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Workplace mental health and Covid-19: experiences of firms in the Midlands

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Workplace mental health and Covid-19: experiences of firms in the Midlands

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Enterprise Research Centre



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We used depth interviews with business managers from the Midlands Engine area of England to explore the ways in which they and their organisations experienced mental health issues during the Covid-19 lockdown period. We spoke with our participants before and after lockdown. Four key themes emerged from the managers' narratives. Firstly, the crisis has meant significant changes to the ways that many people experience the workplace and this has led to a number of new triggers for mental health issues. Secondly, mental health issues during and post-lockdown affected some groups of employees more, or in different ways, than others. Often, those affected were different from those who had experienced mental health issues pre-Covid. Thirdly, while stigma is known to discourage people from disclosing mental health issues, employees may be even less likely to admit to mental health issues during and following the crisis and lockdown than before. Fourthly, with increased remote working, it may be more difficult to identify the changes in behaviour that can signal that someone is struggling with mental health issues. Taking account of these insights is important to allow employers, policymakers and mental health practitioners to be aware of potential issues, and to design appropriate interventions. Our findings also have implications for the future research agenda.

1. INTRODUCTION

Multiple sources indicate that a legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting lockdown will be a mental health crisis in the UK. Depression, for example, has doubled during the pandemic (ONS, 2020) and the NHS has experienced ‘significant additional new demand for mental health services from those affected by the economic, social and loss of life factors associated with COVID-19’ (NHS, 2020). A recent forecast predicts that the economic fallout of the Covid-19 crisis could provoke mental health problems in an additional 500,000 people in the UK (Centre for Mental Health, 2020). Prior research has demonstrated the significant impact of mental health issues, whether due to work or to external factors, in the workplace (ERC, 2020). Clearly, increased prevalence of mental health issues will be felt by employers across the country.

In this short paper we record firms’ experiences of mental health issues during the lockdown, based on interviews with managers from firms in the Midlands immediately before and after the lockdown. Interviews before the lockdown were undertaken in February and early-March as part of a wider project on the impact of mental health issues on Midlands businesses. Interviews after the lockdown with the same employers were undertaken in July and August 2020. Giving voice to business leaders in this way offers a complementary approach to understanding mental health issues in the workplace, and permits a more in-depth and nuanced exploration of the impacts of the crisis than statistical analysis alone. Several themes emerge from the interviews, which may have relevance for the development of policies and interventions at firm-level, and which may also provide the foundation for a future research agenda.

This paper proceeds with an overview of our research approach, followed by a summary of the themes emerging from the data, and conclusions. A series of seven vignettes in which we use managers’ words to narrate their experiences of mental health issues during the lockdown is presented in Annexe A.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

During the first three months of 2020, the Enterprise Research Centre carried out a baseline study (ERC, 2020) for the Midlands Engine's Mental Health and Productivity Pilot project (see: <https://mhpp.me/>). This involved a survey of around 1900 firms in the Midlands to investigate their experiences of dealing with mental health issues, and the impacts on business performance and productivity. As part of the study, twenty in-depth interviews were carried out with managers from participating private and voluntary sector firms, to explore these issues in more depth. The fieldwork concluded just before lockdown began on 23rd March 2020. As lockdown restrictions were eased during July 2020, we re-contacted some of the original interview participants, and were able to re-interview a number of them to explore their experiences of mental health issues during the crisis. All interviews were carried out by one of the original researchers, by telephone. They typically lasted around thirty minutes, and were recorded and fully transcribed. In the summary of emergent themes below, and in the vignettes based on individual interviewees, participants and their firms have been anonymised.

3. KEY THEMES

Four themes related to mental health issues during the crisis emerge from the accounts of our participants.

1. **Diverse factors can trigger mental health issues:** The crisis has meant significant changes to the ways that many people experience the workplace. Our participants identified several factors linked to lockdown which they felt had provoked anxiety and stress in employees.

Furlough was a significant challenge for many. Participants talked about furloughed employees feeling singled out and estranged from others, particularly when regular contact with the workplace was not maintained. This was sometimes exacerbated by the absence of a transparent process to identify who would and who would not be furloughed. Perhaps inevitably, many of those furloughed felt stressed about potentially losing their jobs.

'I didn't want to be furloughed at all, and I felt like ... I wasn't valued and I was extremely upset and felt very vulnerable [...] [furlough] is a bit of an issue because,

if you're selected for redundancy, [...] you've got to justify your decision, for furlough you didn't really, you could just pick and choose whoever you wanted. So, it takes the objectivity out of the situation' (Sandra)

'the company was so busy running its business that it didn't really contact these people ... we, kind of, left people to their own devices, you know' (Peter)

'Various people that were on furlough felt left out, just like, [...] you know, "You on the inside must know more than, than you're telling us," ...there wasn't a lot happening...but they felt, obviously, they were missing out on stuff' (Emma)

'people ... who are furloughed from work have, have a worry about whether their job will actually exist' (Alison)

Conversely, not being furloughed provoked challenges, and so-called furlough envy was noted by several participants.

'there were two or three people who we didn't furlough [...] and they were really, really narked about it. They were really unhappy that they didn't get the break off that everybody else got' (Sandra)

Remote working, and being physically distanced from colleagues, were mentioned in our research carried out prior to lockdown (ERC, 2020) as potential sources of stress and mental health triggers. During lockdown, around fifty percent of the UK workforce was working mainly at home, compared to only five percent during 2019 (ONS, 2020). So, it is perhaps not surprising that feelings of isolation and estrangement were cited by participants as sources of anxiety and stress in employees working at home during lockdown. Often, additional factors (e.g. family circumstances) exacerbated otherwise minor issues.

'some of them struggled definitely ... with the isolation of working from home' (Cathy)

'... it was quite difficult at first because of all working remotely, and not overhearing each other's conversations, and trying to get everybody to still feel they were part of a team, and working as a team' (Jane)

'It's not just people working from home, it's people working from home with all these additional factors in play as well, like family being at home, kids not being at school, the anxiety of the virus' (Cathy)

At the time of the research, during July and August 2020, firms were starting to consider the return to the workplace, and some participants noted that this was already provoking anxiety and stress in employees.

'the feedback we've had from staff over the past few weeks, couple of months, is they're ... very anxious about coming back into the office' (Cathy)

'the people who have stayed off, they seem to be a lot more scared about coming back in' (Sandra)

'... a lady who is very, very introverted and she said, for her, coming out of lockdown was her nightmare because, actually, she feels safe in lockdown' (Emma)

Sources of workplace stress have been found to change with prevailing economic conditions (Williams, 2003), so it is not surprising that the Covid-19 crisis may surface different triggers for mental health issues in employees. Acknowledging that these triggers may have mental health implications, giving staff the opportunity to express concerns or worries, and ensuring that staff and team communications take account of the changed circumstances will be vital to allow these issues to be addressed.

2. **Mental health issues varied between groups of employees:** Mental health issues during and post-lockdown affected some groups of employees more, or in different ways, than others. Participants indicated that those affected were often different from those who had experienced mental health issues pre-Covid. During lockdown, participants noted an age difference in response, with younger staff likely to struggle more with the isolation of remote working.

'the youngest person on my team is 23... and he has been the one who has suffered the most...more so than the older ones, there's been a very, very definite distinction between the older ones and the younger ones' (Jane)

'... graduates [...] felt that they were missing that social hub of being at work and being with people [whereas] the older ones ... were all loving the fact that they weren't going into [the city] every day, they hadn't got that commute' (Jane)

Staff members who particularly enjoyed social interaction at work, and those who were reliant on the routine of work were also identified as groups who may not have been seen as at risk for mental health issues prior to lockdown, but who seemed to struggle more during the crisis.

'There were some members of staff who struggled ... with working from home, particularly the people who were more outgoing' (Cathy)

'... people who live on their own, ... people who haven't necessarily got ... family, haven't got friends outside of [work] so, for a lot of those people their social life as well as their ... work has gone' (Alison)

'[an older colleague] went into meltdown, [although] he's the sort of character that works very much in isolation, on his own [...] he felt really uncomfortable and challenged, the fact that his routine had gone' (Jane)

'those that are ... who absolutely love being with people are struggling, you can see that they are. You know, they... thrive off being with people, that really, really knocked them' (Emma)

People with additional responsibilities, such as having school-age children at home, often struggled more than colleagues who did not.

'... those people who are working and then also doing home-schooling... ...also had a big challenge as well... ...trying to balance all that off' (Emma)

'it has been really difficult and challenging, and people have got lots going on. So, we've got working parents who are dealing with, like, young children and trying to split hours to fit around that' (Cathy)

One potential outcome of the Covid-19 crisis is that people who have not experienced mental health issues in the past may be vulnerable to them (The Health Foundation, 2020). In our interviews, for example, parents who were home-schooling their children while trying to work at home emerged as a group that experienced particular challenges. According to a study undertaken during the lockdown, parents like these often reported physical exhaustion, accompanied by feelings of guilt and anger that they were unable to devote as much time to their children as they felt they should (Walsh et al, 2020). Another study points to the fact that that existing disparities in childcare contributions of mothers and fathers will have been exacerbated during this crisis (Hupkau and Petrongolo, 2020), meaning that women may be particularly vulnerable to overload and exhaustion, leading to mental health issues. A report from the Institute of Leadership and Management (2020) points to men living alone and young people aged between 18 and 30 as most likely to report feelings of isolation during while working remotely.

We also found that, for some people, working remotely was a good experience which impacted positively on their mental health. Jane, for example, said she loved *'...the fact I haven't got the commute, my quality of life's better, I'm able to go out for walks at lunchtime, and cycling in the morning'*. While acknowledging that some people may have embraced and enjoyed the new ways of working, it seems clear that being open and alert to the possibility of mental health issues in people who may have no prior history of them will be essential in helping organisations to provide the right support at the right time for their employees.

- 3. People have become increasingly reluctant to admit mental health issues:** Participants felt that employees may be less likely to admit to mental health issues during and following the crisis and lockdown.

'I haven't seen any increase in mental health problems during this time. Nobody's come to me and said, "I've got ... problems, I need your advice on this." So, I'm not saying it wasn't there, but it wasn't raised... I'm sure there was an impact, I didn't see that impact though [...] I noticed that, people are tense about their jobs, they're doing a lot more job protecting' (Peter)

'... so I, I find it really, really sad that people don't feel that they can be open enough to access the support that's available ... out of everybody that we've brought back,

so we're talking best part of 150 people, we've only had one person who's admitted to being frightened' (Alison)

*'...not wanting to appear needy, potentially... people don't want to look like they're the awkward ones or the pushy ones or the people that are creating an issue [...]
So, therefore, they're keeping their heads down' (Rachel)*

Individuals may be reluctant to admit that they are struggling with their mental health for a variety of reasons, including the stigma associated with mental health conditions in the workplace (Elraz, 2017) and the fear of repercussions (Dewa, 2014). This is not a new phenomenon, but the combination of crisis and economic downturn provide the circumstances in which it may increase, and our evidence points to more job protecting behaviours in some individuals who may worry that disclosing a mental health problem will make them vulnerable to job loss if redundancies occur. They may also feel that their mental health issues are simply not as important as broader issues facing the organisation. Our earlier study indicates low employer engagement with existing mental health initiatives, and that very few establishments have a dedicated budget for mental health and well-being activities (ERC, 2020). Encouraging employees to disclose any mental health issues will require firms to embrace and communicate clearly a supportive stance on mental health and to prioritise engagement with, and signposting to, resources which may help (Reavley et al, 2018).

4. **Lockdown and working from home may disguise mental health issues:** In the absence of regular face-to-face interaction, some participants said that it was more difficult to identify the changes in behaviour that can signal that someone is struggling.

'When I'm with people, I'm very observant of people's emotions, and I get to know their personality so I know if there's a problem. [But during lockdown] I couldn't see visually that [a colleague] wasn't quite himself' (Jane)

'... usually in the office, it's all open plan, and some people, you can just look at and you know they're having a bad day. You don't even need to speak to them to know. [Now] I have to be much more proactive and planned in my approach of supporting people, whereas before things would just happen and you knew that, "Oh, well, they need to talk," (Cathy)

'[a colleague] has been struggling. But [his boss] is totally oblivious to all this because he only has team calls and, he doesn't see what's happening on a day to day basis' (Sandra)

Our earlier research indicates that the main indicator of a mental health issue for an employer is behaviour changes in an employee (ERC, 2020) and that this is often the only evidence of a problem. Remembering this, and finding ways to encourage dialogue and interaction, even remotely, along with consistent signposting of resources will be more important than ever. For our participants, changing their own behaviour has been important in ensuring that issues are identified. Sandra does not wait for staff to come to her and is now *'more likely to ... approach them rather than them approach me'*. Emma has ensured that she picks up issues in all her staff by *'just checking in, and it's a regular feature, [...] of our team meetings every single week'*. Her organisation has also encouraged people to share their experiences of lockdown and furlough with each other, in virtual meetings, to start conversations around the challenges that people have faced. Different organisations and environments will inevitably benefit from different approaches to ensure that mental health issues are identified even when teams are working remotely.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Several issues related to mental health during the Covid-19 crisis emerge from our participant accounts. Firstly, the unique circumstances of the lockdown have provoked new triggers for mental health issues in employees, often related to remote working, social isolation, and furlough. Returning to the workplace appears to be provoking issues in some employees. Secondly, mental health issues may have been experienced by individuals who had no previous experience of them, and some kinds of employees appear to have suffered more than others, for a variety of reasons. Thirdly, reluctance to admit mental health issues, although not a new phenomenon, may be exacerbated in the light of predictions of economic downturn and potential job losses. Fourthly, managers and colleagues who would ordinarily have spotted the signs of a workmate struggling may not have been able to do so because of remote working and team dispersal.

World Health Organisation (2003) analysis shows that prompt treatment for mental health issues can be effective in preventing recurrence of, or exacerbation of, these issues in the

future. In addition to the personal cost, it is also important to remember that, in the UK, the annual cost of poor mental health to employers has been estimated at £33bn to £42bn (Deloitte, 2017). Further research into these issues will help employers, agencies and policymakers to develop appropriate interventions to mitigate the personal and societal-level challenges. For example, we need to understand more about the effects of prolonged remote working on the mental health of different individuals and in different circumstances. We also need to explore ways of identifying mental health issues in the absence of regular daily interaction, given the likelihood of an extended period of remote working for many.

Being aware of, and open to, these issues will be an important first step for employers. Prior research indicates that many employers are not aware of external sources of support for mental health issues in the workplace and that routes which are 'top of mind' for employers tend to be HR-type routes rather than external mental health or government bodies. Engaging with the considerable range of specialist resources available, and putting in place any necessary interventions to support staff, will be vital for employers.

Finding a way for external mental health support agencies, mental health charities and government bodies to integrate and signpost resources would undoubtedly make it easier to connect employers (and employees) to the right sources support and help.

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ANNEXE A: MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE DURING THE CRISIS: THE PARTICIPANT ACCOUNTS

Jane, HR Manager, services organisation.

[A] very definite distinction between the older ones and the younger ones.

When the crisis hit, the office closed immediately and the whole team was *suddenly working from home*. This was initially *a bit of a novelty* and didn't really impact on work because *we can all work very well from home*. However, it was problematic from a team cohesion point of view:

... it was quite difficult at first because of all working remotely, and not overhearing each other's conversations, and trying to get everybody to still feel they were part of a team, and working as a team.

Identifying potential mental health issues became more of a challenge. In her previous interview, Jane had asserted the need to *recognise it by the way that they were... if they were ... normally a very happy person and then suddenly they've got the weight of the world on their shoulders, you know there was something not quite right*. In the second conversation she reiterated this.

When I'm with people, I'm very observant of people's emotions, and I get to know their personality so I know if there's a problem.

But this was less easy with a dispersed team. Talking about a colleague who was struggling, Jane asserted that *the problem that I had with him, [was] I couldn't see visually that he wasn't quite himself*. Jane had to find other ways of picking up on changes in people's behaviour. For her, this involved proactively instigating daily team meetings and one-to-one calls. She also became open to alternative ways of communicating which may suit different kinds of individuals.

[A younger colleague] reached out to me via text messages, [...] I don't know whether it's a characteristic with other young people, but I found that they communicate better by text message or by email than face-to-face

It quickly became apparent to Jane that the crisis was affecting different people in different ways.

the youngest person on my team is 23... and he has been the one who has suffered the most...more so than the older ones, there's been a very, very definite distinction between the older ones and the younger ones

[the young colleague] couldn't see an end to it and he was agitated by that, that he didn't know what was coming ... and the fact that he couldn't see his friends, he couldn't go out, he was missing going to the office

and at the opposite end of the spectrum we have the caretaker [...] he went into meltdown, [...] he's the sort of character that works very much in isolation, on his own [...] he felt really uncomfortable and challenged, the fact that his routine had gone ... he didn't like the fact that we weren't in the building, and he could tell we hadn't been there, he suddenly felt like his whole world, and his structure, had disappeared overnight.

Liaising with colleagues in other organisations, she found that this was not unique to her firm. Another local firm had particular challenges with younger staff members:

... they found that their graduates were desperate to get back to the office, even though that a lot of them were living in [the city] in apartments, and that they were still in shared accommodation with other students, but they still felt that they were missing that social hub of being at work and being with people

And that they found that the older ones, erm, the partners and the, you know, the more senior management, they were all loving the fact that they weren't going into [the city] every day, they hadn't got that commute, [...] we could actually work more productively because we didn't have the interruption of people coming into the office, and meetings

As a more senior and older member of the team, she recognised this divergence in her own circumstances and approach compared to theirs.

I think my young, my young lad would struggle if he wasn't asked to go back five days a week... But I think the older ones [that] have done the journey, and that commute, for a long time, and have worked a lot longer, actually are finding it a very positive outcome [...] I'd be devastated if somebody said to me, "From next week you've got to go back to the office five days a week." I love the fact I haven't got the commute, my quality of life's better, I'm able to go out for walks at lunchtime, and cycling in the morning

For Jane, lockdown has provoked greater dialogue about, and even acceptance of, mental health issues.

I think before lockdown it was almost a bit of a dirty word, it was almost a bit of a failure, that people wouldn't say any... You know, that they'd got an issue [...] I think if lockdown's given us anything it's almost an acceptance that it's actually okay to have a, a bad day, or you feel it's too much today, but that's normal [...] I definitely think it's changed, and I definitely think it's a change for the better

Alison, HR Manager, services organisation

We've got people who feel that their mental health is of secondary importance ... It's further down the priority list even though it's likely to have a bigger impact.

Initially, lockdown seemed as though it may present an opportunity to reinforce the team spirit and cohesion that the organisation had spent years building. In the event, Alison believes that lockdown impacted significantly and negatively on the team dynamics.

... at the beginning of, of, of lockdown it was, like, 'Oh my goodness this is the magic thing that we needed, this is the major benefit, we're all working together, we're all having a bit of camaraderie'

and then suddenly, [...] we've had to stop people from walking or working in different areas, and, 'You can't use this staff room, you can't use this, you can't go in here.'

we've spent an awful long time trying to build up people to feel as they're one team [...] what COVID has done is meant that we've had to become more insular, and

that's been a big negative [...] And it, and it just... It's just driven a wedge. [...] We've just sucked it up because of what it is.

Alison's organisation furloughed a large number of employees. Anticipating mental health challenges, given that *people ... who are furloughed from work have, have a worry about whether their job will actually exist*, they kept in touch regularly and tried to keep mental health at the top of the agenda. This has been especially important for *... people who live on their own, ... people who haven't necessarily got ... family, haven't got friends outside of [work] ... so, for a lot of those people their social life as well as their ... work has gone*

... on, I would say, a fortnightly basis we've sent out specifically mental health support, so it couldn't have been higher priority in regards to the information that we'd sent out, and that's everything from signposting, to funny quotes, to quirky bits of information, [...] as restrictions were lifted, so we changed the tack to say...how they might be affected by the restrictions being lifted. And it's natural, many of us are feeling in that way.

Despite this, and although most have now returned to work, she senses that people are now wary of admitting mental health. Keeping their job and income may take priority over mental health issues.

a big element is the income, the reliance on the income and the worry about whether jobs'll be available at the end of it [...] But out of everybody that we've brought back, so we're talking best part of 150 people, we've only had one person who's admitted to being frightened

I think, I think it's really sad that we've, we've got people who feel that their mental health is of secondary importance to their job security, and I know that it would in no way affect our decisions going forward, if we have to look at redundancies then we'd look at it on a fair basis, we certainly wouldn't be influenced by, by any kind of, of mental health issue. Erm, so I, I find it really, really sad that people don't feel that they can be open enough to access the support that's available

Perhaps more worryingly, Alison conjectures that mental health issues are now seen as less important because of the crisis.

... it's whether the outside influences have made people feel that actually [mental health] is not as important now, because the, the other things are more important, the social distancing, and washing your hands, and, you know, ... the COVID secure environments are more important than how this might impact on me as an individual. [...] I think, if I'm absolutely truthful I think... I feel that it's now more paying lip service to [mental health issues] I feel that it's, it's become... It's further down the priority list even though it's likely to have a bigger impact.

Peter, Health and Safety Officer, Logistics organisation

... there have been reports about mental health, and the fact that you know ... people are having problems. But I actually see that there's less people talking about it.

During the crisis *business still continued on a smaller scale* and as lockdown was eased, *the business naturally, gradually returned*. However, since lockdown, the firm has reduced headcount, through redundancies.

A proportion of staff were furloughed during lockdown. It was a turbulent period during which *the company was so busy running its business that it didn't really contact these people ... we, kind of, left people to their own devices, you know*. Peter was himself furloughed, and experienced highs and lows.

I suddenly found myself with six weeks of doing nothing, which, for me, was very strange ... so the first two weeks were great, er, quite enjoyed it, the second two weeks I was at a... very much at a loss. And the final two weeks I just wanted to get back to work cos I realised it was definitely having an effect on me.

Peter believes that he wasn't the only one to struggle.

I have no doubt, I know that [others struggled] because when I came back after my six weeks, for example, one [colleague] said to me "I'm glad I've come back, cos, cos if I hadn't, I'd have been an alcoholic"

As the firm's mental health first aider, and one of the first to return, Peter prepared for the return of others by making sure that he was signposting resources to help with possible mental health issues stemming from the furlough and crisis.

So we've put up on that [corridor] a display, mental health display, so when people can walk through they can stand and look, and read it, without ... other people watching on.

But his experience was that no-one came forward.

I haven't seen any increase in mental health problems during this time. Nobody's come to me and said, "I've got, I've got problems, I need your advice on this." So, I'm not saying it wasn't there, but it wasn't raised... I'm sure there was an impact, I didn't see that impact though. [...] Nothing at all ... nobody's come up to me and said, erm, you know, "Can I have five minutes with you?"

Peter puts this down to people responding to the difficult circumstances and *metaphorically speaking, batten[ing] down the hatches and just concentrating on, just getting through [...] they're focused on just getting by.* Compared to before the crisis *I actually see less people talking about mental health now.* Reflecting on why, he points to the recent round of redundancies and contends that fears of losing their jobs means that people are keeping quiet about potential mental health issues.

people are doing a lot more job protecting at the moment, I noticed that, people are tense about their jobs, they're doing a lot more job protecting. If you ask somebody some information they'll say, "What do you wanna know that for?" [...] they're protecting, so there is tension in that respect.

Cathy, HR Manager, business services organisation

I'm so used to just knowing if someone's having a bad day ... [now] I have to be much more proactive and planned in my approach of supporting people

Before the crisis most staff worked in an open plan office *probably 95 percent of the time* but since lockdown *everyone's working from home.*

so it's been a big change for quite a few members of staff just all of a sudden going from being in a very social environment to all of a sudden being in their home environment [...] without that face to face contact with their colleagues

As HR manager, although Cathy *had an idea before of who would probably struggle*, she found that while *some people who struggled in an office ... are thriving at home*, quite a broad range of staff did experience problems, for a range of reasons.

There were some members of staff who struggled ... with working from home, particularly the people who were more outgoing, they like to bounce ideas off people. They like the contact and checking in with their colleagues socially, but also work, have they done the right thing? how do they respond to this customer? And some of them struggled definitely initially with the isolation of working from home.

it has been really difficult and challenging, and people have got lots going on. So, we've got working parents who are dealing with, like, young children and trying to split hours to fit around that.

During lockdown, it has also been more challenging to spot the signs of mental health issues.

... usually in the office, it's all open plan, and some people, you can just look at and you know they're having a bad day. You don't even need to speak to them to know. [...] I'm so used to just knowing if someone's having a bad day or, erm, they'd, like, come over and chat, but now it feels like it's more effort for people to let you know [...] you'll not bump into them in the kitchen and be able to say, "How's your day going?" and then they, that, sort of, opens the opportunity for them to say, "Oh, it's a really bad day,"

Cathy has had to adapt her approach - *I have to be much more proactive and planned in my approach of supporting people, whereas before things would just happen and you knew that, "Oh, well, they need to talk," ... now it can all be quiet and then all of a sudden something seems to crop up out of the blue*

If lockdown had its challenges from a mental health point of view, the return to the office is also problematic.

the feedback we've had from staff ... is they're very anxious about coming back into the office, and weren't very pro-coming back, at least initially. They wanted to stay at home for as long as possible.

For Cathy, the new normal will be a greater prevalence of, and focus on, mental health issues.

I think, yeah, the mental health agenda has come so high up now, erm, for organisations all over because it's so clear that people aren't gonna be able to just change back to how it was before, just like they couldn't just change to lockdown. Some people really struggled with that. [...] it's a completely different environment, isn't it? It's not just people working from home, it's people working from home with all these additional factors, erm, in play as well, like family being at home, kids not being at school, the anxiety of the virus,...so I think, yeah, we just need to, as an organisation, be aware that once lockdown's lifted, the mental health, erm, factors that have really come into play, they're not all gonna disappear.

Rachel, Marketing Director, Manufacturing company

[people are] not wanting to appear needy, potentially ... people don't want to look like they're the awkward ones or the pushy ones or the people that are creating an issue

During the crisis and lockdown period, the company experienced highs and lows, which had an impact on everyone, in one way or another. Having anticipated a significant drop in sales, and furloughing *almost everyone, except for a technical guy, [and] a customer service lady* the MD was able to respond to the crisis by diversifying the product range. So, *of course, then sales went through the roof but, obviously, he'd already committed to the furlough scheme.*

Although *the fact we were busy took the, the mental stress off [the MD] thinking, "Well, how am I going to pay people? What's the business gonna be like in six months' time?"* it also created the immediate problem of how to deal with the upturn with a skeleton staff. The changed circumstances meant that while some were inundated with work, others were absent.

... the poor customer service person ... was ... having to come in every day, while everybody else, and though they're not on holiday and they've got their own concerns, was effectively sitting in the sunshine.[...] I think people were just head down and, and felt reassured, I think, by the fact that we were busy and, again, maybe a little bit guilty that somebody in the office is working like a dog and they're potentially...

Rachel anticipated that those furloughed and working at home *would be starting to panic about their role and what was happening*. In fact, her experience was *on the whole, people working from home have been very quiet*. And this was in marked contrast to behaviour before the crisis.

I think the, the situation has made people, sort of, certainly here, look at the bigger picture and just not worry about the "He, said, she said," and, "Oh, he spoke to me a bit," you know, I just feel all that's gone at the moment. People are just knuckling down.

For Rachel, this change in behaviour has been driven by an awareness of broader economic factors.

...not wanting to appear needy, potentially... people don't want to look like they're the awkward ones or the pushy ones or the people that are creating an issue [...] So, therefore, they're keeping their heads down. It's a bit like ducking down, you know, if there's a bit of a furore going on, you just put your head down cos you don't really want to get involved but, sort of, the furore was the potential that you, you could lose your job, [...] It was all in the news. So many made unemployed, so many made unemployed.

Sandra, HR Director, Manufacturing company

Well, there's different factions now, there's the working from homes, there's the people who've been furloughed, there's the people who've been in throughout, and ... there seems to be a lot of resentment... Everybody will say, "Don't take it personally," but I think your instinct is to take it personally really.

Sandra's company continued operating throughout the lockdown - *we've had orders and we've, we've largely done all right, I think, really.* They did not furlough anyone immediately, but when they did, it *divided us as a company really. We're losing the team spirit for a start.*

I didn't want to be furloughed at all, and I felt like ... I wasn't valued and I was extremely upset and felt very vulnerable. And I'm sure I'm not the only one, you know, across the country, across our company and across the country.

Sandra felt really isolated and really lonely [...] *I shouldn't really have taken it as personally as I did, maybe, but I did. I really did.*

I felt like the directors were almost doing it in a, sort of, vindictive way. I don't think they were, in hindsight. But ... I felt really targeted and I felt really unhappy about it.

I don't think it's unique to me, I think there are other people who, who feel that way, and I think, it's almost divided the company a little bit between... Well, there's different factions now, there's the working from homes, there's the people who've been furloughed, there's the people who've been in throughout, and there's, to me ... there seems to be a lot of resentment.....of these groups to each other group. And a lot of bad feeling. I think it's divided us as a company really.

If people who were furloughed felt singled out, some who were not furloughed also felt aggrieved.

there were two or three people who we didn't furlough because they were doing what we called essential jobs, and they were really, really narked about it. They were really unhappy that they didn't get the break off that everybody else got

Sandra also noted tension between those working at home and those required to work on site.

the people in, who have been coming in, you know, it's, like, "Oh well, you know, what, what are people doing at home? They can't possibly be doing the full element of their job."

Phasing return from furlough added to the issues, as a core who were furloughed for the entire period, ... quite rightly, I think, thought, “Oh, why am I still furloughed? Why is everybody else in and out and I’m not?”. So ... I think your instinct is to take things a little bit personally Everybody will say, “Don’t take it personally,” but I think your instinct is to take it personally really. Additionally, the people who have stayed off, they seem to be a lot more scared about coming back in. which may add to tensions.

Different experiences of furlough, and finding themselves in different groups because of it, has impacted on the confidence with which staff view their own personal employment prospects. The arbitrary nature of the choice of staff to furlough adds to the sense of unease.

at any time now, I can be told that I’m on furlough. And there’s other people now who haven’t been furloughed who will never be furloughed because.....they haven’t been furloughed yet. So, it does make you feel a lot more vulnerable, knowing that.

that is a bit of an issue because, like, if you’re selected for redundancy, [...] you’ve got to justify your decision, for furlough you didn’t really, you could just pick and choose whoever you wanted. So, it takes the objectivity out of the situation.

For Sandra, people are still reticent to come forward with mental health issues. Remote working makes them difficult to identify – *[a colleague] has been struggling. But [his boss] is totally oblivious to all this because he only has team calls and, he doesn’t see what’s happening on a day to day basis.* Going forward she believes she will continue to need to find those with issues, rather than wait for them to ask for help.

I still think people struggle to come forward with mental health issues. [...] I perhaps hear about things more third hand, you know. I tend to become aware of people who, you know, have things going on and, I’m more likely to possibly approach them rather than them approach me

Emma, Head of HR, Services Organisation

... this idea that lots of organisations are potentially thinking that they won't ... work back in the office as they did previously, and I think that's fine...for some people but not for everyone

After the crisis hit, keeping the team spirit alive was crucial. This meant communicating to those being furloughed the importance of their role.

So it was very much about them, so, "If you're working, yes, you're playing your part, but my goodness, we need you guys to play your part and your part, bizarrely is to be at home and we'll pay you 80 percent."

Nevertheless, furlough did create some challenges with the team, and with team spirit.

Various people that were on furlough felt left out, just like, [...] you know, "You on the inside must know more than, than you're telling us," ...there wasn't a lot happening...but they felt, obviously, they were missing out on stuff.

When it became clear that lockdown was going to last longer than originally anticipated, Emma's company committed to bringing people back as soon as possible as a way of alleviating anxiety and stress.

... for a lot of people, they were like, "Oh my gosh, I've only just done six weeks, I can't do another five months, ... I just can't do it." So, at that point, I would say we were very concerned about the mental health of our staff.

... we made a commitment that everybody would come back at least one day a week in September, to help with their mental health and then that provided them something to cling on to, to look forward to ... they've got this assurance of at least one day in the office, from September.

Communications have also been challenging because *people want the transparency but ... with transparency also comes, potentially, some anxiety.* Emma and her fellow managers took the decision to be honest with their staff.

so we've been very, very clear about all our different scenarios, which one we're working to at the moment, what the worst case scenario would be, so everybody's really clear on that. [...] We have ... about 40 minutes to an hour update every single Monday, which people can join.

Emma identified several groups of staff that she felt struggled more than others with mental health during lockdown. These included working parents, younger people and those who depended on the social interaction of the workplace.

... those people who are working and then also doing home-schooling... ...also had a big challenge as well... ...trying to balance all that off.

Definitely younger people ... either, they've either given up their rent and they're back home with parents, they may not have the best facilities to either work from ... but definitely younger people, we have found that they, they really struggled with not having the social element and not having the work...

Some staff, those that are ... who absolutely love being with people are struggling, you can see that they are. You know, they, they, they thrive off being with people, that really, really knocked them

The idea that office working may be permanently reduced, or even stopped altogether, may present serious challenges for these kinds of people.

somebody did say to me, a couple of weeks ago, that they felt that it was the more outgoing people that struggled the most... ...because they needed... the social interaction, and this is a worry, I think, ... this idea that lots of organisations are potentially thinking that they won't ... work back in the office as they, as they did, previously, and I think that's fine...for some people but not for everyone

Identifying possible mental health issues was also more of a challenge without face to face interaction. For Emma, *those that were extrovert, you could tell cos they told you, they were loud ... they would be the ones that would sit there, in the meeting, and go, "I am really struggling with this," ...* But she had to make a particular effort to engage with others who were more introverted.

So automatically, you assume, “Well, if you're an introvert, then you're quiet, therefore everything must be all right.” ... But actually, what we did learn from that was, actually, if you're introvert and you're not saying anything, you may not be all right because if you're an introvert, you're more likely to be quiet and then go more inward than actually say anything,

Emma managed this by keeping close to the whole team ...*just checking in, and it's a regular feature, [...] of our team meetings every single week.* Her company also encouraged the team to share their experiences.

as part of our ... staff virtual conference, lots of staff pulled together little mini videos so, you know, ‘my experience of furlough’ or ‘my experience of lockdown’, whatever it would be [...] and just listening to people’s individual stories was really insightful

Doing the video activities allowed one team member to share her anxiety related to lockdown ending.

An interesting one was from a lady who is very, very introverted and she said, for her, coming out of lockdown was her nightmare because, actually, she feels safe in lockdown because that's her personality type

Emma herself sums up the experience of remote working – she enjoyed it to start with, but over time has come to miss the social interaction of the workplace.

for me, personally, working at home, initially wasn't a challenge, it was nice to actually have some time... I could actually get on and do some work ... But then, as time's gone on, it's like, “You know what? I do miss that people interaction.”



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