



How can I boost workplace wellbeing when my staff are at home?

As debate rages on about whether working from home is the new normal, small business owners are busy balancing business interests with staff wellbeing. With some employees enjoying improved work-life balance, greater job satisfaction and cost-savings, other staff are ready to return to a face-to-face environment. As the lines between our personal and professional lives become blurred, what does it mean for morale, motivation and engagement? And where do business owners focus their attention?

This guide will focus on measures that office-based businesses – such as professional services, accounting and technology – can take to boost wellbeing, engagement, and productivity for employees, even as some return to the physical office and some don't.



Where are we now?



Since the beginning of 2020, the world has been turned on its head. Nobody planned our new, radically changed way of working – it was a hurried reaction to sudden extreme circumstances. Now that we have a better grip on our situation, it is clear that “business as usual” remains a long way off, and we need to adapt to that reality.

Lots of people are worried. It’s perfectly understandable to be anxious about your health during a pandemic, let alone that of your family and friends. Then there are natural, and to some extent realistic, fears about job security. Business owners, meanwhile, face difficult questions about layoffs and the looming threat of going under. In this moment of high stress, a dedication to wellbeing is more vital than ever.

The way we work has already changed significantly – but the total upheaval of the old way of doing things isn’t necessarily a negative. Britain’s SMEs can seize this moment and use it as an opportunity to build workplaces that are more equitable, comfortable, engaging, and efficient.



Who's helping?



Portia Hickey

Portia Hickey is a chartered psychologist who advises Fortune and FTSE 100 companies on leadership assessment and development. Portia is co-creator of the Thrive Matters accelerator platform that combines behavioural science with technology to accelerate behaviour change. She recently launched The Smart Collaboration Accelerator, a research-based psychometric assessment and suite of tools to help teams and individuals collaborate more effectively.



Saurav Chopra

CEO and co-founder of Perkbox

Saurav Chopra is CEO and co-founder of employee experience platform, Perkbox. Born in Delhi to a family of business owners, he studied electrical engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology and acquired an MBA in Management of Technology at University of California, Berkeley, as well as a further MBA in Entrepreneurship and Strategy at the London Business School. He founded Perkbox after a decade in global business development with Deloitte, Yahoo! and VC-backed start-ups.



Natasha Wallace

Founder & Chief Coach, Conscious Works

Natasha Wallace is founder of Conscious Works, a coaching and consulting company dedicated to improving workplace wellbeing. A former HR director, Natasha is a wellbeing and culture specialist, author and speaker who works with organisations advising and coaching them to build more conscious organisations that achieve performance without compromising employee wellbeing.

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Chapter 1:

Staying engaged while working remotely



As it has established itself during the lockdown, it seems safe to assume that online and remote will remain as a legitimate counterpart to the office, storefront and several other types of SME workplaces. Many of the changes we made early on were intended as temporary quick fixes, so now is the time to consider whether they will serve us in the long term.

1. Remind everyone of the company's goals

According to Natasha: "Setting a clear vision and direction of travel for the organisation aligns everyone to a common purpose. Then personal work and objectives can be linked to this so that everyone knows that what they are doing matters." Now is an ideal time to "revisit or co-create" values. Change is happening whether we like it or not, so it's in your best interest to steer it in the right direction.

2. Make improvements as you go

Saurav advises SME leaders to make feedback and open company discussions a priority. He suggests an open-door policy to leadership, Q&A sessions and regular meetings that act as a "time for reflection and sharing of anecdotes" while also giving employees the opportunity to highlight concerns. Nobody gets everything right on the first go, so be willing to continually make changes to the way the business operates. This ensures that the business will be flexible enough to adapt to the realities of coronavirus recovery with ease.



Stay social

Although in-person socialising has gone out the window due to distancing rules, it's still essential that teams stay in touch. Saurav suggests that SMEs should try to mimic the feel of your "normal" workplace as much as possible. "If you have traditions such as end of week catch-ups over drinks and snacks, try to do this in the digital space too." Natasha encourages leaders to focus in on what made the culture work effectively prior to remote working and then agree how to maintain that as a team, sharing responsibility with everyone.

Ideas for keeping the team in touch while working remotely:



Weekly virtual pub quiz or coffee get-togethers



Implement a rotating buddy check-in system



If your office uses a chat app, set aside a channel for non-work watercooler talk



Most phones and all fitness wearables track steps, so team up to see who can get the most steps in a week



Run a virtual book club, either related to your industry or just for fun



Monthly dress-up challenges with small prizes for the winner



Collaborate to create a themed playlist every month

3. Choose the right technology

Many of us were rapidly introduced to the reality of remote working as the lockdown began, but now is a chance to ask whether the solutions you adopted then are still fit for purpose now. Conduct an internal audit, beginning with discussions with staff members, of the software and platforms you use to see if they are the best option for your needs. One feature to look out for in the tools you use is the ability to automate repetitive tasks like stock-taking, invoicing, and payroll. It's also important to ensure you aren't doubling up – for example, SMEs unfamiliar with video conferencing may not realise the business is already paying for Microsoft Teams (a video conferencing solution) in its Office 365 subscription and may be paying for Zoom on top of that, a product that performs the same function as Teams.

Chapter 2: Creating a supportive workplace



As SMEs take this opportunity to redefine the workplace, we all want to ensure that it is healthy, supportive, and productive. What does that mean in practice?

Flexibility

At a time like this, a little flexibility goes a long way. Natasha observes that employees need to be able to manage their workload and understand their priorities. Saurav stresses the importance of understanding that your teams comprise people with different life circumstances, demands and responsibilities that may impact their ability to structure their work-day in the same manner as before lockdown.

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Ideas for greater flexibility

The degree of flexibility that you can offer depends on the nature of your business. Here are some broad ideas for flexible policies.



Allow employees to choose the hours they work. In many industries, as long as people do their hours, it doesn't matter whether they're working from 7am to 3pm or 10 am to 6 pm. This flexibility will be especially valuable while schools are closed.



Offer non-continuous hours. If employees prefer to travel, exercise or visit the store at off-peak times for their safety, it may mean that they use up more break time than is available in a typical day. However, as long as they make up the time, they're still contributing to the business. Consider setting up a digital timesheet system or having employees sign in and out so that it's clear when they're available.



Implement job-sharing where two people work a single role, freeing each of them up to spend more time on responsibilities outside of work.

With any policies, it is essential that the guidelines are clear and accessible. Employees should be able to refer to the company handbook to understand what is acceptable and should know who to go to if they need clarification.



Physical fitness

The Coronavirus pandemic has been a stark reminder of the importance of staying healthy. To maintain physical and mental health, says Natasha, people need time out to rest, exercise, and keep a balanced diet. “Sleep is also important. Anything that employers can do to provide some level of flexibility and education around these basic foundations of wellbeing, enable people to take greater control over the way they feel and perform.”

Be on lookout for anxiety and depression

Everybody has experienced some degree of mental impact from the chaotic circumstances, but some people – normally through no fault of their own – are hit harder than others. Natasha adds: “You should consciously watch for team members who have stopped speaking up, who aren’t dialling into calls, or who seem less available.” At that point, you can reach out to ensure that everything is alright – and offer support if it isn’t.

Employee assistance programmes

While workplaces with a small handful of employees are naturally closer, it’s easy for growing businesses to lose track of employee wellbeing as their systems don’t scale. If your business has grown so fast that its wellbeing system is no longer manageable, Saurav advocates employee assistance programmes (EAPs). An EAP is a confidential service that enables you to help your staff with personal or workplace issues that might be impacting their performance, wellbeing, mental or physical health.



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Chapter 3: Keeping employees engaged



With thin margins and fluctuating demand, it's understandable that many SMEs will not be able to offer cash bonuses or expensive benefits to employees. As Saurav correctly points out, however, many businesses get “engagement” wrong by throwing money at the issue when landmark studies have shown that the highest-rated cash incentives are no more effective at engaging employees than praise, recognition of achievement by leadership, and autonomy and sense of ownership.

In a larger sense, employees who feel respected by their employer are happier and more engaged. As Natasha puts it: “People want to be treated like adults, given the opportunity to contribute, and trusted to take responsibility for making a difference. Stretching people in their roles, offering developmental opportunities, and being honest with them about what is going on – these are the things that keep people connected, and wanting to contribute to the team.” Businesses can still do all of these despite the disruption.

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Saurav agrees that, especially given the uncertainty around the near future, businesses of all sizes should invest in implementing initiatives, schemes and programmes that demonstrate the company cares about the all-round wellbeing of its staff: emotionally, mentally, financially, socially and physically.

Natasha notes that employees value being able to work in a way that enables them to manage their work and home life without feeling “watched”. This trust is particularly significant as employees continue to work from home. Ultimately, she observes “As long as people are fairly paid, it is the extent to which they are trusted, empowered and recognised that makes a significant difference to the way that they feel at work.”

“Recognise and reward effort, not just results,” suggests Saurav. He also recommends that, although cash bonuses may be infeasible, leaders still back up this recognition with a token “bonus” of sorts. He suggests letting employees have the afternoon off, an early finish, a bottle of their favourite tippie or a voucher that can be redeemed at a favoured brand or retailer.”

Another low-cost way to keep employees engaged is with team learning and development. Saurav says: “Think about how particular team members can run masterclasses for colleagues by sharing their skills in areas that nurture creativity or benefit job roles directly. Invite people of interest – entrepreneurs, authors and other creatives and innovators – to do talks remotely, sharing stories about challenges and successes and imparting valuable advice for personal and professional development.”



Employee engagement checklist:

- Talk to the team to find out what non-financial rewards they value
- Design a clear, fair system of review and reward
- Recognise hard work as well as positive outcomes
- Offer advancement opportunities
- Demonstrate trust of employees. Are there onerous oversight systems you could cut?
- Develop an internal learning and development program to share expertise

Chapter 4: Communication is crucial



Regular, effective communication is the cornerstone of a healthy workplace, and it is a prerequisite to employee wellbeing, engagement and productivity. Existing communication systems have been upended by the lockdown, so it's time to consider redesigning them to meet your current and future needs.

Now that we're mostly working from home, Portia recommends regular meetings that include every member of the team. These discussions are an opportunity to update them on the status of the business and any projects you're working on, as well as to air concerns and put new ideas forward. She pushes leaders to make sure nobody dominates the discussion and be sure to thank everyone for their contribution. "Leaders should speak last, since they prime how people interpret information."

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Portia recommends three main communication areas for strengthening team cohesion while employees can't meet in person:



Work

“Choose tools that allow people to stay connected with their teams and prioritise tasks they are working on. Train people in how to collaborate, as this is not a natural skill-set for most people.”



Interpersonal

“Psychologically, people need to feel connected with others. Giving employees a dedicated forum and time to interact socially is essential to wellbeing and will support effective teamwork. This could be through setting up WhatsApp groups, interest groups or virtual drinks, pizza or coffee sessions.”



Creativity and innovation

“Creative thinking requires time and space to share ideas. Specifically, holding meetings where the focus is innovation is generally more productive than incorporating the brainstorming in with other agenda items or as part of a regular work meeting.”



Similarly, Natasha argues that “managers should be regularly sitting down with team members to check in on how things are going, discussing priorities and objectives for the next period, reviewing progress and challenges, and giving real-time feedback – although feedback doesn’t have to wait until a meeting. “Although annual appraisals are useful as a recap, it’s the more regular check-ins that make the biggest difference in managing performance and keeping everyone on track.” Internal surveys and anonymous feedback are also powerful tools for keeping a finger on the pulse and will help to inform decisions that impact the workforce.

Keeping the team in close contact:

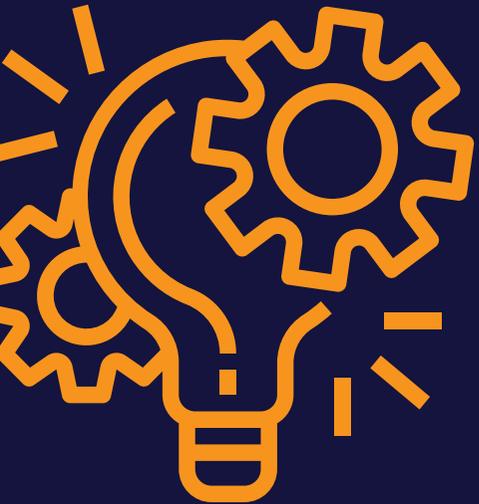
- ✓ Weekly virtual coffee morning where employees are free to talk about work and non-work topics
- ✓ Optional online pub quiz on a Thursday or Friday outside of work hours
- ✓ Weekly or fortnightly one-to-one calls between managers and employees
- ✓ Monthly all-staff updates on the company’s progress
- ✓ Monthly surveys to gather ideas about improvements and all-staff meetings to discuss the proposals

“**Managers should be regularly sitting down with team members to check in on how things are going, discussing priorities and objectives.**”





Chapter 5: Staffing for the uncertain times



Many SMEs have already had to make difficult staffing decisions. Now, as the recovery begins, we are in entirely new territory, and businesses may need to further adjust the strategy to meet changing needs.

Unless you're radically pivoting the business, the best employees are the ones you already have. They know the ropes, you understand their strengths and weaknesses, and they're ready to work with no lead time – not to mention the challenge of onboarding during a pandemic. Business leaders need to actively work to retain staff, and one mutually beneficial way to do this is through learning and development. Saurav suggests that SMEs consider:

- What is the skill gap that needs filling?
- How will these new skills support other areas of the business?
- Will employees be interested in learning these new skills?

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Finding a permanent/freelance balance

Choosing the right staff levels to suit the business is its own challenge, and at a time when uncertainty is rampant, it can feel daunting. For many SMEs, designing a flexible business that goes beyond the coronavirus era means balancing permanent employees with trusted freelancers. As Saurav puts it: “Ideally, an organisation needs to be able to scale up and down, resourcing according to fluctuating demand. This is easier to do when teams comprise a permanent base of staff supplemented by contractors that can be plugged in to deliver on work during busier times.”

He goes on to say that there are a myriad of reports speculating that the future workforce will largely be made up of freelance remote workers. Whether this is true or not, organisations must have the capability to remain agile to weather periods of uncertainty.

So, having a proportion of teams reinforced by contractors or outsourcing work to trusted specialists, whenever needed, makes sense, he believes.

Natasha concurs, “As with any fluctuation in demand, you need to have enough resources in place so you don’t overload people. Be honest about the resources you need and if you’re worried about demand reducing, find temporary resource to help out. It may mean taking on different types of people and recruiting for different types of roles but there are plenty of people on the market who may have just the skill set you’re looking for – and who are willing to do some short-term work until things stabilise.”

“Use your network to see who is available or check out a reputable freelance service online. Being honest with people is also important. If things are tight financially and you can’t afford additional resource, be honest with those affected and work out between you what you can do to manage workload.”

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Creating a resilient, healthy remote workplace



As an SME leader, you have a rare opportunity to participate in the reshaping of work life. It is in your capable hands to create a more human, engaging, supportive workplace and to strengthen the relationships that make your business great.

For more information, resources and tools, visit our website



Share your belief in your vision with your employees and bring them along with you; together, you will come back stronger



About Be the Business



Be the Business is a small, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to boosting productivity among UK businesses.

We're doing it by helping leaders of small to mid-sized firms do what you do best: improve, innovate and inspire.

In response to the coronavirus outbreak, we created Rebuild. It provides free expert advice on recovery tactics, stories from your peers and access to like-minded people to bounce your ideas off.

Business leaders told us they need practical support in six priority areas – so that's what we've done. In each topic section on Rebuild you'll get a range of articles, videos, guides (like the one you've just read) and other accessible support. Start with the topic that meets your company's challenges and remember, it's the small steady steps that are going to count.

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