effectively work from home
- I am able to effectively collaborate with my colleagues
- What if anything, could improve your experience of working remotely?

**Return to work:**
- I would feel safe now returning to my usual place of work
- I would feel safe now commuting to my usual place of work
- I have the flexibility to decide when it’s safe to return to my usual place of work
- If my usual place of work was open today, I would prefer to work there
- What are the biggest barriers, if any, for you returning to your usual place of work:
  - Childcare
  - Concerns about my commute
  - I or a family member is high risk / shielding
  - I have other caring responsibilities
  - Concerns about social distancing in work
  - Concerns about catching the virus at work
  - Other
- If given a choice, after the pandemic, how many days a week would you choose to work from home? (0-5 drop down)
- I’m being kept well informed about what to expect in terms of returning to work
- What is your biggest concern about returning to your usual place of work?