

# NEW REALITIES OF THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

ADVISORY SESSION: POST MEETING NOTES 28 FEBRUARY 2022

CRF's John Whelan hosted a CRF Advisory Session on 28 February to inform the development and focus of the upcoming research project on the new realities of the working environment. The informal discussion session brought together members who are interested in/working on new working practices to share challenges, good practices, and questions.

These notes summarise the discussion.

## HAVE YOU EMBEDDED THE NEW PRACTICES THAT YOU'VE TRIALLED DURING THE PANDEMIC, OR DO YOU PLAN TO REVERT TO PRE-PANDEMIC PRACTICES?

- One organisation reported taking a pragmatic approach by introducing a flexible, working approach. They were not changing anyone's terms and conditions or contractual status, but just changing how they implemented it and having a "flexible wrap around". They admitted that they would need to change their policies at some point and navigating that might be challenging.
- One organisation was keeping remote working optional and voluntary.
- One attendee conceded that they were adopting a top-down approach because they needed to consider the possibility that clients may want to meet in person, and they would consequently have to tell their workers to be back in the office to meet them.
- Most companies have written guidelines because they want some degree of structure but not contractual amendments.
- One organisation said they had implemented a non-contractual policy and branded it as two main policies: one based around trust to do what you need to do in regard to flexible work and make up the hours as you need to. This had been issued as a directive guidance. The second part is that they were now location agnostic. Employees could work abroad, for up to four-weeks, to allow some flexibility but avoid issues of taxation.
- In general, most organisations were not instilling any minimum days for being in the office.

- Unions had been supportive of smart flexible working and equally as supportive of people being back in the office.
- For one organisation, 'Smart Working' had been implemented as a new policy.

## HOW DO YOU ENSURE FAIRNESS OF APPROACH FOR FRONTLINE ROLES?

- One organisation said there had been resentment from frontline workers directed at workers that can work from home.
- Another organisation also reported there being a division and suspicion between warehouse staff and staff who were working from home – when the reality is that home-based staff were working far longer hours than previously. No one felt like they were winning.
- There was discussion about the unions understanding that there were different treatments for different staff groups and not trying to achieve the same for all.
- One organisation has had to think about different types of flexibility for operational staff. On some sites they had implemented a four-day week with extended days, which had gone down well with their workforce.
- Pay had been an issue for workers who choose to be in the office five-days a week and therefore spend more money on travelling in. They felt that they deserved more of an increase than others.
- Achieving equity across different ages and seniority levels had been a challenge. Senior workers generally had better homework set-ups, so it was easier for them to work from home. Whereas more junior and generally lower paid workers may not have had such home facilities and so were forced back to the office.
- One organisation was thinking about what they can do differently with their office space and taking into consideration the different reasons people wanted to come back to the office.
- Some organisations had looked at improving facilities, social areas, access to Wi-Fi etc for site-based staff.
- From a legal perspective, it was important to check circumstances on an individual basis when deciding on new work policies to avoid being discriminatory.

## NEW REALITIES ADVISORY SESSION: POST MEETING NOTES 28 FEBRUARY 2022

### HOW DO WE BALANCE THE NEED/DESIRE TO LISTEN AND RESPOND TO OUR STAFF WITH THE TOP-DOWN GOALS AND OBJECTIVES WE MAY HAVE?

- One organisation is giving clear direction rather than asking staff what they want to do.
- One attendee highlighted that there was the need to strike the right balance between flexibility and from a culture point of view, allowing people to collaboratively learn together in the office.
- One organisation said they were still listening to employee needs; however, they needed to keep running the business at front of mind.
- Alternatively, another organisation said that running the business is not front of mind. They are more focused on doing the right thing for their workers.
- One organisation admitted that having a workforce with a bigger geographic reach has been a challenge. Although it was good for increasing the talent pool, they are dealing with important details such as, can you be in the office if we need you? And who pays for travel?
- There was a trend of advertising fully remote roles with no expectation to ever attend the office, with remuneration tailored to remote roles.
- Practices were now seen as being more driven by the need to compete for staff. If a competitor provided more flexibility, you risked losing talent.
- One attendee noted that one of the first questions from candidates in the recruitment process was 'what is your agile working policy?' Companies don't want to come across as archaic by bringing everyone back to the office for five days a week.

### WHAT ARE PEOPLE DOING TO EVALUATE THEIR ACTIONS AND ARE THERE ANY EARLY RESULTS YOU CAN SHARE?

- With the one size won't fit all idea in mind, one organisation had used a test and learn or experimentation approach with a variety of staff from different departments testing different approaches, such as, how many days are spent in the office, or different working patterns. Through this, they hope to get a clearer idea of what is working and what they should invest in. Results of the experiments would be reviewed at the end of the 'test and learn' year, with no policy changes until this was completed.
- One organisation was looking at designing new office spaces and incorporating biophilic designs (the incorporation of more natural elements in the

workplace e.g. plants). They were looking at facilities such as, soundproof pods, collaborative meeting areas and quiet spaces. They planned to set up pilot collaborative spaces in their building and make decisions based on their usage.

- Some organisations were doing surveys to get people to think of the future of work and how they wanted to use the office. They are also looking at what would entice them to come to the office, whether it was a better gym or better catering facilities for example.

### HOW STRONG IS THE DEMAND FOR FLEXIBLE WORKING, AND HAVE YOU SEEN A POSITIVE RETENTION/ATTRACTION EFFECT?

- For one organisation, some of their people had taken the decision to retire early after the experience of the last two years.
- The point was made that because it had been a sustained period of change, people have changed their lives in significant ways. For example, some parents in the workplace could now pick up their children from school a few days a week and didn't want to change this.
- Talent retention was a general concern amongst attendees. The point was made that for certain industries where hybrid work was not an option, some employees wouldn't be able to accommodate non-flexible working and would leave if asked to come back to the office full-time.

### WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES THAT HAVE COME UP?

- One attendee said it is important to remember that everyone has had a traumatic two years. It would be crucial to take the time to remember the social side of people's lives.
- One attendee made the point that reactive learning would be important. Unintended consequences may come up that require organisations to react to them in real-time.
- The nature of disciplinary and grievances was harder to monitor online as they were less traceable.
- Organisations would have to update their onboarding procedure.
- Belgium's 'right to disconnect' had highlighted the implications for blurring the lines between home and work life.
- One organisation noted that the increase of recruitment during the pandemic had meant insufficient space in the office for all staff at one time and the need to stagger attendance.

## NEW REALITIES ADVISORY SESSION: POST MEETING NOTES 28 FEBRUARY 2022

### WHAT QUESTIONS ABOUT THE NEW WORKING ENVIRONMENT ARE YOU LOOKING TO ANSWER?

- How do you start working in the office again? How do you make the shift from interacting in person rather than on the screen?
- How do you measure working time?
- Will there be a degree of self-regulation? Companies will look at what others are doing and broaden their flexible policy to retain the talent.
- From a mental health point of view, some people want to be back in contact with other people. How do you achieve that when you've gone fully remote?

### crf UPCOMING EVENT

- IN-PERSON AND ONLINE:**  
[The Realities of the New Working Environment](#)  
 🇬🇧 **10<sup>th</sup> May, 9.00 BST, Central London**  
 📺 **10<sup>th</sup> May, 10.00 BST, Online**

Register →

There's still time to add your voice to the research by participating in our survey. Please click [here](#) to take part.

This research is sponsored by:

**Bird & Bird**

**bts**  
Strategy made personal

**Mercer**