

# A better way of working

## SPECIAL REPORT

The past two years have placed huge strains on UK businesses and employees – but they've also shown new ways forward. Read more inside



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# How tech is the catalyst in the shift to flexible working

The events of the past 18 months have accelerated an existing trend towards remote and flexible working, which had been slowly developing over the past two decades. As always, technology was the enabler, with faster broadband speeds and cloud computing major drivers.

Now, as the immediate danger of Covid recedes and businesses begin to emerge into something approaching normality, comprised in many cases of hybrid working arrangements, technology will again help to shape the future of the workplace. "The urgent need for businesses to reduce their physical presence alongside a drive to lower their carbon footprints is going to accelerate adoption of intelligent technology that can support the rise of smart buildings," predicts Narinder Sahota, chief technology officer at Advanced. "These learn about occupancy patterns and then suggest how workplace conditions can be optimised for both workforce comfort and energy efficiency."

"Working from home (WFH) has decoupled people from the workplace and systems that we previously assumed could only be accessed from there," says Rohit Talwar, CEO of Fast Future and author of *Aftershocks and Opportunities 2: Navigating the Next Horizon*. "Now firms are seeing the value of moving applications to the cloud for widespread accessibility. Business applications and tool selection are increasingly being selected on the basis that working from home is or could be part of the core working model going forward in industry."

Technology is also having an impact on how sales are conducted in the wake of the pandemic, says Liam Halpin, VP sales EMEA and LATAM, at LinkedIn Sales Solutions. "In many sectors this has involved a wholesale transformation of the sales process," he says. "I've watched



sales teams for export businesses, whose lives previously revolved around international travel and events, reinvent how they prospect, gather insight and build relationships. With the future of large-scale trade fairs still uncertain, they've turned to sales intelligence tools to fill the gap." One example here would be a platform such as LinkedIn informing recruiters or HR teams when a target employee gets a new role, he adds.

The rise of remote working has also made cyber-security even more important, with 86 per cent of organisations expecting to permanently adopt remote working practices, according to research by Forrester. "It's already well past time for infosec leaders to strategically re-evaluate the systems to accommodate these changes, with an eye toward making their security as dynamic as the workplace itself," says David Cummins, vice president of EMEA Tenable, which commissioned the research. "Organisations need to rethink how they define risk, looking beyond software flaws and device compliance, to achieve a holistic view of their dynamic and disparate environments." GDPR and data compliance is also a concern: 33 per cent of organisations

that had suffered a cyber-attack in the past 12 months admitted it resulted in a data breach.

Big data, too, will play a more prominent role, particularly in sectors such as marketing, says Douggie Melville-Clarke, head of data science at Duco. "But in order for innovation to continue, education needs to follow," he says. "If employees don't have the analytical skills necessary to perform the statistical tests and experiments large data sets need, then industries will face setbacks."

3D printing also came of age during the pandemic, being used to manufacture everything from swabs for Covid testing to face shields, points out Dave Prezzano, MD, UK & Ireland, at HP Inc. User data itself is now becoming increasingly useful, adds Halpin, with first-party data that is actively maintained by users rather than sourced from elsewhere particularly valuable.

Other trends that were developing before the pandemic remain ongoing. "As AI-based robots and humans continue to collaborate, productivity, quality and the security of the working environment will significantly enhance," says Marina Ruggieri, IEEE fellow and professor

## Sales skills in demand

As businesses transition to becoming digital enterprises, so too must those working in the sales function adapt.

According to LinkedIn's State of Sales survey, the following skills are most in demand when hiring new salespeople:

|                         |     |
|-------------------------|-----|
| • Problem-solving       | 26% |
| • Confidence            | 26% |
| • Relationship-building | 26% |
| • Active listening      | 24% |
| • Creativity            | 22% |
| • Critical thinking     | 22% |
| • Oral communications   | 22% |
| • Technological skills  | 21% |
| • Category expertise    | 20% |
| • Teaching ability      | 19% |

of telecommunications at Tor Vergata University of Roma. "We can expect to see more encouragement towards enhancing the relationship between humans and robots in a cyber-physical domain."

It's essential businesses develop a culture of innovation that allows people to create and share ideas easily and assess any scenarios that may arise in the future, says Matt Spry, strategy consultant and founder of Emergent. "Design small-scale experiments and projects to test your hypothesis and possible responses," he says. "This will create deep insight and learning, and help you prioritise the changes you'll need to make to your business to thrive in the future."

## INDUSTRY VIEW

To discover ways to create new business opportunities for your organisation, visit <https://business.linkedin.com/sales-solutions>

# The automatic revolution is already here

*The robots (probably) won't be coming to take our jobs just yet – but automation and developments in AI mean we won't necessarily be doing the same ones, writes Francis Andrews*

In the US city of Spokane, 280 miles east of Seattle, students at Gonzaga University are growing accustomed to the presence of robots. Some will welcome them: the robots – small, four-wheeled and shaped like a cube – will cruise the campus at two miles per hour delivering burgers, burritos and other hot food to otherwise indisposed students. They are designed to look cute; a stark contrast with many of the robots the students will have grown up seeing on television.

Others might be disturbed by the sight, and not only for the freakish nature of it all. The robots will be working the campus alongside real delivery men and women. It was only recently that independent food delivery companies, as opposed to delivery services attached to restaurants, really took off, and they have become a go-to employment opportunity – albeit a precarious one – for tens of thousands of workers. And these workers will consider the robots competition.

Cue much debate over the effect automation will have on the workforce. One camp sees the rise of robots and other innovations in automation as beneficial, not only in terms of the efficiency they'll bring to services such as food delivery, but also because they can take on the dirty, dangerous work that humans have long had to toil at, thereby freeing them up to take on more meaningful jobs. The other



camp cries foul: robots are here to steal jobs, they say, and the result will be mass layoffs and rising unemployment rates.

This debate is nothing new. The Luddites – textile workers who famously smashed the spinning machines they felt they were being replaced by in Victorian England – saw the Industrial Revolution not as heralding progress, but a threat to their work future. Two centuries on, few would argue against the claim that, on balance, the machinery developed in the early 19th century has advanced human development. But radical change in the working landscape will always provoke anxiety.

Today's fears surrounding automation, AI, machine learning and other technologies are doing something similar, by drawing attention to a scenario where the unemployed remain forever idle and reliant on the state for income, and away from the improvements these innovations will bring to the quality of human labour: better workplace safety; reduced hours; enhanced output.

Jobs will be lost to robots: economists at MIT have estimated that

## New attitudes to work

The story goes that millennials are more demanding when it comes to work. They make up 35 per cent of the UK workforce, and are dubbed by some as the “most impatient” working cohort. They want flexible working hours, faster career progression and a workplace culture that bends to their desires. A survey by recruitment consultants Robert Walters found three-quarters of millennials see a social workplace as important, while more than 90 per cent consider rapid career progression as central to their decision over whether to take up a role. They've also grown up amid a technological revolution, and the offices in which they work

today would be unrecognisable to a person who hasn't entered one since the 1980s.

Employers are facing a problem. The struggle by companies in the UK to find talent is so pronounced now that employers are boosting starting salaries and offering myriad benefits to new recruits. That shows within the job market: candidates now have great power to choose. Employers will need to listen to demands for flexible working and social activities. But that mightn't be a bad thing: studies have shown that morale and productivity increase when employees are able to work to their own schedule.

they could replace some two million workers in the US manufacturing sector by 2025. But in crisis lies opportunity. A more positive, and probable, scenario is that those who lose their jobs will be reskilled, and that rather than spending eight hours a day checking for defects in children's toys on a factory conveyor belt, their working life becomes richer, with more stimulating roles

that see them interacting with humans not machines. Their days are shorter and the work-life balance improves.

Positions are already opening across the economy for people to train as reskillers and upskillers for the soon-to-be-unemployed. That goes to show, if anything, that the mere prospect of unemployment is a job creator in itself.



# Six top tips for selling in the virtual world

*Covid has led to all sorts of challenges and upheavals in the world of work – not least for sales professionals. Here are some ideas for getting the most out of the new normal...*



In recent years, the way in which organisations approach sales has changed, with a greater emphasis on a consultative approach and building relationships. The days of cold-calling and pressured sales were already on the way out before Covid-19 struck, forcing a more virtual approach that relied more on softer skills.

“People who work in sales need to be able to sell in the hybrid world,” says Liz Sebag-Montefiore, sales director at HR consultancy 10Eighty. “It’s important to think about how to communicate in hybrid business development meetings.”

The following pointers reveal what top sellers do differently, and they could help you to optimise your sales strategy for 2022.

## 1. Do your homework

Top sellers prepare for every engagement, setting a clear purpose with an expected outcome in mind, says Premal Patel, MD of retail marketing firm Catalina UK. “They also understand who the decision makers and the influencers are and apply different strategies for both,” he says. “Top sellers also don’t give up. Even when the process feels

difficult or near impossible, they find a way to overcome the hurdles, maintain positivity and create the right impact to win the sale.”

## 2. Identify the need

It’s essential to understand the problem the client needs solving, says Mike Drew, partner and head of the technology and IT services practice at recruiter Odgers Berndtson. “They listen, adapt and bring together partners to deliver a holistic business solution, rather than just selling isolated services or products,” he says.

## 3. Build multiple relationships

In the current climate, with teams likely to be more physically disjointed, it’s likely any sale will involve different stakeholders, according to LinkedIn research, seven people are involved in the average B2B buying decision. “This means relationship-building between the salesperson and primary buyer is highly important, so that buyers don’t get lost in the sea of conversations,” says Iain Masson, RVP UK & Nordics. The most important skills today are empathy, focus and brevity, he adds.

Being able to work in a broader ecosystem of organisations is crucial, too. “Most organisations don’t just sell their own products or services, so one of the big drivers is how to manage and grow these partner ecosystems,” says John McLaughlin, chief commercial officer, human capital solutions, EMEA at Aon. “We’re seeing this moving down the ranks, with people thinking about it earlier in their careers.”

## 4. Challenge clients

Part of a more consultative selling approach means being prepared to ask tough or in-depth questions, says Pete Evans, UK practice partner of global sales development firm SalesStar. “To become a true partner, you have to be constantly challenging your client, continually adding value,” he says. “Clients are looking for partners and salespeople who truly understand business, not more friends.”

## 5. Social media

The pandemic has made it imperative to use social channels to engage potential buyers, says Michael Cupps, senior vice president, marketing, at software firm ActiveOps. “This is less

about ‘look at me and my accomplishments’ and more about sharing information that will intrigue potential buyers to engage in a conversation,” he says. “They will then adapt to the right amount of in-person and digital engagement that allows the customer a mutual pace to evaluate and close.”

## 6. Stay on top of technology

Making use of the latest technology is a growing part of a successful salesperson’s toolkit. “Today, artificial intelligence and machine learning can help analyse an organisation’s lead prioritisation and opportunity-to-close-won scoring, and ideal customer profile alignment,” says Craig Charlton, CEO at SugarCRM.

“That enables them to understand which businesses are similar to other businesses in their customer base, and the attributes that make these customers the best and most profitable.”

## INDUSTRY VIEW

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## The sales operations support act

Sales operations roles play a vital role in helping increase the productivity or effectiveness of the sales team by reducing friction in the sales process. Typically, operatives will handle a range of tasks including:

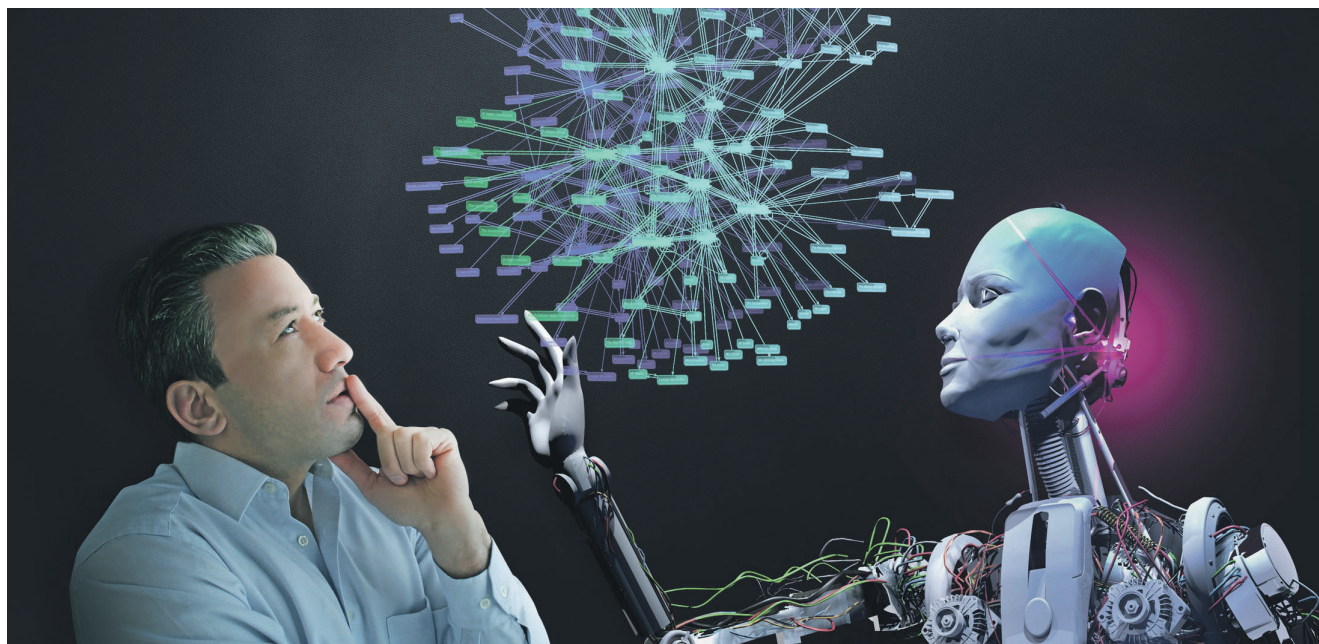
- Designing compensation/incentive plans
- Territory structuring and alignment
- Sales and revenue strategy
- Lead management
- Process optimisation
- Sales technology and methodology evaluation
- Pricing and contract support
- Hiring and training
- Data modelling, analytics and reporting

Effective sales operations teams will need a wide range of skills including technical and operational competence and project management, as well as creativity and out-of-the-box thinking.



# What can human interviewers learn from robots?

*Recruitment is the next thing AI routines are muscling in on, and getting good at. But cutting down on “noise” and introducing new KPIs may keep humans in the HR game, writes Zita Goldman*



**A**thletes can testify to how performance feeds off rivalry. The biggest competition of the digital age between humans and robots – or rather different types of automation and AI – is no exception. To be sure, there are areas where humans don’t stand a chance. Take the laborious work of screening CVs, when hundreds, or sometimes even thousands of them, are submitted for a single position.

And with 75 to 80 per cent of CVs for a role being unqualified on average, sorting through a huge pile of CVs manually is an ultimate waste of resources when AI can do the screening and shortlisting at a fraction of the time and at about 25 per cent of the original cost.

But when it comes to judging the suitability of shortlisted candidates, humans and AI algorithms are still

neck and neck. This is partly – and paradoxically – thanks to the biased data humans use to train algorithms, and partly to the great strides humans have made debiasing their recruitment judgments in the past decade. We’ve come to appreciate the benefits of a diverse workforce and have been learning to combat our cognitive biases – the halo effect (where initial good impressions make us blind to the weaknesses of a candidate) being the best known.

It’s what Israeli psychologist Daniel Kahneman and co-authors Cass Sunstein and Olivier Sibony have dubbed “noise”, in their book of the same name. We are lagging behind machines, say the authors, because of the natural variation and idiosyncrasies of human judgments, and the influence circumstances such as hunger or happiness can demonstrably make on them. It’s

predominantly this “noise” that will cause even two competent HR professionals to disagree about which of two candidates will perform better on the job.

Not only is there disagreement between the judgements of different assessors but, based on studies carried out in other fields, the same judge can arrive at different conclusions about the same candidate on two separate occasions depending, for example, on their mood, or the time of the day.

## **Making human judgement less chaotic**

To become less noisy, recruitment assessments need more structure. In unstructured interviews there is more room for acting on the superficial impressions often driven by the appearance or verbal skills of the candidate – even if

these are irrelevant to the position. Skills required for a role need to be tested separately and independently to avoid a high score in one area cancelling out weaknesses in another, or the opposite. Ideally, multiple – up to a maximum of four – interviews should be carried out separately, while making a holistic judgement based on aggregated results should be delayed until the very last moment.

It is only by implementing more regulated processes that human recruiters can take on noiseless algorithms. And, to prove their worth, they could adopt something else from their machine rivals, and attest to their competitiveness by measuring the predictive validity of their judgements. The long-neglected link between the selection process and the quality of the hire need to become their top KPI!

# Challenges for technology and the financial markets

In the early part of the Covid-19 pandemic, as lockdowns set in around the world, turbulence hit the global financial markets in a way not seen since the height of the financial crisis in 2007/8. This time, as busy open-plan offices fell quiet, thousands of employees, from traders and back-office operations teams, to salespeople and IT support staff, moved to log on from the safety of their homes. Long-established financial institutions that had previously been reluctant not just to fully embrace home working but speed up adoption of other types of business technology suddenly had to start signing-off on those decisions. Changes that would previously have taken months or years were pushed through in a matter of days or weeks.

As orders flooded in amidst a sharp rise in market volatility, staff worked late to ensure they were processed correctly, filed in under the right accounts, and funds and securities transferred. Growing backlogs of trades meant that the clearing houses took longer and longer to fully settle them, and investors suddenly had no idea whether a trade had gone through or how much stock they now held. Small brokers struggled to know their exposure and it was a nervous wait until the end of the trading day, or longer, to find out what the fallout from the day's trading had been.

The situation was similar for the specialist technology companies that support the financial sector. For Sinara, a London software house that builds and supports IT systems for exchanges and trading firms across the financial markets, it was also a case of a speedy transition to remote working. "We had actually been testing out our remote work infrastructure as we had been investing in business continuity," says



Steve Dobb, a founding director of Sinara. "We just didn't expect to be using it for real so soon, and for so long. We established the business back in 1989 and have seen off multiple recessions, but this was a transformation like no other."

While most people are at least familiar with the idea of stock or commodity exchanges and the buying and selling of securities, there is a whole series of events that must take place in the background for a trade to actually become 'settled'. A complex patchwork of IT systems across multiple firms does a lot of the legwork, but there is still a need for significant manual involvement to make sure it all goes smoothly. At a recent derivatives industry conference in London, panellists agreed that financial firms had to invest in modernising their post-trade processes, create

more integrated IT solutions, and remove manual touchpoints.

"While the paper and fax-machine days are (well, mostly...) in the rear-view mirror," says Hamish Adourian, Head of Sales and Marketing at Sinara, "We now often find a whole series of low or legacy tech, email or manual processes that can cause real bottlenecks for a financial business once it hits turbulence in the markets."

Alongside modernising their IT, with their employees increasingly at home at least part of the time, the major banks and brokers will have to provide software that can be updated quickly and efficiently. Large, slow systems that consume vast quantities of data will have to be adapted or replaced in order to be effectively run from home offices. The transition to the cloud will likely accelerate as

companies decide to outsource the hosting and operation of these complex systems. Security will become even more of an issue as organisations dealing with sensitive financial data will have to ensure it is managed robustly and cannot be leaked out of a staff member's home laptop, mistakenly or otherwise.

"There's been plenty of discussion about how work will change now post-pandemic," concludes Adourian, "but I think it's also worth asking how technology itself will change, and how it can benefit not just customers but employees of the financial industry, which after all is critical both to the UK and global economy."

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# Workforce optimisation: the key to success post-Covid

**T**he UK's workforce is edging shiftilly towards the exit. A recent survey from Microsoft of more than 30,000 global workers showed that no fewer than 41 per cent were considering quitting or changing professions this year, with another study of workers in the UK and Ireland showing 38 per cent were planning to quit in the next six months to a year.

With numbers on the move so high, many workers must be exchanging jobs with one another, and thus setting themselves up for further disappointment down the line. Nevertheless, signs of Britain's coming stampede towards greener grass represent a troubling development for employers across all industries.

The rumbling in the herd sounds a special alarm for organisations in sectors with high employee turnover rates. For this select group, any statistics projecting an average increase in worker mobility are a colossal problem. In usual times the UK annual average for staff turnover is 10 to 15 per cent. In the contact centre industry, that rate stands at a shocking 26 per cent annually – in normal times. A predicted

three- or four-fold increase from the average could see whole workforces disappear.

Contact centres have focused heavily on workforce optimisation for some years: performance management, quality monitoring, call recording and customer relationship management have long been used to improve efficiency and compliance. For workers in such a tightly controlled environment, though, these optimisation initiatives have often felt like a one-way street.

But all that is changing. Contact centres are embracing employee engagement as the key metric on which to focus, in order to survive the post-pandemic workforce hypermobility. To succeed, contact centres will need to offer employees more than just free Diet Coke and crisps. On offer will be total flexibility, of location as well as hours – all while ensuring staff are trained, supported, monitored, motivated and organised. To achieve this, an effective workforce optimisation strategy is essential.

## Remote working

Opinions are divided on the WFH revolution: some people welcome

a return to the office environment, but the taste of freedom has led many others to experience a permanent shift in outlook. At the very least, the option of partial or full remote working has become a “must have”. In an increasingly competitive jobs market, offering remote working widens the talent pool, bringing contact centre jobs within reach of people who aren't looking for office-based roles, including previously less enfranchised demographics such as single parents.

## Motivation, management and support

The pandemic has been a catalyst for the digital transformation of traditional work practices, and this has changed the way contact centres view workforce optimisation. Contact centre leaders recognise that providing remote employees with integrated knowledge management tools is essential if they are to meet the needs of customers, whether working from home or the office. Real-time relevant information and access to customer interaction histories ensure that a “work from whenever” model doesn't have a negative effect on service delivery.

However, for a workforce optimisation strategy to succeed, employee motivation is equally as important. Employees are more productive when the processes that assign tasks to them take into account their skillset and development goals. Without this, tasks can seem challenging and stressful, factors exacerbated by working away from the office without an experienced supervisor. Workforce optimisation solutions offer intelligent scheduling, enabling workers to communicate with each other through multiple channels,

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*“Contact centres are embracing employee engagement in order to survive the post-pandemic workforce hypermobility. To succeed, contact centres will need to offer employees more than just free Diet Coke and crisps”*

and allowing managers to offer over-the-shoulder support.

Likewise, optimisation systems must recognise that experienced people with strong skillsets work better when allocated more complex tasks. In the customer service context, organisations are increasingly turning to AI-powered chatbots to handle repetitive enquiries.

## Wider lessons

For organisations where remote working has been a way of life since that start of the pandemic, there is no going back to the Before Covid (BC) way of working. To make this last for the long term, business leaders should take inspiration from the workforce optimisation tools used by contact centres.

With the right technology, mindset and workforce optimisation strategy, any organisation can navigate the new employee landscape simply by enhancing their ability to efficiently manage all types of workers more flexibly and efficiently – and head off the stampede.

## INDUSTRY VIEW

Martin Taylor is deputy CEO at Content Guru

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<https://www.contentguru.com>





# THE CHANGING PERIM

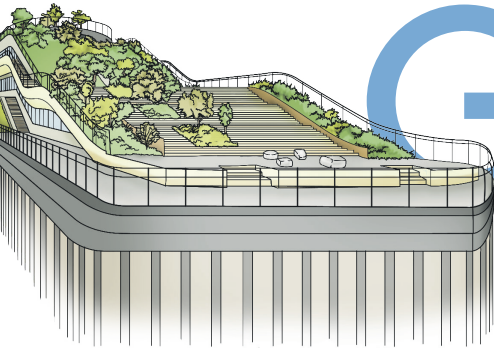
Words: Zita Goldman/In

## HOW CAN HYBRID IMPROVE ON THE ALL-REMOTE WORKING EXPERIENCE?

- Decreases sense of isolation
- Retrains workers to unplug at EOB
- Meeting F2F boosts effectiveness of online collaboration
- Watercooler moments – at least partially – return
- Better work-life balance
- Boosts social capital

## HOW CAN HYBRID COMPLICATE THE ALL-ON-SITE EXPERIENCE?

- Leaders need to manage a both virtual and on-site workforce
- A two-tier workforce may leave remote workers disengaged
- The cost of software enabling remote work remains
- On-site workers need to use videoconferencing with remote colleagues
- Most of the cognitive overload persists
- Scheduling tools are required for co-ordinating hotdesking and hoteling



# Google

HQ at London King's Cross Station will have a swimming pool, basketball courts and nap pods, as well as a running track in the roof garden

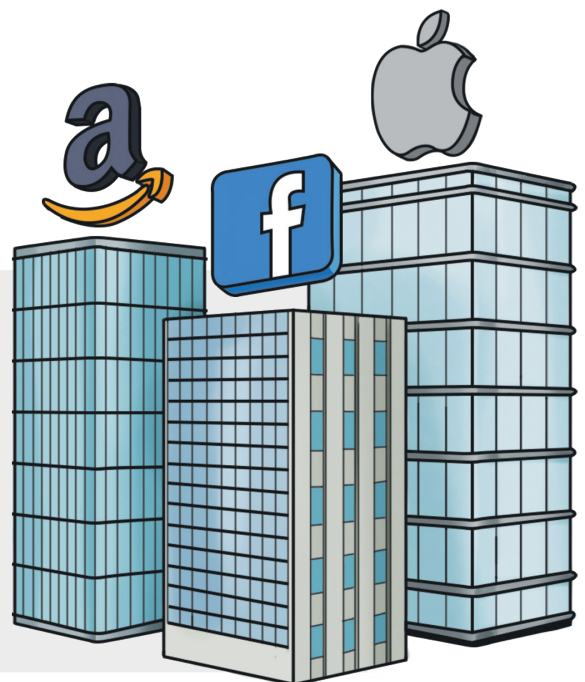
**66%** of participating leaders say that their company is considering redesigning office space for hybrid work

Six months into the pandemic, Amazon, Apple and Facebook have bought or leased

**1,600,000**

square feet of office space in New York alone

(Marker Editors, 2020)

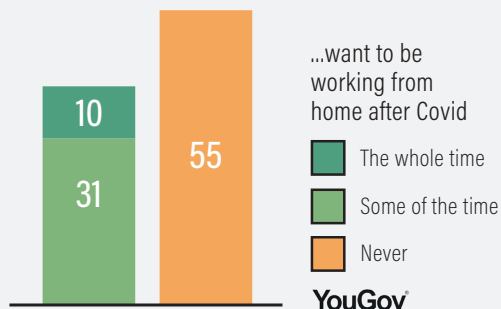


# ETERS OF THE OFFICE

Infographic: Margo Rossi

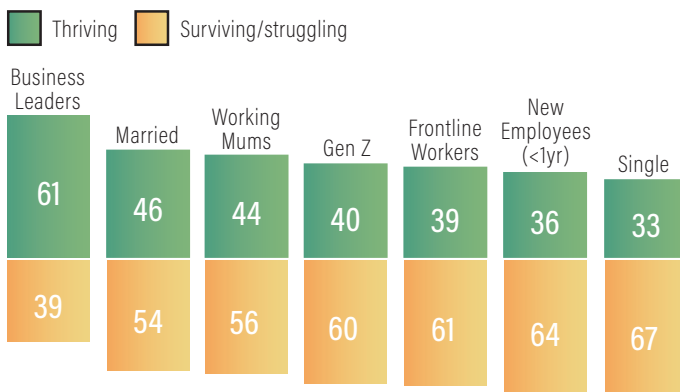
## THE APPEAL OF REMOTE WORK

Remote work has been a hit with 41 per cent of those new to it



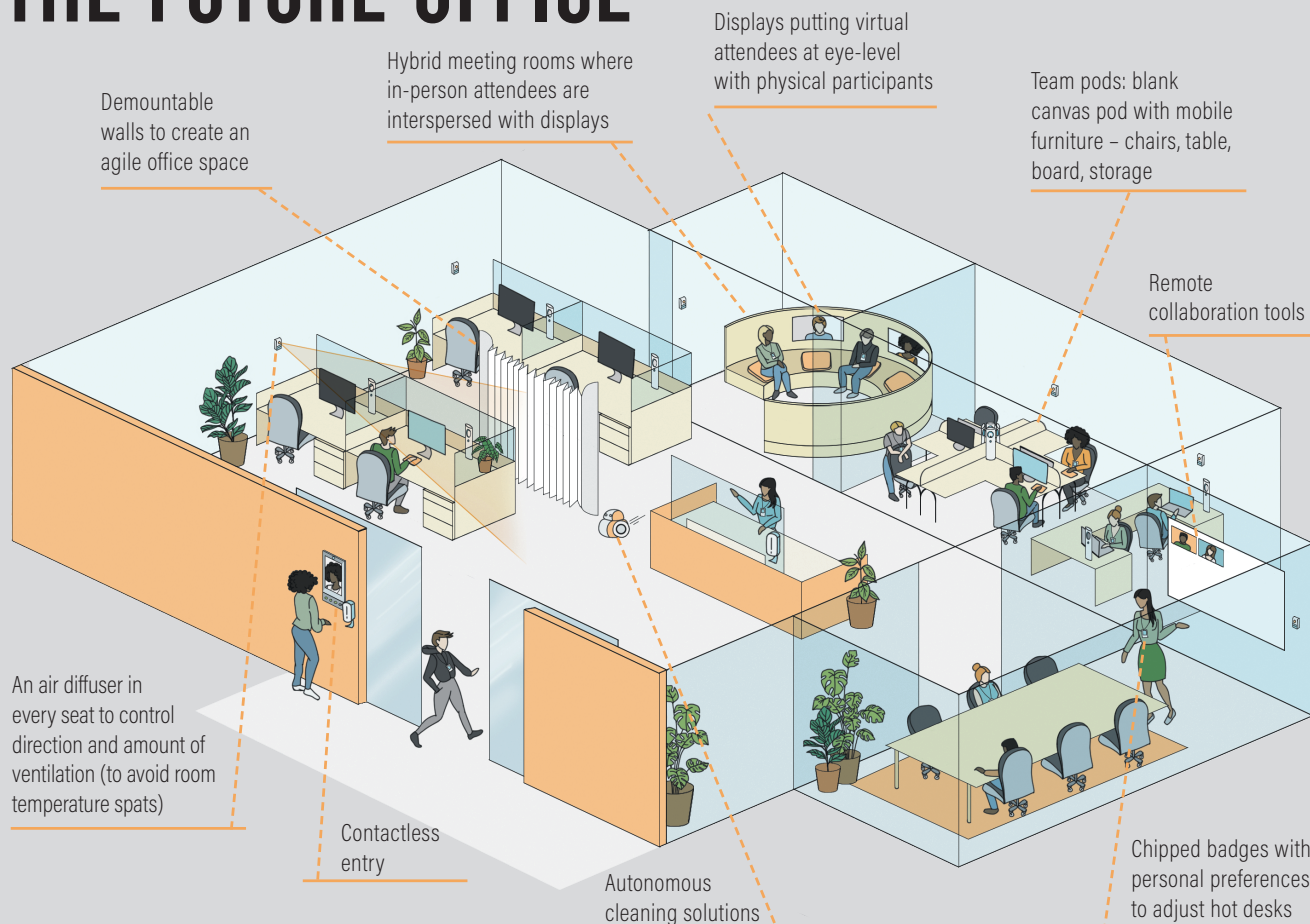
People who never worked from home pre-Covid...

Business leaders are faring better than their employees



The Work Trend Index survey was conducted by an independent research firm, Edelman Data x Intelligence, among 31,092 full-time employed or self-employed workers.

## THE FUTURE OFFICE



# Sustaining the working interest

*The labour market is currently a seller's one – and with prospective hires taking a greater interest in sustainability and diversity, businesses are discovering that they ignore their social responsibility record at their peril. Francis Andrews reports*

Trends can come and go. Think of the changing faces of fashion over the decades, or the migration from countryside to city living: trends that can fade, or even reverse their course.

But confluent with certain trends is a high degree of confidence that they will stay: they are needed, not just desired, and the momentum behind their shift towards the mainstream suggests they are not so vulnerable to the changing norms and fashions that have caused others to decline.

Environmental sustainability is one such example, for the simple reason that planetary survival – at least, survival of the planet we know and enjoy – depends on it. The trend manifests at every level, from individual behaviours – recycling, waste consciousness, changing diets – to the workplace: businesses reducing their energy usage, or printing less paper.

Indeed, the sustainability agenda has become a hot topic even among job applicants. They want to know that their would-be employers are foregrounding environmental awareness and positive action, both in their day-to-day behaviour and in their business objectives. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) was once merely seen as an add-on, a way to marginally differentiate a socially conscious company from one that wasn't. These days, it is core to business planning.

The momentum behind the trend has made younger applicants particularly attuned to whether or not the CSR arm of a prospective employer is merely PR-oriented, or actually meaningful – part of a company's DNA.

Several years ago, a report by PwC found that 65 per cent of people in countries as geographically diverse as China, the UK,

India, Germany and the US desired to work for organisations they considered socially conscious. As a result of this trend, the same report said, HR professionals were reshaping their hiring processes around sustainability and other similar agendas. They understood that talented people had a wider array of options, and that if they wanted the brightest and best, they would need to yield to new demands.

The same is true of sustainability as it is of other socially conscious trends: diversity and gender equality chief among them. These have become key goals not

just among communities who have long experienced disadvantage or prejudice in the workplace, but for others who simply want to see, and contribute to, a fairer society. The changed hiring processes brought about by the sustainability agenda are now being mimicked on the diversity and equality fronts.

But a new trend stands to disrupt this, for better or worse. More companies are bringing new technological innovations into the workplace: AI, augmented reality, machine learning and more. Much has been made of the potential for AI to reduce bias into

the hiring process. After all, humans hold both explicit and unconscious biases that influence all decisions they make, including the suitability of a candidate, whereas machines don't have "past experiences" that could generate prejudices. But we also know that AI can be biased: it is known to infiltrate algorithms, and it learns in part from human action and preference, which can be heavily skewed towards, and away from, particular groups.

Even augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), innovations being taken up by businesses to help employees visualise scenarios and solutions, comes with problems that relate closely to issues around fairness. People with physical disabilities may struggle to access AR and VR: the technology can require physical strength, fine motor movements and other characteristics that differently abled people may struggle with. Those working to develop AR/VR tech are only now beginning to take these considerations into account when refining their products.

Those trends that look set to become integral to the workplace are, for the most part, widely considered to be positive. Unequal pay between genders is archaic and has no basis in rational thinking; turning someone away because they are from a minority community is not only cruel, but a waste of potentially good talent; needlessly keeping the office air conditioning on overnight will have ramifications down the line.

That said, some trends – technological ones in particular – need more careful consideration paid to them. They hold the potential to do much good, but only if we remain aware of the dangers that lurk within.





# Enabling an effortless employee experience

*Martin Cross, CTO at Connect, argues that effective hybrid working requires a reassessment of the employee experience*

As we return to offices, it's readily assumed that the tools we've become so familiar with over recent months will now support a "hybrid" working model – with some colleagues at home and some in the office.

In reality, however, rather than blending easily, office culture and home working culture may well clash. And because so many solutions and networks are fundamentally designed for office working, technology may be part of the problem.

## The hybrid meeting

To explain why, let's start in the meeting room. Four of you are around the table. Now you need to link your remote colleagues in.

Switch on the spiderphone (remember them?) and one colleague is waiting to be admitted. Another's having tech problems.

It's disjointed and awkward, and you've not even started.

With the meeting underway, those in the room are exchanging views naturally, picking up cues from body language. By contrast, those at home are struggling to get a word in – and when they do, voices keep breaking up.

*"An effortless employee experience will consistently save time for the business. And in a world where your people can choose to work literally anywhere, taking away some basic frustrations could even help with retention and attracting new talent"*

At this point, the colleague with tech problems finally joins...

## Hybrid isn't just about location

Over the coming months, scenarios like this will be replayed across the country – unless we adapt our technology.

Businesses have a lot of what they need already. Tools such as Teams, WebEx and Slack have been designed, or rapidly enhanced over recent months, to enable collaborative, multi-location working.

Now, they have to be brought into the office environment.

Take meeting rooms. For ease, they need to be equipped with display screens, full audio and video capability and – crucially – a way of allowing people to use the same tools they rely on at home when they're in the office.

But it's not just meetings that we need to consider. Think too about ongoing collaboration between teams in different locations. Instant messaging tools are crucial here: the smarter workspaces – again, the likes of Teams and Slack – make it easy to store conversations. Essentially, we're looking for an environment where everyone has access to the same tools wherever they are working.

## Enabling an effortless employee experience

In the world of the contact centre, organisations have invested extensively in an "effortless" customer experience, to increase customer loyalty.

But reducing customer effort also



provides efficiency gains for the organisation, removing bottlenecks and duplication. Why not apply the same logic internally?

An effortless employee experience will consistently save time for the business. And in a world where your people can choose to work literally anywhere, taking away some basic frustrations could even help with retention and attracting new talent.

## Rethinking the network for hybrid working

Of course, the most common frustration is a slow connection. While sometimes that's a user problem, there remains a fundamental issue on the business side.

Pre-pandemic, networks were built on the assumption that most staff would be office-based and only a small proportion working remotely. That led to a centralised model, with capacity and network intelligence focused on the office or data centre, which remote workers accessed via a virtual private network (VPN).

When hundreds of people are remote that model no longer makes sense. The capacity is in the wrong place.

Instead, to deliver an effortless and

consistent experience to all employees, organisations need to look at a distributed model, where the power is at the network edge, closer to users. That reduces the risks of sluggish video performance – benefiting not only remote workers, but also those in the office.

Crucially for businesses, distributed models put security controls at the edge too. By recognising a user's identity, device and location, the network determines what services and applications the user can access. Instead of needing to connect to different tools in different ways, there's a simple, consistent user experience.

And the business still retains control.

Moving to a distributed network model is arguably the biggest change in corporate networking in a generation. But if hybrid working is the future – which most analysis supports – then a distributed model not only provides an effortless employee experience, but also gives organisations the agility, security and scalability needed.

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Martin Cross

# All hands on the digital deck!

*Zita Goldman looks at how a common platform could help unite efforts to address the digital skills shortage gap*

At the beginning of June this year TechUK, the leading trade body representing hundreds of domestic and multinational tech groups, published its Fast Forward for Digital Jobs report, calling for a major overhaul of the UK's adult education system. The report was created in collaboration between UK national businesses and the world's biggest tech companies, including FDM, UKFast, Google, Microsoft, Amazon Web Services, BT, Salesforce and Cisco.

The last of the report's seven recommendations highlights the urgent need for the development of an online "Digital Skills Toolkit 2.0". The role of the new iteration of the original platform, launched by the Department for Education, would be to make "digital opportunities and pathways more transparent and accessible to more people" by providing an interface for those who are ready to enter the digital workforce, the courses available to them and the vacant positions they qualify them for.

Considering the estimate that three million new jobs requiring digital skills will be created in the UK by 2025, achieving scale in supplying digital talent is a pressing requirement for the country to remain competitive. Joining forces doesn't seem to go against the grain of the players in the space as they are already closely inter-linked through various training projects. Jacqueline de Rojas, TechUK's president, is also the co-chair of the Institute of Coding (IoC), a consortium of industry, educators and outreach providers led by the University of Bath and funded by the National Skills Fund – which had already enrolled 675,000 learners on consortium



partners' courses. The COO of the FDM group, a member of the TechUK taskforce, is also on IoC's advisory board, while Google, another member, launched its Google Career Certificate in the UK in May 2021, offering 9,500 Google Career Certificate scholarships.

The government is playing a major role in many of these partnerships not only as funder but also as an orchestrator of redressing the disconnect between rising unemployment on the one hand and the digital skills shortage on the other. By navigating people without jobs to, for example, Google's digital scholarships and then to job vacancies, the initiative considerably increases the employability of these jobseekers. The government is also attempting to incentivise large companies and SMEs to spend more on digital training and upskilling via tax credits or making digital skills training eligible for support under its earlier Lifetime Skills Guarantee Policy – another central recommendation of the Fast Forward for Digital Jobs report.

In addition to providing a marketplace for jobseekers, educators and employers, a concerted

## Knowledge transfer takes time and trust

### Capturing and codifying employee's implicit knowledge

– the kind of intuition, judgement or insight gained through experience that makes an expert – has long been a holy grail of employers. With UK employees staying at a single job for an average of only five years, companies are pressed for time to transfer an employee's implicit knowledge into a long-term company asset.

### When an employee moves on

after, say, a year, a business will not only have wasted the cost of their recruitment but also pay an opportunity cost for not retaining them for longer. While explicit knowledge is accessible without interaction with its holder, implicit knowledge is hard to express let alone communicate or formulate. In a conducive office environment, its transfer

happens spontaneously during watercooler moments, social interaction or mentoring – scenarios that in remote work and digital onboarding come at a premium.

### Naturally, the digital tools that helped businesses

during the pandemic can also capture communications where tacit knowledge is shared among colleagues. Such exchanges, thanks to AI, can then be tagged and stored on corporate knowledge platforms, as well as retrieved long after their holder left. Expert colleagues can be incentivised to share their insights in how-to videos and best practice white papers. But in an environment dominated by freelance work and high staff turnover, will they trust their employer with the knowledge unique to them?

effort to set up a unified platform could also create the kind of network effect necessary to convince both smaller players in the space, such as UK education pioneer Code

Nation with about 2,500 alumni, and giants such as LinkedIn, which is offering 9,000 courses for 17 million subscribers to come on board.



# Making sure your changes are for the better

*Generating great ideas in business shouldn't necessarily mean disruption and upheaval, writes Jeremy Swinfen Green. Taking your time to do things more organically often means better results*

Innovation is, for some at least, a troubling concept. It signifies “blue sky” thinking – impractical ideas that sound wonderful in theory but will never come to fruition. However, when managed well, innovation is at the heart of any organisation’s success, allowing it to respond to ever-changing circumstances.

Innovation isn’t only the creation of new products and services. It’s also about creating new ways of doing things. And it’s not always about radical change either. Some of the most powerful innovation is iterative, evolutionary change. Innovation that generates



new products, perhaps with the potential to disrupt markets, is exciting. But it comes with substantial risks of failure. Improving existing products piece by piece is far less risky and over time can deliver just as much value.

Most importantly, innovation isn’t simply having

lots of new ideas. While generating ideas (“idea-tion”) is an essential part of innovation, it is only one part. Ideas need to be filtered, with those that might solve a business need selected for further development. Ideas that have no use in the real world are just dreams.

Organisations that are truly innovative will always be open to new ideas, no matter where they come from. Finding new ideas takes effort. Creating innovation partnerships, perhaps with academic organisations or smaller companies, can be fruitful if all partners are incentivised to contribute.

Some organisations use venture capital as a tool for innovation, supporting start-ups in areas of interest and observing their thinking. Others run innovation competitions where individuals are invited to propose solutions to a business problem. Keeping an eye on how technology

is developing (“horizon scanning”) is another popular technique.

But the best innovation comes from within. A culture that welcomes new ideas from all levels across an organisation will benefit from the skills and experience of the whole workforce. Without a proactive approach to innovation, important ideas will remain unexpressed.

Innovation on its own will never be sufficient. To be successful, it needs a flow of new ideas, a willingness to invest in the best ones, and a belief that, without change, any organisation is ultimately doomed to irrelevance.

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# The new uncertainty principle

*The disruption of Covid was a major acid test of businesses' adaptability and resilience – and the organisations that made it to the other side have some interesting things in common*

Even before Covid-19 struck, we had been living in an age of precarity. The financial crisis of 2008 ended a lengthy period of steady growth – decades when technological innovation was giving birth not only to new jobs, but new industries and new ways of doing business. Once the run on banks began 13 years ago, it became clear that those days were no more.

Since then, the working landscape in the UK – like much of the rest of the developed world – has been characterised not by stability but by volatility. Businesspeak has a term for this: VUCA, or volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. It's a situation of constant flux. Nothing is certain, and crises must forever be prepared for. The effect is an erosion of confidence that things will be okay.

The pandemic took this to a new level. As the virus spread across the world in March 2020, stock markets recorded their sharpest drop in nearly a century. The ramifications of this were seen with greatest clarity in the workplace. By late June, 11.6 million employees had been furloughed. Offices were emptying, people were working from home, and there was little sense of when things would return to normal.

This presented a range of pressing challenges to senior management: how could they keep their business above water when



the ability of employees to do their work had been heavily impacted? How could they ensure the well-being of staff, many of whom were now confined to their homes? How could they manage uncertainty – not only economic, but personal, and not only theirs, but the people they were tasked with looking out for.

## **In short, how could they still do the job of management?**

The businesses that made it out of lockdown intact tended to have a range of attributes, especially at management level, that those that struggled were lacking. First was an agile mindset, one that enabled them to respond to crises nimbly and adapt as quickly as the situation was evolving. It was important that traditional modes of working could change without causing major disruption to the business.

Second was skill with technology, such that the sudden transition to remote working and all that came with it – remote project management, virtual communication – wasn't such a shock to the

system. Technology was prince before the pandemic; now it is king. It is now a necessity.

Finally, the ability to maintain a clear sense of how employees were faring from afar became important not just in a business sense, but in a cultural sense too. Having the capacity to respond in compassionate ways to their mental health or other concerns, and ensuring they felt they were still contributing to the business, mattered hugely even once the initial shock of the pandemic passed and people started returning to the office. After all, management needed to know that their staff would continue to work with them; failure to understand the anxieties they were experiencing could become a deterrent to going back to the office.

Yet this fear of employees not returning took on a more acute form as the pandemic combined with Brexit to prompt a mass exodus of EU workers to their countries of origin. Official figures recorded some one million people as having left the UK in the space of a year, with the hospitality,

retail, construction and food and beverages industries hit especially hard.

In short, businesses have undergone a degree of upheaval unlike anything seen in decades – loss of employees, reduced margins, a complete transformation in the way work is done. HR departments have had to grapple with the fact that the vital work of guiding employees through volatility would take on extra significance, given that the future of the companies on which they depend was uncertain.

It brought the importance a business places on culture and wellbeing to the fore, and underscored the fact that a business's culture is the glue that holds it together. When the UK workforce atomised last year and employees became isolated inside their homes, it was those companies that continued to communicate with staff about their wellbeing, and that made efforts to go that extra mile to make the most of a dire situation, that tended to remain intact, and whose workers came back once the worst was over.

# Building your employee brand

**W**hat's your Uber rating? If it's anything less than 4.5 you may find it's hard to get a job.

Increasingly, organisations examine the footprint we leave behind when we go online. A good Uber score, the argument goes, shows that you are a caring person. If you are kind to taxi drivers, you will probably be kind to your colleagues. And someone with a high number of Twitter followers is obviously a good communicator who interests other people. Meanwhile, someone who writes reviews on TripAdvisor must be someone who happily shares their wisdom – just the sort of person you want on your team.



Is it all nonsense? Quite possibly. But, for now at least, it matters. Employers take account of what people say online when selecting who to hire. That's why you need to burnish your online credentials. So what should you do to increase your chances of being hired?

The place to start for many people is LinkedIn. It's a great place to list your experience. But make sure that the information on your LinkedIn profile matches any CV you use: discrepancies will be embarrassing. Recommend your colleagues: it makes you look like a good team

player. Don't be shy about asking for recommendations too, and suggest what people might write to make it easier for them. Get actively involved with a couple of relevant interest groups: even if you don't post articles you should comment on posts to show that you have an opinion.

Avoid controversial areas (such as politics and religion): you might have a righteous fury about something, but the HR executive in that company you really want to join may hold the opposite view. Don't make comments that others may find offensive (using Twitter in the pub is always a bad idea). When you post content, pay attention to clarity, grammar and spelling: you want to look professional at all times. And do get rid of those office party photos.

Curating your online reputation is a serious business. There is no need to come across as a robot. But you don't want to give people the excuse not to hire you. So next time you rent an Uber, be kind!

## Do HR professionals need to become more marketing-savvy?

**A**ccording to a CIM (Chartered Institute of Marketing) survey, 86 per cent of HR professionals believe that social media marketing is going to be one of the core skills in their trade. But how does this trend affect the credibility of employer reviews and employee advocacy on social media?

Information extracted from social media has always been gold dust in the early stages of adoption. In the early days, motor insurers could refuse to pay false claims using a claimant's social media post as evidence that they weren't at the scene of the accident. The product recommendations from people with a wide social network were easier to take at face value

– before they became influencers often paid by brands. Also, job candidates' social media accounts were much larger treasure troves prior to job seekers being trained to seal off their frailties from the prying eyes of future employers.

With about two-thirds of job applicants relying on social media in their job search, employers can't be blamed for seeing it as a strategic brand-building tool. Nothing is more powerful than an engaged employee posting cheerful office pictures suggestive of inclusion and belonging on its private social media account. While employers' desire to curate some of the user-generated content (UGC) from their workers that may reveal critical information about their



operation or unwittingly damage their reputation is fully understandable, it's also key that they observe some red lines in order not to undermine the genuineness of these posts.

Employer review sites are great places for getting a more nuanced picture about a workplace. Although Glassdoor has the strongest presence, there are many more offering granular information about corporate culture and employment policies including work-life balance, technology used, competitor

comparisons or demographics. There are also platforms offering employee engagement survey and certification services alongside with a best-workplaces ranking if the company scores above the threshold set for its size category.

Opportunities for job seekers to take a peek behind corporate scenes abound, and they will gravitate to businesses with a consistently appealing brand image. To pull that off, HR professionals will surely need to develop some flair for marketing.



# Effective selling starts with the buyer.

When it comes to successful selling, everything should be about the buyer. LinkedIn Sales Navigator empowers sales professionals everywhere to find the buyers they're looking for, learn more about their needs, and engage with them. Today when 92% of UK buyers are more likely to consider a brand's products or services if a sales professional has a clear understanding of their business needs, there's never been a better time to invest in sales technology that puts your buyers first.

*Source: LinkedIn, State of Sales Report 2021, UK Edition*

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