

HR and coronavirus survey: Two steps forward, one step back

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As the Government's coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions tighten once again, we asked HR practitioners how their businesses are planning for the ongoing reality of coping with the pandemic.

Just as many businesses were beginning to re-open workplaces and see some pick-up in trade, further restrictions put in place by the Government have stopped them in their tracks.

We have followed the response of HR to the workplace challenges of coping with the pandemic in a [series of coronavirus surveys](#) since the start of April. Our previous survey, run at the end of June, now feels like it was set against a quite different background. Then, social distancing rules were being relaxed and commercial activities were set to recommence.

Up until the last week of September, businesses were also planning for the end of any government assistance with the wages of employees who were furloughed. Chancellor Rishi Sunak's announcement on 23 September that the new [Job Support Scheme](#) will start on 1 November 2020 means that there is ongoing support for employers and assistance with the payment of wages. His comments, and those of the Prime Minister the day before reversing the message of returning to the workplace to work from home where possible, came just as we were fielding the [sixth in our series of surveys](#), which looks at the redundancy risk that still prevails for many, and at how organisations' plans for the return to workplaces.

About this survey report

This summary report covers key findings from XpertHR's sixth pulse 2020 survey on the workplace impact of coronavirus (COVID-19).

XpertHR's [benchmarking service](#) has the [full data](#) on the questions from this survey.

Initial HR work overload reduced

The first few months of lockdown resulted in an unprecedented volume of work for HR - back in early April, more than two-fifths of our survey respondents were spending almost all of their time on coronavirus-related work (see Table 1). Today, that is down to less than one tenth of our respondents. Instead, HR professionals are now more likely to be spending less than 40% of their time working on their organisation's response to the pandemic.

Table 1: Volume of work driven by pandemic response

Volume of work	% of orgs at 25 September	% of orgs at 29 June	% of orgs at 20 May	% of orgs at 30 April	% of orgs at 16 April	% of orgs at 2 April
80-100%	7.4	14.1	18.9	20.8	32.2	42.8
60-79%	14.2	24.1	28.7	26.1	23.7	24.8
40-59%	20.9	27.7	24.4	25.0	18.6	16.5
20-39%	27.7	24.1	20.7	14.8	17.0	11.0
0-19%	29.7	9.9	7.3	13.3	8.5	5.0

n = 148 organisations at 25 September; 191 organisations at 29 June; 275 at 20 May; 264 at 30 April; 388 at 16 April; 400 at 2 April.
Source: XpertHR.

Using the furlough scheme to the end

Government support through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, via its contributions towards furloughed employees' salaries, finishes at the end of October 2020. While many businesses were initially optimistic that they would not need support for this length of time, 61.5% of our respondent organisations were still using the scheme towards the end of September.

However, more than half now say that only up to 10% of their workforce remain on furlough, and around eight in 10 have less than 40% on furlough. Although very few businesses have had the majority of staff on furlough, the current findings (see Table 2) do suggest that employers are winding down their use of the scheme as it nears an end.

Table 2: Percentage of workforce furloughed

Furloughed employees	% of organisations at 25 September	% of organisations at 29 June	% of organisations at 20 May	% of organisations at 30 April	% of organisations at 16 April
91-100%	4.4	2.9	7.1	8.7	7.9
81-90%	3.3	7.4	6.6	5.5	4.7
71-80%	1.1	3.7	3.8	5.5	4.7
61-70%	2.2	0.7	5.5	6.6	4.0
51-60%	2.2	2.9	2.2	5.5	8.3
41-50%	5.5	6.6	13.2	7.1	7.2
31-40%	6.6	8.8	8.8	9.3	10.8
21-30%	3.3	17.6	13.2	10.9	10.4
11-20%	16.5	11.8	14.3	14.2	13.3

n = 91 organisations at 25 September; 136 organisations at 29 June; 182 at 20 May; 183 at 30 April; 278 at 16 April.
Source: XpertHR.

Furloughed employees	% of organisations at 25 September	% of organisations at 29 June	% of organisations at 20 May	% of organisations at 30 April	% of organisations at 16 April
0-10%	54.9	37.5	25.3	26.8	28.8
n = 91 organisations at 25 September; 136 organisations at 29 June; 182 at 20 May; 183 at 30 April; 278 at 16 April. Source: XperthR.					

What follows furlough?

Now that the end of the scheme is in sight, employers have been making plans for where workers will be, come the end of October. For the most part, employees are expected to be returning to work on their full contractual hours - respondents estimated that an average 63.3% of furloughed workers will be in this position when the scheme ends.

Table 3: Likely prospects for workers currently on furlough by 31 October

Outcome	% of furloughed workers
Working full contractual hours	63.3
Working fewer than contractual hours	15.3
Made redundant/contract terminated	9.0
In redundancy consultation	6.2
Working in different roles within the business	3.2
Other	3.1
n = 91 organisations. Source: XperthR.	

Whether affecting furloughed workers, or others still working, redundancies due to the current situation seem unavoidable - 38.5% of survey respondents are actively considering them for at least some employees. For the most part, this is expected to affect up to 10% of the workforce (cited by 34 of the 57 organisations expecting to make redundancies). A further 11 employers expect to lose between 11% and 20% of their workforce, and six foresee between 21% and 30% being made redundant. A couple of respondent organisations unfortunately expect to lose almost all their staff.

However, all but a handful of organisations are taking steps to avoid or minimise the number of compulsory terminations (see Table 4). This is most likely to be achieved by not replacing leavers (cited by 61.4% of respondents), freezing all other recruitment (54.4%) or seeking volunteers for redundancy (42.1%).

Table 4: Alternatives to compulsory redundancies

Measures under consideration	% of organisations
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Measures under consideration	% of organisations
Natural wastage	61.4
Freezing recruitment	54.4
Voluntary redundancies	42.1
Stopping/reducing use of temporary workers	35.1
Freezing/reducing pay	35.1
Retraining/redeploying employees	35.1
Short-time working	31.6
Offering career breaks/unpaid leave	15.8
Stopping/reducing overtime	14.0
Inviting early retirements	7.0
Lay-offs	7.0
Other	7.0
None	7.0
n = 57 organisations. Source: XperthR.	

Current workplace situation

With effect from 22 September, government guidance has reverted to a recommendation that employees should work from home if they can. A quarter of our respondents' workplaces were already open to all employees, with many others open for some, although with limited plans to move everyone back to their premises. Asked how they would describe the current situation at their organisation's premises, it is clear that the majority of businesses had at least some employees attending in person (see Table 5).

Table 5: Current workplace arrangements

Arrangement	% of organisations
Open for some employees - no immediate plans to bring others back	28.4
Open for all employees	24.3
Open for some employees - workers beginning to return	18.9
Closed but reopening for some employees only	10.1
n = 148 organisations. Source: XperthR.	

Arrangement	% of organisations
Closed - no plans to reopen	5.4
Other	12.8
n = 148 organisations. Source: XperthR.	

The future workplace

Returning to the workplace in stages, and giving employees a choice in this, are the key approaches being taken by employers with business premises that are not yet fully open (see Table 6).

Table 6: Approach to returning to the workplace

Arrangement	% of organisations
Return to workplace remains employee choice	24.1
Plan to encourage employees back to the workplace in stages	23.2
All employees now being encouraged to return to the workplace under COVID-19 Secure arrangements	12.5
Return to workplace to remain employee choice until daily testing/vaccine in place	9.8
Other	30.4
n = 112 organisations. Source: XperthR.	

As the announcement was made for employees to return to working from home if possible, several respondents had to re-think their plans. A charity has just done a U-turn on its plans to reopen, while a training provider is now having to decide whether to close the offices they had only recently re-opened. A logistics company had been in the midst of making "plans to encourage employees back to work in stages", which are now on hold.

Among those organisations going into more detail, one noted that its premises remained closed and that they were considering when to reopen, with the current conclusion that this would "most likely [be] next March". Other comments around timing indicate that no whole-scale return to workplaces is likely this year:

- "Closed until social distancing is not required, then we will have a phased return. Expecting this to be next year."
- "Open to all but not compulsory until January and none [have] chosen to come in so far."
- "We will not look to return staff to the office until at the earliest January 2021."
- "Majority of our workforce are unable to work from home but all those that can are being asked to work from home with a review taking place at end of the year."

- "No formal return until June 2021 but some may wish to return if they have job/mental health needs."
- "We have advised staff that we will not be looking at staff returning to the office until February 2021."

Giving employees a choice about whether they want to return to the workplace in the current environment is a practice employed by many. For example, one organisation who said that while it is "encouraging sensible small meetings for collaboration and mental wellbeing", its "standard culture is for people to never be pushed to do something they feel is unsafe or [are] not wholly comfortable with".

The workplace that employees do return to may not look and feel the same as the one they left at the end of March this year. The flexibility around working hours and location that became a necessity overnight is not going to disappear with the same speed at which it arrived. Many employers are now looking to retain some semblance of these arrangements on a more permanent basis. Asked about the options being considered, homeworking clearly stands out as a practice to stay, notably also among those organisations that had never offered it in the past (see Table 7).

Table 7. Options for workplaces

Arrangement	% of organisations
Increasing the proportion of time/number of employees working from home on a permanent basis (some homeworking prior to COVID)	54.7
Introducing homeworking arrangements for some or all staff on a permanent basis (no homeworking prior to COVID)	35.1
Move towards other flexible working patterns, eg annualised hours, compressed hours	26.4
Strongly encouraging employees to return to COVID-secure workplace	25.7
Workplace relocation	10.8
Outsourcing work to another country	1.4
Outsourcing work to elsewhere in the UK	0.7
Other	9.5
n = 148 organisations. Source: XpertHR.	

Among those organisations with no homeworking prior to the outbreak but now considering these arrangements on a permanent basis, many are looking to have a mix of homeworking and attendance at the workplace. As one respondent told us: "We are an online business. Eventually we would like all employees to return to work but with added flexibility to work from home." Another is re-thinking the use of their office space: "Debate moving towards using office space as a collaboration hub with much more flexibility on home working." However, one business where "79% of roles have been assessed for suitability for remote working" now has "plans to close/downsize premises".

Where employers are introducing more flexibility on work location, the following practices mentioned offer useful guidance to others:

- "carrying out a risk assessment on staff working from home";
- "seeking feedback from all staff via a survey on how much time they wish to home-work in future";
- "plans communicated to staff following engagement activities to assess wider workforce opinions";
- "the future mix of office/home working will be trialled";
- "we have an internal project group focused on future ways of working to review what will work for all employees";
- "we have engaged an external consultant to support us on the implications of implementation of agile working"; and
- "working through the policies and changes needed to allow more flexibility and working from home".

HR challenges remain

Ever-changing official guidance has been a feature of the response to the pandemic from the very beginning, and the latest developments are no exception. Plans that had been made based on a gradual return to normality are now having to be reconsidered, leaving HR professionals with yet more challenges to overcome. We look at [how HR professionals are rising to this challenge](#) in a separate article drawing on responses to this survey.

Our research

This report is based on original research carried out during the period 21 to 25 September 2020. Responses were received from 148 organisations.

The breakdown of respondents by economic sector is as follows:

- 77 (52%) are in private-sector services;
- 32 (21.6%) are in manufacturing and production;
- 26 (17.6%) are not-for profit; and
- 13 (8.8%) are in the public sector.

Broken down by workforce size, the respondent organisations comprise:

- 100 (67.6%) employing between one and 249 employees;
- 29 (19.6%) employing between 250 and 999 employees; and
- 19 (12.8%) employing 1,000 or more.

What should I do now?

- Access and drill down into the [full data from this survey](#) to benchmark your organisation's response to the coronavirus pandemic.
- Visit our [coronavirus resource round-up](#) for guidance, model documents and other helpful information for HR practitioners.
- Find out how [HR practitioners are rising to the latest challenges](#) from new local and national restrictions and lockdowns.