PUSH

THE HUMAN ELEMENT REPORT

How to place people and their performance at the heart of organisations in our new world of work.

THIS REPORT ALMOST STARTED OUT LIFE AS A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT BEAST....

You see, with the imminent 'return to work' on everyone's minds, producing a report on 'How to Hybrid' seemed like the obvious thing to do. But whilst this would of course have been considered in a human context, it still didn't feel quite right for PUSH - a company that looks after humans - it felt wrong and far too executional to deliver a report that was essentially 'just' about a process.

So, back to the drawing board, what about a report on mental health?

Whilst we completely understand the unique nature of what's happened to us all over the last year, and are vocal advocates for individuals' wellbeing and mental health, we also believe that positive mental health should be the baseline that we all hope for ourselves and each other.

AT PUSH, WE ARE OBSESSED WITH PEOPLE

We want to help the teams and organisations that we work with consider how they can go beyond 'just' that, by managing their minds and bodies to reach peak performance - in particular throughout times of change.

So with the focus of the report still not sitting quite right, the PUSH team thought long and hard, eventually going back to our core values, at which point its direction became clear...

Because at PUSH, we are obsessed with people.

We spend all day, every day thinking and talking to people about… well, people. It is a company that looks after people - however they need it - to help them think, feel and do better. And with this deepened understanding, we are able to radically improve the performance of the businesses that they work within.

And it's because of these many conversations that we have seen the far-reaching impact of the last 12 months on leaders, employees and organisations alike.

We realised that we had a wealth of insights that needed to be shared, insights that would eventually lead us to discovering where the opportunity lies in our new world of work.

BECAUSE WE BELIEVE THAT WE ARE AT A GENUINE WATERSHED MOMENT IN TIME.

The last 12 months have seen our people experience trauma on a scale, fortunately, not felt by most of us ever in lifetimes before. One that has had a huge impact upon our mental health and wellbeing and is likely to continue to for some time now.

At the same time, our businesses have been catapulted forward five, maybe ten, years into the future. We've carried out the greatest remote working experiment ever known to man, with employees, hopefully, feeling like they have more choice and control than they've ever had previously.

However, let's be clear, whilst we have made work… 'work' over the last year by evolving our processes, our behaviours and beliefs (in particular those of leadership) have not necessarily moved at a similar pace.

WE MAY HAVE BEEN FAST-TRACKED INTO THE FUTURE,

but it's caused a misalignment between people's wellbeing, their performance and their behaviours. Of course, this is understandable; we were flung into this new world of work at speed and with little time to think.

However we now have the opportunity to consider and create a future of work that not only supports our people, but will radically improve the way they work, and this all starts by putting our people and their performance at the heart of our organisations.

Our mission: Continuing to place people and their performance at the heart of organisations in this new world of work.

How did we approach this?

In order to achieve this goal, we needed to ask the following question:

What's been the real impact of the pandemic on humans at work?

The results of which paved the way for our next question:

In the context of Q1's answer, how do we ensure now that our people think, feel and do their very best so that they can operate at peak performance?

Who was our audience?

We looked first to our clients - including both their leaders and employee population - gaining first-hand insights into how the pandemic has affected them as individuals and teams.

We also wanted to quantify this qualitative work, and as such worked with YouGov to survey 3,000 individuals within the employee community, which helped us to understand the full impact of Covid, lockdown and working remotely over the last 12 months, as well as how they feel about what's coming next.

THE PUSH REPORT

In the below report we share our findings complete with additional context, after which we provide recommendations and frameworks based on this research. The aim is to demonstrate how you can radically improve the way your people can work in their new post-lockdown frameworks, but it all starts with placing them at the heart of your organisation.

PRE-COVID: THE HALCYON DAYS?

Do you remember the time, seemingly a million light years away, but in fact just over 12 months ago, when we'd fall into a Sunday evening or post-holiday despair and groan outwardly that tomorrow we'd be 'going back to work'?

68%

Of people worked in the office 100% of the time pre-COVID.

37%

Of people were actively unsupported to work from home.

That very phrase instantly evokes images of alarm clocks bleeping, coffee on the boil, a lukewarm shower and a scrabble for semi-clean clothes before a dash to the car, bus or train, joining thousands of others in the caterpillar-crawl towards a strip-lit office in which you'd spent eight or so taxing hours before doing the whole journey in reverse. And repeat.

Those were the days, eh? Employers had complete control over where we worked and how we worked. The days when our physical presence in the office seemed to matter more to our bosses than 'being present'. With limited 'trust' from bosses to their employees it was apparent that there was a belief if you couldn't be seen then there was a likelihood that you also were not working.

Indeed, our YouGov research showed that 68% of us worked 100% in the office and nearly two in five (37%) workers were actively unsupported to ever work from home.

We groaned at the petty office politics and irritating habits of our colleagues and told ourselves that we'd 'get out of this' and find something more meaningful. Only to discover that weeks, months and years had passed us by, and we'd done nothing to stop the march of time.

Then the pandemic hit, and suddenly our ways of working were catapulted into the future.

Almost overnight, we were liberated from all of the above. Some of us were furloughed (and maybe still are). Others waited patiently for HR and Tech Support to fix us up with a way of working that didn't involve us stepping out of our front doors. And whilst we all had vastly different experiences, we all had to deal with a significant amount of change in both our personal and professional lives.

Which brings us to the report's first question:

What's been the real impact of the pandemic on humans at work?

Following our YouGov survey of 3,000 individuals within the employee community, we were able to extract three main learnings. These are:

1. We were never working remotely, we were working in isolation
2. Leadership behaviours haven't caught up with the new world of work
3. The 'New Norm' anxiety

"People enjoyed the novelty of working from home at the start, but it did become tiresome at times, especially when people realised they missed human contact."

1. We were never working remotely, we were working in isolation:

Let's be clear, we were never actually truly working remotely - we were working in isolation! These are very different things: working remotely means that you can work from anywhere - not just your kitchen table! It means that you can still see people and go to the office any time that you want - not be constrained to your four walls and the odd zoom call when we want to speak to a colleague or friend.

On distinguishing between the two, it's easy to see why so many of us started out enjoying our new benefits of working from home, but ultimately saw that enthusiasm fade…

REMOTE WORKING: THE HONEYMOON PERIOD

Pre-Covid there were few companies who were 'all in' on remote working. But suddenly it was thrust upon employers, and without any alternative, they were forced to make it work.

And in the early days the benefits seemed endless: fewer pointlessly long meetings (because video-call technology doesn't really favour it), no dull office conversations about last night's TV, no stressful commute, and no-one worrying about what you were wearing from the waist down.

For years employees had questioned the rigid customs of the workplace, understanding that flexible and remote working wouldn't impact their productivity. However until March 2020, few had been granted the opportunity to prove that - but then the pandemic struck, and the results of this great 'remote working' experiment were clear, with our YouGov surrey demonstrating that

35%

Of individuals felt that they got so much more done working from home rather than being in the office!

40%

Of employees do not want to return to my office/place of work full time, as working from home is better for their mental health. This increased to over half in some industries including IT (57%) and Media/Marketing (59%).

Woohoo! Working remotely was clearly the elixir of life!

However, over time, our initial adrenaline dwindled, and our enthusiasm for this new way of working waned as the real effect of lockdown and our never-ending isolation continued…

WORKING IN ISOLATION: THE END OF THE HONEYMOON PERIOD

So what happened? Why were we suddenly so exhausted?

Because it wasn't like we were going anywhere or doing anything! Life was suddenly so much simpler, less full and consequently less stressful! So, why were we feeling so damn drained?

Put simply it was because of the total lack of stimulation and variety that we were experiencing, and this detracted from the benefits that working from home offered.

The Healthy Mind Platter -
created by Dan Siegal proposes that we need seven essential daily mind activities in order to achieve optimum mental health:

- Focus
- Exercise
- Rest
- Play
- Sleep
- Reflection
- Connection

Whilst these individual activities are weighted differently based on the individual, you can very quickly tell that we were denied most of these over lockdown! From a professional perspective, we started to desperately miss our connection with colleagues and the outside world:

47%
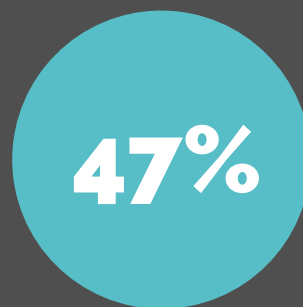
Of our YouGov survey saying they disagree with the statement that they feel they know their colleagues better whilst we've been working from home (as we've had a glimpse into their real/home lives), compared to only 13% who agree with this.

So, now that we're heading out of lockdown, the solution seems obvious:

IMPLEMENT A HYBRID MODEL

That allows people to trial remote working, but real remote working, where they can work from anywhere.

"Flexibility is the word. It shouldn't be compulsory. We need to be able to work effectively whether face to face or virtually and give people choice."

Where they can benefit from the stimulation and variety that we know enhances productivity, whilst encouraging coming into the office regularly in order to connect with colleagues and collaborate well.

Indeed it is clear from our research that this is also what the workforce largely want:

With 40% of people saying they do not want to go back to working completely in the office full time as it would be bad for their mental wellbeing. This increases to 50% for the under 35s.

However, it's clear that this route won't be available to everyone, which takes us onto our second learning

2. BEHAVIOURS (IN PARTICULAR THOSE OF LEADERSHIP) HAVEN'T CAUGHT UP WITH THE NEW WORLD OF WORK

The opportunity for employers to design a productive and happy hybrid working model seems clear, yet despite this;

36% **of the 3,000 people researched believe that they will be back in the office 100% of the time!**
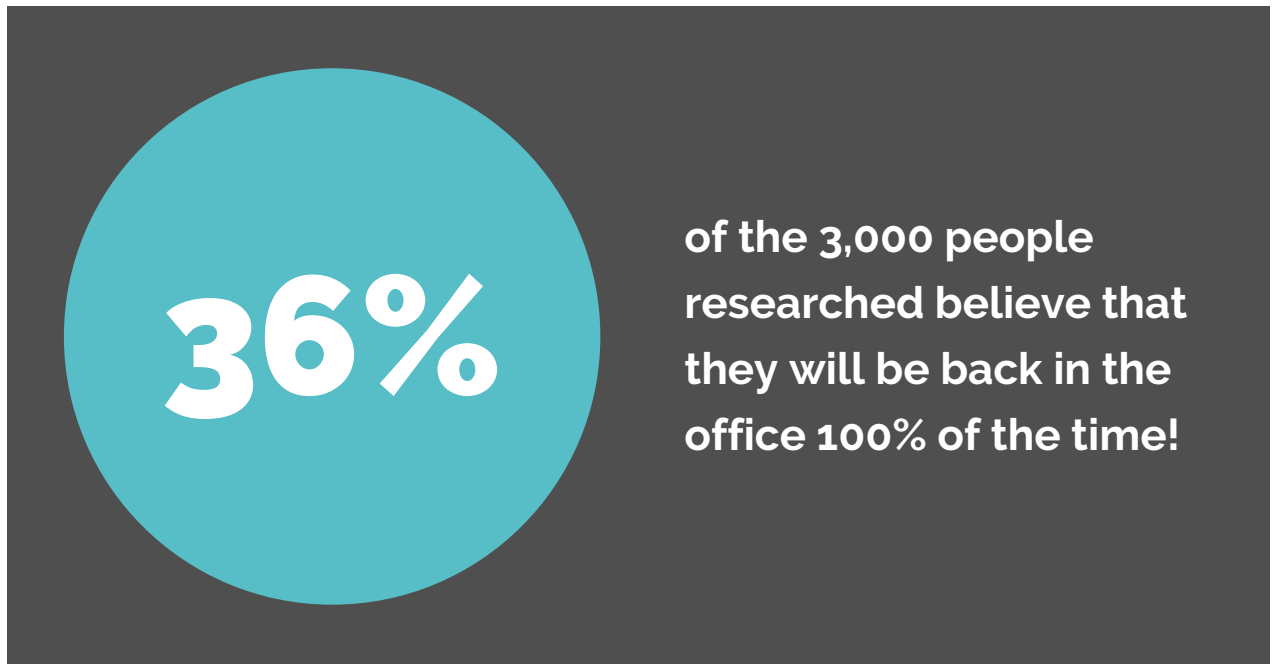
So why is this when it's clear that individuals feel that working remotely increases their productivity and improves mental health?

Well on one hand you could hypothesise that organisations - so driven by the bottom-line and placing all of their focus on service and product - don't have the resources, energy or motivation to spend additional time thinking about how they could improve their work environment. Consequently, they will resent spending time formulating a hybrid model that truly works; innovating and iterating will be a drain on resources that they just don't have, so they'd rather just return to how things were.

However, when you dig a little deeper, it becomes clear that there's an underlying, more human-centric issue at play here, backed up by the perturbing, but frankly unshocking declaration from David Solomon, CEO of Goldman Sachs, that working remotely was 'an aberration that we're going to correct as soon as possible.'

In fact our survey reinforced this, we recorded that:

40% Of people suspect that their employer would prefer them to return to the office as soon as possible, because they think that their employees achieve less work at home. This increases to 48% for those under 35.

32% Of people believe that those who return to the office are more likely to get promoted. Rising to 42% for the under 35!

This was further illuminated by conversation we had with employees we worked with:

"I'd like to return to the office for a limited number of days per week/month purely for the social side of things. I prefer working from home as it improves my ability to focus, but I miss the social side of things. However, I don't want to be penalised or ostracised for making that decision - whether that's from a work or social perspective."

"Leadership is an achievement of trust."
Peter Drucker.

Despite clear evidence that employees have maintained and in fact increased productivity whilst working from home, it still remains the case that bosses don't trust employees to get the job done, and are unable to let go of their inherent belief that hours are not worked and corners are cut whilst working from home.

Meanwhile, we're also seeing that employees don't trust that managers understand their particular needs (childcare, for example, or making sure that remote workers are properly informed and included as part of the overall team.)

This lack of two-way trust is a problem, because it's how the hybrid model survives, and at the moment there clearly isn't enough to support the model working effectively.

Unfortunately, this lack of trust, combined with the uncertainty as to how the new world of work is going to look, has lead to significant levels of anxiety, which leads us into our third and final learning:

3. THE 'NEW NORM' ANXIETY

We were counting down the days until March 29th, it would be the first glimpse of the light at the end of the tunnel, we were ecstatic at the thought of returning to our favourite haunts with (up to 6 of) our favourite people.

So what's this low-level hum of anxiety?

Whilst we're slowly coming out of this current stage of lockdown, many have found that the 'half-life' we're living is actually making us feel more uncertain and, consequently, anxious! That whilst this 'new norm' that we're heading into is liberating in so many ways, it also feels like we're living in some strange parallel universe which feels very controlled, clinical and masked. And by holding up a mirror to what once was, it's intensifying the feeling that the old world has gone for the foreseeable….

So yep, that feeling you can't quite place, might in fact be grief…

Think about it, this year we have suffered a tremendous amount of collective loss: loss of loved ones, loss of connection, and loss of life as we know it.

What doesn't help, is that we seem to have developed a strange complex for guilt: where we feel guilty for grieving when life's okay, or guilty for feeling sad when others have lost more, as though grief and gratitude couldn't possibly exist side by side. Because they can, and they do!

Similarly whilst lockdown was incredibly hard, it was defined, temporary and also somewhat safe. The lack of boundaries and expected rate of change has spiked our anxiety, and it's showing up for so many in how they feel about returning to the workplace, with our research showing that:

31%

of individuals feel anxious about going back to the office.

Increasing to:

39% **47%** **42%**

for under 35's.   for those in media/ marketing.   for those in legal.

THE PANDEMIC & ITS HUMAN IMPACT

A SUMMARY

1 **People have experienced undeniable trauma -** there was a 10% increase in absences due to mental health in 2020.

2 **There is still widespread grief and anxiety -** particularly in regards to returning to the workplace.

3 **Working remotely had a positive impact on mental health and productivity,** whereas working in isolation had a detrimental effect.

4 **Employer and leadership trust issues were highlighted -** lack of trust being the underlying reason many want their employees back in the workplace.

5 **Employees are now predicting a new form of presenteeism -** believing that even in hybrid environments they could be overlooked for promotions and career progression if they aren't in the workplace.

6 **People want support from their employers.** Almost 30% of our YouGov respondents stated this, and it increased to 38% for those under 35, and just over 30% for those in the legal and financial industries.

So with a clearer understanding of the human impact and our emotional state of play, we refined question 2, realising that essentially we needed to answer the following question:

In the context of this uncertain, anxious but quickly evolving landscape, how do we ensure that our people think, feel and do their best so that our businesses operate at peak performance?

The answer to this question can be found in the genuine and empathetic understanding of how the people in your business are feeling. It's the foundation for everything else, for high-growth, fulfilling potential, and hitting targets.

The following are 5 recommendations that will put your people's feelings front and centre of the decision and solution making process. It sounds so simple. It is. And it's also a game-changer

1. PROMOTE ENVIRONMENTS AND CULTURES OF SAFETY

The biggest rule of business and creating high-performing people is actually the most straightforward of them all: For people to work and perform well, they need to feel safe. So, what affects how safe our people are feeling?

This is where we turn to David Rock's 'SCARF' model, which examines the social factors that affect how safe people feel and consequently perform within their teams.

There are five factors:

1 **Status**: Our relative importance to others

2 **Certainty:** Our ability to predict the future

3 **Autonomy:** Our sense of control over events

4 **Relatedness:** Our sense of safety with others

5 **Fairness:** Our perception of fair exchanges between people

It's abundantly clear that the last 12 months have affected all of these factors, so how can we start to replace and safeguard them for our teams so that they can continue to perform well during times of uncertainty and rapid change?

FIRSTLY, HERE'S WHAT NOT TO DO:
INSTIGATE YET ANOTHER CHANGE WITHOUT TALKING TO YOUR PEOPLE FIRST

We recently heard from a client that the first communication they'd had with their employer about returning to work had been when an email landed in an inbox notifying them that they 'would all be returning to the office on the 21st June.' The problem isn't so much on the content of the email, but the way in which it was delivered - without any prior communication or consultation with the employees.

On referring back to the **'SCARF'** model - it's clear that almost all of the factors were overlooked and affected, and with people already being subjected to so much uncertainty and change, the last thing they needed was another thing forced upon them.

SO HOW CAN YOU WORK WITH THE SCARF MODEL?

We all prioritise 'SCARF's' five factors differently, which is why it's important to see this through the eyes of the individual person and their needs. Not only will you have a far better understanding of what your team needs if you've reached out to them, but people generally just want to feel that they have been given the opportunity to share their thoughts and concerns so that they feel part of the solution. Doing this will automatically soothe each element.

2. EXPERIMENT & EVOLVE

Last year the workplace was catapulted into the digital age, and I think for most people it's hard to imagine it's real potential, we're 13 months in and have only scratched the surface.

So whether you're exploring hybrid working or going fully remote, remember you're navigating new frontiers - you wont know the answer right now! You're also almost certainly not going to get everything right, which is why it's important to view this period as a time for experiments, not final decisions.

15

Crucially, to make the experiment truly work, you need to understand the context of your workforce - what they need and what is important to them and then, how you will judge success. Your solution is unlikely to be the same as your competitor's down the road and nor should it - your workforce are unique therefore so should their solution be..

And, let's be really clear - like buying a house, you are unlikely to hit open a perfect solution or indeed one that suits everyone. However, if you understand what is most important to your people, your service and your proposition, alongside where you have some flexibility, you will have tailored a new solution that feels right for most of you.

Facing this new chapter with an experimental mindset will take the pressure off everyone, and if people know that everything is up for iteration, they will be more likely to feel more involved and likely to contribute more.

Remember, your employees have experienced previously unparalleled levels of professional autonomy over the last 12 months, you can't just put the lid back on, so keep both channels of communication and mindsets open.

3. SET AN AGENDA AROUND EXPECTED BEHAVIOURS AND BOUNDARIES

In order for these experiments to succeed, and so that you can ensure your new way of working is a triumph, you'll need to set in place company-wide behaviours and boundaries.

These need to be set out and agreed by everyone up front, so that everyone is clear on the context and limits that these experiments and new ideas are being set and tested against - as well as what is expected of them.

Ultimately this process is going to save everyone a whole load of emotional energy; because on one hand, it stops people feeling taken advantage of and, on the other, it stops people wondering what is and isn't ok, which leaves more time for innovating and growing!

4. SUPPORT AND TALKING THROUGH A WAVE OF GRIEF AND ANXIETY

Since March 2020 we've endured an awful lot of loss.

Many people won't have fully processed their response to that yet (surviving was the brain's priority, there was no space for grieving), but as life begins to open up again, you might see signs of delayed grief alongside more established uncertainty and anxiety. In fact as we emerge from lockdown and re-enter familiar spaces, it will hold a mirror up to the parts of life that aren't the same anymore, in doing so, likely triggering the grieving process.

Our point being - don't expect that your people will be consistently overflowing with positivity - and make sure there are systems in place so that they have someone they can talk through their feelings with, and seek help if they need it.

In many instances, providing a fully-trained, external, confidential and non-judgemental resource isn't just a nice to have - it is entirely the right thing to do. And, to be clear, catching 'challenges' early on means that preventative support can be much simpler and quicker to action rather than the much greater and protracted need once someone hits 'crisis' point.

5. PROTECT YOUR PEOPLES' TIME AND SPACE TO LEARN THROUGH RELEVANT TECH AND BEHAVIOURAL UPSKILLING

Leaders and employees alike will need to upskill their communication and behaviours in order to get around the challenges of hybrid working.

Our research showed that it hasn't gone unnoticed that leaders feel uncomfortable at the prospect of remote working, and this very likely boils down to insufficiency in their own skills.

Indeed a Mckinsey and Company's recent article 'Innovation in a Crisis', found that whilst

90%

of executives agreed that innovating their business will be critical right now.

21%

feel they have the expertise, resources and commitment to pursue this successfully.

27%

believe they could enhance their organisational health.

It's clear that investing in leadership programmes right now will be vital to your company's growth, and people's success.

Alongside leadership challenges, when PUSH have spoken to companies over the last year, another concern has cropped up time and time again:

"How can we maintain staff development and upgrade skills when we aren't in close proximity with one another?"

So many of our clients referenced how junior members of staff, in particular, were suffering as they were losing the opportunity to learn through 'osmosis' - those serendipitous moments when you ask questions and quickly get answers from the person next to you.

Whilst it's clear that it is not a one-size-fits all solution for everyone, what we do know is that it's likely the right tech will bestow the opportunity to answer your genuine business problems. These will include up-skilling your people and getting them to the very best version of themselves; positioning them to create career-defining work.

So, alongside us continuing our highly effective programmes, PUSH has created their first app that incorporates behavioural upskilling through innovative technology whilst also enabling individuals to connect and access support at the same time, too.

The technology will provide for every element of your people being at their very best whilst they're in your organisation. It will also provide real time data on how they are feeling; demonstrating how the content and service they're being delivered can immediately support their needs.

We are launching this app at a time when people need it most, to promote development, collaboration and wellbeing - proven and powerful tools for increasing business competitiveness, profitability and employee retention.

And, over the last year, despite an incredibly challenging context, our programmes have been proven to deliver exactly that for our clients with reported shifts in performance, engagement, wellbeing and productivity. Most importantly, time and again we have created spaces for growth, connection, joy and safety. Something that, whichever way you look at it, has been in relatively scant supply since March 2020.

And, now, we're looking forward to creating the future of brilliant work with you too.

WRAPPING IT UP

Throughout history, crises have been the catalyst for opportunity, innovation, and growth. This is no different, and as such could and should be a genuine watershed moment.

We hope that this report has given you a glimpse into how we see forward-thinking companies will innovate and iterate through people-led physical and digital solutions, seizing this as an opportunity for real, meaningful growth, and investing in their people by implementing frameworks so that people feel fully supported.

Because your people are open to change, they want to be doing great work, and if this time has shown us anything, it's that there were great faults in how we were previously working. The answer therefore is not to 'go back to how things were' but to learn from what has happened over the last 12 months and keep learning.

For, now, we clearly have the opportunity to be truly awesome.

Notes: All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 3,037 employed adults in the private. Fieldwork was undertaken between 8th - 16th April 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of British business size.