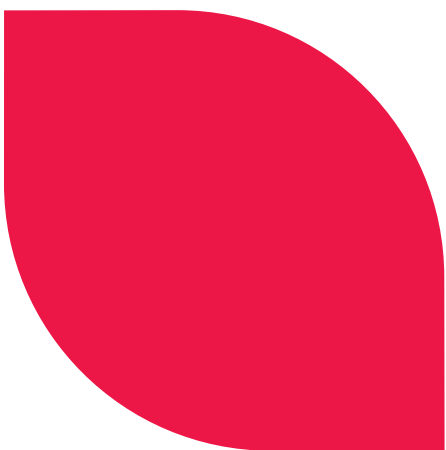# THE NEXT NORMAL
FUTUREPROOFING THE WORKFORCE FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Supported by

LifeSkills
Created with **BARCLAYS**

British Chambers of Commerce

Contents

British Chambers of Commerce
Foreword

During its 161-year history, the British Chambers of Commerce has repeatedly made the point that uncertainty in the business environment has negative consequences for both our economy and our society. It makes returns on investment harder to judge. It drains the time and resource of management. It makes the job security of employees more fragile.

Few events within BCC's lifetime – with the exception of two world wars – have created business uncertainty on the scale of the Covid-19 pandemic. Well over a year on from the discovery of the virus, it is still having a profound impact on firms up and down the country.

This report describes how this pandemic-led uncertainty has affected the ways in which businesses have managed their workforces, and how it may permanently change how they are managed in the future.

Our findings were the result of conversations with Chamber of Commerce members from across the UK. Many familiar themes emerged, such as ensuring staff wellbeing and the need to address skills gaps. But these themes were set in a drastically new context because of the pandemic.

The hope is that this report's conclusions can be used by businesses, educators and policymakers alike to understand more about how the UK workforce can be futureproofed so as to remain dynamic, productive and globally competitive.

One participant in the research suggested that the post-pandemic business environment should be described as the "next normal". It is a term that perfectly describes the situation that businesses currently find themselves in. Although many things will return to how they were once the pandemic is over, some things will have undoubtedly changed forever.

Barclays LifeSkills
Foreword

The LifeSkills programme aims to help all people in the UK, whether that is a young person preparing for their first job, or someone wanting to progress in their career.

Since it began in 2013, the programme has supported youth employment by raising the confidence, motivation and aspirations of millions of young people making the move from education into work. More than 12.4 million people have now participated.

In 2019, the programme was extended to the whole of the UK workforce. The aim was to ensure that workers of all ages have the opportunity to continue to develop their skills throughout their careers. The LifeSkills partnership with the British Chambers of Commerce is an important part of helping the programme understand more about how businesses are managing their workforces, and what skills support they wanted in the future.

The LifeSkills programme has already made several adaptions in response to the challenges brought about by Covid-19, and the insight from these sessions will help the programme continue to ensure its supporting skills development. More than 60 brand new tools, resources, virtual lessons and workshops have been launched, to assist teachers and parents in delivering remote and home schooling, as well as advice for adults on essential upskilling and making changes to their working lives.

The findings of this report demonstrate why these tools were needed, and as new challenges develop in 2021 the LifeSkills programme will continue to adapt and support the UK workforce.

Supported by

LifeSkills
Created with **BARCLAYS**

Summary

THIS REPORT ANSWERS TWO QUESTIONS:

i. What workforce challenges have been created by the pandemic?

ii. How do businesses expect to manage their workforces in the future?

The answers were informed by 10 online "roundtable" discussions with Chamber of Commerce members from across the country.

WHAT WORKFORCE CHALLENGES HAVE BEEN CREATED BY THE PANDEMIC?

The roundtable discussions revealed the following answers:

Adjustment to a new working environment.
Some customer relationships had become more demanding. Managing employees remotely had not been straightforward. There was widespread concern about employee fatigue, with multiple reports of staff working long hours. But new processes had been introduced – such as task-based working practices – to respond to the circumstances.

Increased incidence of employee wellbeing and mental health issues.
Concerns were raised about employees working from home becoming isolated and lonely. It was noted that the body language that signals something is wrong can be difficult to pick up via video call. Managers were reported as being emotionally drained from dealing with such a high volume of employee wellbeing and mental health concerns. Some businesses had felt it necessary to provide training in mental health awareness for staff.

How to communicate effectively.
The process of communicating to staff about job security had taken on a new context, particularly with those employees on furlough. Colleagues had to find new ways to communicate with each other, with queries that are easily resolved in an office environment not as easily resolved when remote working. Many businesses had used social networking and messaging platforms to support communication both with and within their workforce.

HOW DO BUSINESSES EXPECT TO MANAGE THEIR WORKFORCES IN THE FUTURE?

The roundtable discussions revealed the following answers:

The workplace will evolve.
Businesses highlighted the benefits of having employees in one place. It makes the training of young people and new employees easier. It is more conducive to the creation of ideas. It is easier to cultivate a positive workplace culture. That said, positive experiences of remote working had changed some perspectives on workforce management – the opportunities to recruit from further afield and to offer more flexible working were widely acknowledged.

Training priorities may shift.
The need to develop digital capability was seen to be increasingly important to business competitiveness and success. There was recognition that employee wellbeing and mental health is not well understood, making it likely to be more prominently featured in future training plans. Some suggested that more learning content would move online – the pandemic had demonstrated that lots of training provision can be delivered on a virtual platform.

A focus on the workforce's next generation.
There was widespread agreement that early engagement with young people is crucial to the development of employability skills. Work experience was regarded as important – but many businesses stated that they did not have the resource to engage with work experience programmes. It was made clear that generalising about the role of young people in the workforce can be problematic. They may be adept at using some digital technology, but not always specialised digital software. Several businesses argued that winning the war for talent requires a deep understanding of what potential employees want from their employer.

CONCLUSION

A blueprint for futureproofing the workforce

The roundtable discussions suggest that the skills and capabilities necessary for workforces to thrive will be different and broader post-pandemic. Of course, every business is different – many themes will be more relevant to some businesses than others. But taken together they provide a blueprint for how to futureproof workforces post-pandemic. This blueprint is set out in the table below.

AREA OF FUTUREPROOFING THE WORKFORCE	REQUIRED SKILLS OR CAPABILITIES TO SUPPORT FUTUREPROOFING
Adjusting to a new working environment	• How to maximise the productivity of the remote workforce. • Adopting new digital processes to support new ways of working. • Redefining client relationships in an online world.
Managing wellbeing and mental health issues	• Ability to identify the signs of wellbeing and mental health issues as they arise. • Ability to address wellbeing and mental health issues when they arise. • Implementing business processes to support employee wellbeing and good mental health.
How to communicate effectively	• Ensuring good channels of communication from management to employees. • Adopting technology and systems that allow employees to constructively communicate with each other. • A specific focus on communicating issues around job security.
Evolving the workplace	• Moving to more flexible working arrangements as part of the workplace. • Ensuring inexperienced staff members can learn by being in the workplace. • Maintaining workplace culture in new workplace environments.
Shifting training priorities	• Understanding digital skills needs and employee barriers to acquiring them. • Introducing more knowledge on employee wellbeing and mental health where possible. • Assessing how blended approaches to training can develop the skills that businesses need.
The next generation of the workforce	• Early engagement with young people to develop employability skills. • Recognising that not all young people have the same development issues within the workforce. • Recognising what younger people want from the workplace to attract them to the workplace.

The Next Normal - Futureproofing the workforce for a post-pandemic world | 7

Introduction
Moving to the next normal

This report is about how businesses manage their workforces. The content of the following chapters was informed by 10 online "roundtable" discussions with Chamber of Commerce members from across the country (a list of roundtable locations can be found in the orange box, below).

Businesses of every size and sector took part, from the chauffeur company in Birmingham to the fitness equipment manufacturer in Northern Ireland, and from the wealth management firm in Norfolk to the digital connectivity provider in Somerset. Educators, economic development bodies, charities and governmental organisations also took part.

The discussions were held between 23 November 2020 and 26 February 2021, providing a unique insight into the experiences and outlook of businesses during a key period in the pandemic. This period included two national lockdowns, tiered local restrictions, the start of the vaccination programme, multiple changes to business support schemes and the release of the Government's roadmap to reopening the economy in full.

The contributions to the roundtables reflected the unprecedented uncertainty of the times. Every participant had a story to tell about their experiences during the pandemic, and was interested to hear how others had approached workforce management. Businesses spoke openly about the difficult decisions and extreme pressure they had encountered, and were keen to hear about the processes, products and policies that they could use to help them thrive. The tone of all of the roundtables was very much one of collaboration to understand how a brighter post-pandemic future could be delivered for both businesses and employees.

The topics covered in the discussions can be grouped into two headline questions:

i. What workforce challenges have been created by the pandemic?

i. How do businesses expect to manage their workforces in the future?

The answers to these questions were found to be fundamentally interlinked. The challenge of the pandemic has caused businesses to adopt new approaches to recruitment, training, management, health and safety and employee communication (among many other things). Some of these new approaches have proven to be so effective that many businesses will adopt them – or at least some aspects of them – on a permanent basis.

Despite this, it was clear that businesses felt that the pandemic would encourage only an evolution, rather than revolution, in workforce management. Also, many of the themes arising from the discussions would have been relevant to the future of workforce management regardless of a pandemic taking place. Understanding employee wellbeing, addressing skills gaps and the growing role of digital technology in the workplace were all prominent talking points.

In short, businesses recognised that what they had previously regarded as normality would not exist in the future. But – whilst still in the midst of the pandemic – there was some uncertainty about exactly what the next normal would be.

In describing the outcomes of the discussions, the rest of the report is structured as follows:

- Key statistics related to the findings from the roundtable discussions.

- A description of the roundtable discussion on the workforce challenges created by the pandemic.

- A description of the roundtable discussion on the future management of workforces.

- A conclusion setting out a blueprint for businesses looking to futureproof their workforces.

Key Statistics

Some increased flexibility in working arrangements is likely to be adopted by a lot of businesses.

For those businesses that intend to use increased homeworking as a permanent business model, the top three reasons are: reduced overheads (64% of ONS survey respondents), improved staff wellbeing (55%) and the ability to recruit from a wider geographic pool (20%).[1]

The pandemic has laid bare the importance of employee wellbeing and mental health.

56% of people report that their wellbeing is being affected by the Covid-19 pandemic (for example, by boredom, loneliness, anxiety and stress).[2]

Employers have had to communicate with employees in new ways, particularly with those on furlough or those whose job security was threatened.

11.2 million jobs were furloughed across the UK between March 2020 and 15 February 2021. The number of people on company payrolls fell by 882,000 between February and November 2020.[3]

Digital connectivity is an essential ingredient to engage with an increasingly online world.

An estimated 9% of families in the UK do not have a laptop, desktop or tablet at home.[4] Around 190,000 homes and businesses are still without access to a decent broadband connection.[5]

[1] Figures taken from ONS datasets, Business Insights and Data on the Economyand social impacts of Covid-19 https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/economicoutputandproductivity/output/datasets/businessinsightsandimpactontheukeconomy

[2] Figures taken from ONS health and wellbeing datasets, https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/datasets/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritaindata

[3] HMT, March 2021, Budget Document

[4] Children's Commissioner Blog, August 2020, Children without internet access during lockdown, https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/08/18/children-without-internet-access-during-lockdown/

[5] Ofcom, December 2020, Connected Nations 2020, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0024/209373/connected-nations-2020.pdf

What workforce challenges have been created by the pandemic?

Roundtable participants described a long list of issues that businesses faced at the beginning of the pandemic. The implications for sales, supply chains and employees were hugely uncertain. The varied (and very welcome) Government support schemes put on offer had to be understood. There were no guarantees that staff had access to reliable broadband, the right IT equipment or appropriate workspaces at home.

But after the initial shock and adjustment to the pandemic, roundtable participants described how they had managed their workforces in the face of significant challenge. The three subjects that came up repeatedly were around adjustment to a new working environment, an increased incidence of wellbeing and mental health issues and how to communicate effectively.

ADJUSTMENT TO A NEW WORKING ENVIRONMENT

There have been productivity downsides to working from home.

Some businesses described an initial productivity boost from home working. Staff generally took well to the new arrangements, gaining time by avoiding the – sometimes stressful – daily commute and travelling to and from in-person meetings.

But as the pandemic wore on, more and more issues with remote working arose.

Some businesses reported that their relationship with customers had changed. Regular online interaction became an expectation, with hours of the day lost to video calls. Several businesses said they had provided a higher level of service but without the increase in fee to match. One business felt it necessary to empower staff to challenge the unreasonable expectations and demands of clients.

Several businesses raised concerns about managing remote employees. Ensuring that staff were doing what they were meant to whilst working from home was regularly mentioned.

> **Key quote**
> "What I gain from not commuting is lost through additional work requests".
> **A PROVIDER OF BUSINESS SUPPORT, GLASGOW**

Employee fatigue has been a widespread concern.

There were numerous reports that employees had been putting in longer hours. This was felt to be particularly true of those in senior positions. It was not uncommon to hear examples of employees having been working more or less constantly since the start of the pandemic. One business was so concerned about employee burnout that they enforced a company-wide Christmas break for the first time.

It was noted that those employees who had returned from furlough appeared refreshed in comparison to those who had remained at work.

> **Key quote**
> "The problem is that no one has been on holiday. It has been relentless".
> **A LAW FIRM, SOMERSET.**

Businesses had innovated in response to their new environment.

Several businesses described how they had adopted a "task-based" approach to management – it did not matter if the work was done in two hours or eight hours, so long as it got done. Critical business processes, such as staff onboarding and training, had been moved successfully online.

> **Key quote**
> "Before Covid, every time staff had a cuppa in the office there was a positive interaction. Now they do a cuppa online, which helps with onboarding as well."
> **A BRANDING AND DESIGN CONSULTANCY, THE NORTH EAST.**

.

INCREASED INCIDENCE OF WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Employee wellbeing and mental health has been a major concern for businesses.

There were examples of how employee wellbeing and mental health had improved during the pandemic – spending more time with family and forming closer bonds with colleagues in difficult circumstances in particular.

But these positive impacts on wellbeing and mental health were, in some cases, far outweighed by negative ones.

Anecdotes of employees becoming frustrated and lonely because of the dramatic reduction in social interaction in both their professional and private lives were widespread. There was also concern for those employees working from small living spaces, and those colleagues who were previously people-facing as part of their job roles.

While many businesses described being proactive in recognising and addressing wellbeing and mental health issues before the pandemic, they felt they had to take this to an entirely new level from now on.

Key quote
"Making staff/colleagues feel connected has been the key focus for employers this year. The most popular online course for [our college] in the summer was Mental Health Awareness".
A COLLEGE, SOMERSET.

There had been notable barriers to identifying employee wellbeing and mental health issues.

Several businesses commented that video call conversations made body language harder to read and emotional signals harder to pick up, making it more difficult to recognise when something may be wrong.

Moreover, managers were not used to dealing with such a volume of wellbeing and mental health concerns, which became emotionally draining for them in turn.

There was significant worry that the winter months could make existing wellbeing and mental health problems worse.

Key quote
"At the moment it is not work from home, it is living at work. You are not getting decompression of travelling home and making dinner".
A RECRUITMENT FIRM, GLASGOW.

Businesses were on a steep learning curve to recognise wellbeing and mental health issues.

One business had set up group wellbeing sessions so that staff could talk about the issues that were affecting them. Staff engagement programmes – such as virtual quizzes, virtual yoga sessions and virtual line dancing lessons – were all examples of how businesses were trying to remain engaged and support their workforce. It was noted that training from mental health charities had helped staff to identify the signs of someone who may be struggling.

Key quote
"We have done an awful lot around wellbeing, upskilling the employees to understand and talk about their issues. Ensuring employees have breaks. Having the constant conversation and awareness".
A SKILLS PROVIDER, GREATER MANCHESTER.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

Communicating to employees about job security has been of paramount importance.

There were reports that many staff were concerned about losing their job and that it was important to offer them reassurance where appropriate. Where job security was under threat, employers were having to have video call conversations about threatened or actual redundancies, which were new and challenging experiences for all concerned.

Putting staff on furlough raised its own communication issues. It was viewed as good practice to check in on furloughed workers to let them know what was happening both with their job and with the company more broadly (there were some stories about how devalued staff felt when they had not been contacted during their time on furlough).

Key quote
"When staff came back in November they thanked the business for the communication that they had had whilst being on furlough".
A TRAVEL COMPANY, NORTHERN IRELAND.

Employees have had to find new ways to communicate with each other.

At every roundtable there were examples of how productivity-enhancing office interactions were hard to replicate with remote working. This might be asking for a password or login details, going to the IT desk with a query or problem or simply learning about what was happening within other parts of the business. Some businesses were still struggling to replicate these lost office interactions more than a year on from the start of remote working.

Key quote
"Despite many people using online calls for ages, there is still stuff that gets lost in online conversations. This can make communication difficult".
A TECH COMPANY, SHEFFIELD

Businesses have had to communicate with their workforce differently.

The move to remote working had put up barriers to communication. For instance, all-staff meetings could not happen like they used to. Businesses were also having to communicate to their employees on entirely new subjects, such as how to stay Covid-secure in the workplace and remain aligned to the Government's rules and guidelines.

Different communication channels were adopted. Instant messaging videos and voice notes, texts and social media groups had all been used.

Key quote
"The CEO does an instant messaging video to staff – this means they get a headline readout of what's going on every day".
AN ENERGY CONSULTANCY, NORFOLK.

How do businesses expect to manage their workforces in the future?

It was clear that roundtable participants thought that some aspects of new working arrangements instigated by the pandemic were of benefit and here to stay. They also described how those new working arrangements would fit into their more general plans for the future management of their workforce. The three subjects that came up repeatedly were how workplaces will change, how training will be delivered and how to attract and train the next generation of employees.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE WORKPLACE

The business benefits to having employees in one place had been proven.

There were numerous examples of how new starters or younger members of staff learnt more – and in many cases faster – from being in the same physical space as colleagues all day. This learning involved how to interact with customers, how to interact with colleagues and developing an understanding of how and why decisions are made.

A lot of businesses articulated how impromptu office interactions had been lost through remote working. This meant fewer ideas being formed and developed, as well as a general drop in productivity.

Key quote
"Unless there is a very good reason not to, my staff will be back in the office after the pandemic. You don't have the same types of conversations of ideas on Zoom – it is better than nothing, but it will not continue".
A MERCHANDISE COMPANY, GLASGOW.

There was a strong feeling that the workplace will become more flexible.

It was explained that now remote working was better understood, some job roles could be offered with more flexible terms and conditions in the future. Indeed, several businesses reported that they had already found more skilled candidates by offering flexibility involving remote working.

Several businesses talked about adopting a hybrid working pattern of three days in the workplace / two days at home in the future. The experience of the pandemic so far had made it clear that different people have different motivations, which could be reflected in more flexible workforce management.

Key quote
"What happens after Covid? Blended working is closer to what happens in the US. It elongates the work day. Those who are adaptable and flexible will thrive".
A TECH COMPANY, NORTHERN IRELAND.

Online recruitment to the workplace had worked well, but maintaining workplace culture online had not.

Many businesses had been forced to take a different approach to recruitment in a remote working environment. This was widely regarded as a success. Recruitment processes run entirely online were mostly thought to have worked well. Firms had become comfortable with making hiring decisions despite not having met a job candidate in person.

Yet businesses talked about how they had tried to establish an identity and culture over many years. Some felt that these identities and cultures that had been eroded because of the pandemic. The point was made that regardless of how good an online onboarding process may be, there are barriers to embedding people into company culture.

Key quote
"Cultural communication is key. You need to give new hires the confidence that they belong".
A UNIVERSITY, NORFOLK.

A SHIFT IN TRAINING PRIORITIES

The need to develop digital skills in the workforce preoccupies a lot of employers.

Many businesses stated that the digital capability of employees will be increasingly important to their competitiveness and success.

A lack of confidence was thought to be a key barrier to older workers engaging more with digital processes. But the point was also made that the pandemic had shown how every employee could digitally upskill quickly when it became an absolute necessity.

While there was agreement that more digital skills were needed in more or less every workplace, the level of competence required depended on the nature of the business. Basic digital skills – such as being able to use email – are relevant in almost every sector of the economy. But specialised digital skills – such as computer coding – are needed within only certain industries.

There was some frustration that there seems to be a lot of digital skills training courses available, creating a confusing landscape for those trying to access them.

Key quote
"The last year has proven that older people can do tech, they are more open to it".
A MANUFACTURER, SUSSEX.

Recognising and addressing employee wellbeing and mental health issues are skillsets that will be given more prominence in the future.

It was felt that less stigma will now be attached to discussing wellbeing and mental health in the workplace because of the experiences of the pandemic. But it was clearly an issue that many were yet to fully get to grips with. There was acceptance that there is a lack of expertise in dealing with wellbeing and mental health issues and that credible external advice may need to be procured. Emotional intelligence was expected to be a quality in employees that employers will increasingly look for.

Key quote
"We have to be careful as employers that mental health and mental wellbeing is not a fad. It has to be a sustained thing. Why weren't we doing it before?".
A BUSINESS OWNER, SOUTH WALES

There is an opportunity for a lot more learning content to move online.

Many believed that training would involve more online resources in the future, provided alongside in-person training as part of a blended approach. Examples of the training that could be provided online were quite varied – one participant described how a college stone masonry course had adapted to be delivered virtually.

One note of caution was that people's access to technology needs to be considered if there is to be a shift to more online learning. For instance, many people do not have the right equipment to engage with ICT qualifications.

Key quote
"There is an awful lot of people trying to get themselves digital ready and digital savvy".
A COLLEGE, NORTHERN IRELAND.

A FOCUS ON THE WORKFORCE'S NEXT GENERATION

Early engagement with young people is crucial to early development of employability skills.

The long-recognised lack of soft skills among young people is still a problem – conversing effectively via email, using the telephone and interacting with colleagues are all things that tend to require improvement among young people. It was felt that businesses need to engage with young people earlier if they are to influence their employability skills and career choices.

The role that work experience can have in developing soft skills was noted. The pandemic has had a negative effect in this regard, with work experience offers effectively ceasing. Several businesses talked about offering virtual placements. However, the problem of companies not having the resource to lead work experience programmes persists. Some commented that they would like to see more engagement from schools in designing work experience placements.

Key quote
"Young people are more likely to embrace change than any others. We are engaging with them too late – 14, 15 is too late... We have had to get off our backsides to get young people in through engagement with the local college".
AN ENGINEERING COMPANY, SHEFFIELD.

It is important to avoid generalisations about young people and the workplace.

There were several comments that young people were generally better at understanding technology and processes within a business. But it was also clear that there is nuance to this statement. It was recognised that while this may be true in terms of things like smart phones and apps, the use of more specialised software was something that still needed to be learned and where there were obvious skills gaps in the economy.

It was also very important to note that not all young people have access to technology, which is representative of wider inequality in society. Businesses have a responsibility to help address this societal problem.

Key quote
"How are businesses going to help kids in our most deprived communities? There are kids out there who do not have a laptop. Forget about LEPs and Mayors to do this".
A MANUFACTURER, SHEFFIELD.

Winning the war for talent requires a deep understanding of that talent.

It was noted that businesses need to better understand what people entering the workforce want from their jobs. Many young people are keen on portfolio careers. They want to work for a company with whose ethics they agree. They are more determined to have a work / life balance. Some believed that smaller companies are behind the curve when it comes to recognising what young people want from the workplace (whereas corporates are much more aware of it).

Key quote
"We talk about getting young people ready for the workplace, but the workplace needs to be ready for them".
A PROVIDER OF BUSINESS SUPPORT, BIRMINGHAM.

Case Studies

A LOOK AT WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT ISSUES IN TWO BUSINESSES

The two case studies set out below are taken from businesses in different sectors and different parts of the country that took part in the online roundtables. Senior leaders in both businesses described the workforce management issues they have faced, and what their approach will be in the future.

GRANT McKNIGHT

Grant McKnight is a West Midlands-based chartered accountant, tax consultant and business adviser. It currently employs nine people and has offices in Birmingham city centre and Sutton Coldfield. Its lengthening client list ranges from individuals and start-ups to limited companies, charities and large international organisations.

Joanna Drinkwater – Grant McKnight's CEO – approaches workforce management as an employer with significant growth ambitions. There is a need to find the right people to expand successfully, to ensure existing employees have positive working environments and to establish a collaborative and inclusive company culture.

The experience of the pandemic has caused Joanna to think differently about how Grant McKnight will recruit in the future. Online interviews have saved time, lowered costs and reduced the firm's carbon footprint. While in-person interviews will not become a thing of the past, they will be dramatically reduced in number, only taking place at the final stage of hiring.

Joanna also believes that the pandemic has changed perspectives about how to work. There are clear benefits to working from home. Staff can better balance their domestic and professional lives, which ultimately means they are happier and more productive. But this is only achievable in an environment conducive to working – Grant McKnight commissioned research into the home-working experiences of its employees, providing support and equipment if issues were found. This has contributed towards a more focused workforce, being able to start work each morning without the stress of the daily commute.

Despite the greater adoption and use of online tools, Joanna thinks that office spaces will remain as an extremely important part of Grant McKnight's future. New starters and junior members of staff – who need to develop skills in how to conduct themselves professionally – learn a great deal from being in the same physical space as more senior staff. Monthly in-person all-staff team meetings will be introduced to encourage relationship building within the company, and to allow all employees to feel a fundamental part of it.

Joanna also sees workforce management issues through the lens of Grant McKnight's clients. The immediate concern is moving from lockdown to gradual reopening. Making preparations while staff are still on furlough and ensuring workplaces are as safe are two of the major issues that companies are grappling with. It is clear that different sectors will experience different recovery paths (something that should be reflected in how the Government supports the business community going forward).

But whether Grant McKnight or one of its clients, Joanna sees the future of workforce management as one of evolution, not revolution.

Tribepad

Tribepad is a Sheffield-based tech company employing 50 people. It provides recruitment solutions for organisations that have large-scale or complex human resources needs, offering an end-to-end service – from advertising job roles to onboarding new hires. The company has now been going for over 10 years and counts the BBC, Subway and the RAF among its clients.

The labour market consequences of the pandemic could clearly be seen in the demand for Tribepad's services. At the end of March 2020, Tribepad had over a million applications in just one week on its platform – many, many more than usual – as people whose job security was threatened looked for new employment options. Moreover, some sectors of the economy that saw increased sales because of the pandemic began accelerating their recruitment.

Dan Kirkland is cofounder and CTO of Tribepad. He offered his insights into the workforce management challenges of a fast growing company in a cutting-edge sector.

Dan described how the company has had a lot of experience recruiting out of schools and universities. From his perspective, the young employees that Tribepad take on through this route are highly unlikely to have relevant industry experience, with their time spent in the world of work usually being in retail or hospitality jobs.

Dan thinks it is easy to blame the education system for young people lacking certain skills when they enter the workplace. He argues that businesses need to take responsibility for the development of young people. Schools can teach the theory of the skills needed to operate in digital and remote working environments, but companies need to accept that those in their first job will always need time to adapt so that theory can be turned into practice.

More broadly, Dan stressed the vital importance of recognising workforce wellbeing and mental health. While the subject was certainly gaining attention pre-pandemic, the crisis has shone an intense spotlight on it. As people go back to work, employers should recognise that these wellbeing and mental health issues will not just go away, and that employees will need to adjust to another type of work environment.

Looking ahead, Dan says that it is too early to make final decisions on workforce management. But despite the benefits of remote working, the company will continue to look local to recruit in the first instance. If the right skills cannot be found in and around the city then Tribepad would be comfortable recruiting from anywhere in the world. Looking further afield for workers should be viewed as another tool to grow a Sheffield business if relevant local talent is not available.

Whatever has happened over the pandemic, and whatever the future holds, Tribepad will remain as a business with its heart in Sheffield.

Conclusion
A blueprint for futureproofing the workforce

The roundtable discussions suggest that the skills and capabilities necessary for workforces to thrive will be different and broader post-pandemic. Of course, every business is different – many themes will be more relevant to some businesses than others. But taken together they provide a blueprint for how to futureproof workforces post-pandemic. This blueprint is set out in the table below.

AREA OF FUTUREPROOFING THE WORKFORCE	REQUIRED SKILLS OR CAPABILITIES TO SUPPORT FUTUREPROOFING
Adjusting to a new working environment	• How to maximise the productivity of the remote workforce. • Adopting new digital processes to support new ways of working. • Redefining client relationships in an online world.
Managing wellbeing and mental health issues	• Ability to identify the signs of wellbeing and mental health issues as they arise. • Ability to address wellbeing and mental health issues when they arise. • Implementing business processes to support employee wellbeing and good mental health.
How to communicate effectively	• Ensuring good channels of communication from management to employees. • Adopting technology and systems that allow employees to constructively communicate with each other. • A specific focus on communicating issues around job security.
Evolving the workplace	• Moving to more flexible working arrangements as part of the workplace. • Ensuring inexperienced staff members can learn by being in the workplace. • Maintaining workplace culture in new workplace environments.
Shifting training priorities	• Understanding digital skills needs and employee barriers to acquiring them. • Introducing more knowledge on employee wellbeing and mental health where possible. • Assessing how blended approaches to training can develop the skills that businesses need.
The next generation of the workforce	• Early engagement with young people to develop employability skills. • Recognising that not all young people have the same development issues within the workforce. • Recognising what younger people want from the workplace to attract them to the workplace.

British Chambers of Commerce

We represent and campaign for business.

Our roots are local, but our reach is global.

We're owned by, and work for, a network of Chambers of Commerce that champion and support our members all across the UK and in countries and markets around the world.

Our unique perspective gives us unparalleled insight into British business communities – every sector, every size, everywhere.

They trust us to be their advocates, and we're passionate about helping them trade and grow.

Working together with Chambers, we drive change from the ground up – and our bottom line is helping companies, places and people achieve their potential.