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# THE ISOLATION ISSUE

*How to manage a workplace culture shift during lockdown*

# WORK IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

**The Coronavirus pandemic** has affected the world in a manner never seen before. Social lockdown, mass business closure, widespread unemployment, and for many of those still in jobs, either a significant cultural shift to working from home full time or regular forays into a hazardous environment. It's the kind of social impact historically only seen during world wars and in this crisis, HR professionals are the front line troops.

Tasked not only with rapidly implementing a company-wide working from home strategy to keep businesses up and running, many HR functions are also operationally responsible for the mass layoffs and furloughing of employees. This is all while building a crisis communication plan and keeping on top of the numbers of those directly affected by COVID-19.

In short, the HR function has never been more essential or more stretched. A mid-March poll by People Management magazine found that 84% of companies have pulled HR into top-level strategic planning and response. But the same survey estimates 33% of businesses do not know what they will do if an employee contracts the virus. A lot of very serious decisions are being made on the spot.

Law firm Lewis Silkin LLP estimates that as of mid-March, around 59% of large multinational enterprises have managed to put into place a plan to respond to pandemic diseases such as Coronavirus. Typical measures include social distancing and remote working arrangements with the majority (88%) managing self-isolation by asking employees to work from home.

In the white collar world the shift is happening quickly. Cloud security services firm Netskope, which routes corporate network traffic for hundreds of thousands of office workers said it estimates that the number of American knowledge workers (primarily desk workers) logging in from home hit a high of 58% on March 19. This is up from a weekday average of 27% over the last six months.

But with large swathes of the global workforce moving to a work-from-home model, the next challenge will be managing a new workplace etiquette to ensure that the vector for discrimination and interpersonal misconduct does not shift in parallel with the adoption of digital-first communication.

# WE'RE ALL HOME WORKERS NOW

**W**e're into uncharted territory. Despite the availability of enabling technologies - high speed broadband, cloud services, wireless connectivity, highly portable and powerful devices - remote working hasn't been adopted quite as widely as people think. Depending on the research you read it's estimated that only between 25% and 30% of companies worldwide allow large numbers of their workforce to log on remotely and only around 4% of enterprises worldwide are in a position where the entire workforce *can* work online.

The main challenge to widespread home working has largely been cultural. Employers for the most part don't trust their people to do the job if they aren't physically on premise. Or in cases where the company allows home working, it may be a line manager that doesn't buy into the model. After all, it's a more challenging management style.

UK labor authority ACAS has this to say: "A lack of trust can be the biggest barrier to achieving successful homeworking. It can be challenging for managers who prefer face-to-face supervision... Having systems or policies in place will help the organization run effectively."

As a result, working-from-home has become almost something of a perk and caused considerable rifts between those who can and those who can't.

A 2017 study by David Maxfield and Joseph Grenny for leadership training consultancy VitalSmarts found that just over half of people who work mostly remotely feel they don't get treated equally by their colleagues.

Yes, there is research that suggests that companies that embrace flexible working practices see productivity gains and happier staff but there is also research that found home workers feel the need to put more hours in to make up for the perceived 'slacking' associated with WFH.

Given current events however, this argument may now become academic. Everyone has been thrust into an experiment - willingly or not - where businesses get an unexpected opportunity to test out the remote working model wholesale. The future of some may even depend on the experiment's success.

Now everybody who has a primarily desk-based job gets to see what it's like to WFH. Is it rolling out of bed three minutes before your first video call and spending the day in a smartish work shirt and pajama bottoms? Or is it discovering that everyone is now putting in two or three hours more work as standard? Even in some cases, as salaries are being cut.

People are understandably tense. Against a backdrop of social and economic unease they are being forced to work in an unfamiliar way that requires a different communication etiquette. Many will also be battling mental health pressure and social isolation. It's not a good mix.

## *88%*

*of large enterprises are managing self-isolation by asking employees to work from home*
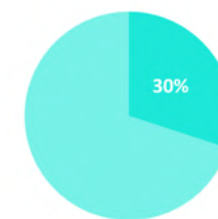
*- Lewis Silkin LLP*

# DISCRIMINATION GOES DIGITAL

**S**ome 30% of UK respondents to a survey by Totaljobs in 2018 said they had been victims of workplace discrimination on official corporate messaging platforms, such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, or Google Chat. In the US, a 2019 survey by Monster.com revealed that 39% of respondents had received aggressive messages from colleagues on similar tools.

Cyber-bullying has been well documented for some time and remains as persistent in the corporate workplace as it does in schools and collages. A recent high-profile case focuses on the departure of the CEO of leading consumer luggage brand Away after an exposé of bullying culture over Slack.

But as with most workplace misconduct, the revelations at Away that made the headlines are an anomaly, because it's still the case that most incidents of discrimination, bullying, and harassment go unreported. Indeed, the same studies also show that 30% of workers in the UK (according to Totaljobs) and 34% in the US (according to Monster.com) who do experience cyberbullying suffer in silence because they are not confident they will be supported by their employer. Furthermore, around 8% find it easier to leave their jobs than to report the issue and request an investigation into the situation.

It turns out that digital workers are disincentivised from reporting workplace misconduct in just the same way as employees that spend all their time in the physical presence of their colleagues.

30% of UK employees have experienced discrimination, harassment, or bullying at work via a messaging platform. 8% left their jobs as a result (Totaljobs 2018)
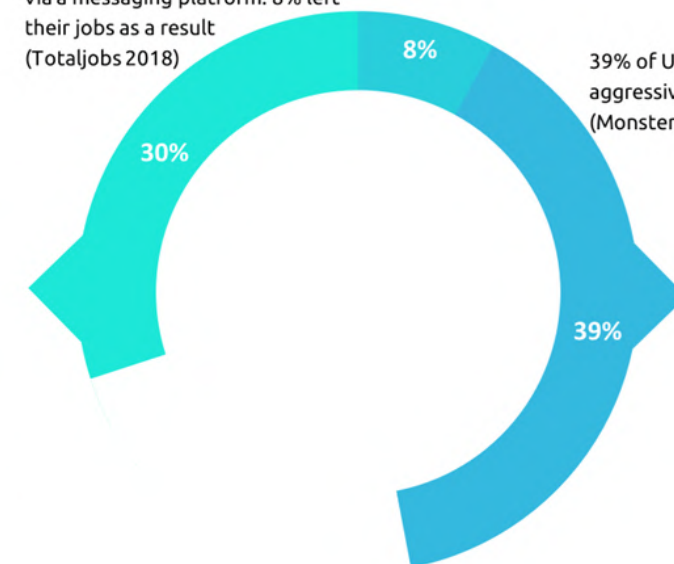
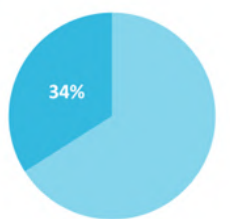39% of US employees have experienced aggressive messages from colleagues (Monster.com 2019)

30% of UK employees that experienced online bullying at work did not report it because they did not feel supported by their employer (Totaljobs 2018)

34% of US employees that experienced online bullying at work did not report it because they did not feel supported by their employer (Monster.com 2019)

8%

30%

30%

39%

34%

# AS TENSIONS RISE
# SO DOES MISCONDUCT

The rush to implement a working from home initiative is just one of the new challenges facing HR professionals during this crisis however. There are several others clamoring for mind share.

One of the first issues to hit the headlines was not new as such but is certainly being amplified by COVID-19. Racial harassment, bullying, and discrimination was one of the noted social symptoms during the SARS outbreak in 2003 and Coronavirus has seen that same behavior raise its head again. Initially, we heard that increased racism was directed towards Chinese and Asian ethnicities in public settings but it quickly became evident the problem is present in the workplace too.

In the US, the issue prompted the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to issue guidance, warning that COVID-19-related "fear and anxiety can lead to social stigma towards Chinese or other Asian Americans."

While in the UK, trade unions such as BECTA acknowledged an increase in discrimination in people at work and ACAS reminded organizations: "Employers must not single anyone out. For example, they must not treat an employee differently because of their race or ethnicity."

As tensions rise, employers are advised to remind staff of the behavior expected of them and that treating employees of certain nationalities differently or jokes and banter related to Coronavirus could easily be seen as distasteful and expose the company to discrimination claims.

Another problem is discrimination against those employees infected or apparently affected by the virus. Paranoia is high and while knowledge workers can likely operate remotely without too much impediment, there are workers that need to be physically present to do their job. Even with mass layoffs and furloughing, there are still millions of essential workers such as healthcare and emergency services, grocery stores and food production, utilities, logistics and online retail that are still expected or required to turn up.

So as well as taking care not to discriminate against employees based on their national origin, accordingly, employers should establish consistently applied and clearly communicated practices with regard to self-quarantining of employees that have been or might be infected.

In recent days, Amazon and its subsidiary Whole Foods have seen mass walkouts and come under fire in the press over their handling of incidents where a number of warehouses and stores were kept open allegedly after multiple employees tested positive for COVID-19.

*It's appalling to see new reports of people being targeted due to their race, ethnicity or purported association with COVID-19. WHO once again calls for an end to stigmatization & discrimination at a time when solidarity and compassion must be paramount*

*- Director General, World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros Adhanom*

# KEEPING THE DIGITAL DOOR OPEN

Another HR challenge identified here is how to keep track of those employees directly and indirectly affected by the virus. Given how off guard the world was caught, not many organizations will already have in place a tool or process where people can specifically report having tested positive for a contagious virus, displaying symptoms, or perhaps living with someone who is sick. The fact remains however that employers need to be able to capture this data in order to respond appropriately to the employee affected, their team members and colleagues and all those that share the same building or facility.

The requirements are not dissimilar to those for workplace misconduct reporting but when it comes to incumbent and legacy tools, it's been well documented that most are ineffective, with hotlines among the least used mechanisms **(see Vault magazine 02: The Activism Issue)**.

## RESPONSIBILITIES AS AN EMPLOYER

Employers have a duty of care to protect their staff, not just from the virus itself but also from any associated discrimination or harassment both from colleagues and third parties. Furthermore, when it comes to responsibility, employers will be unable to rely simply on a policy that states that discrimination and harassment is not tolerated, they will have to prove that they took appropriate steps to mitigate the discrimination.

- **Remind employees of your organization's discrimination and harassment policies.** Make sure they are easily available and they are adapted for a remote-first culture (i.e. how they apply to discrimination across messaging apps)
- **Encourage a speak up culture**. stigmatizing issues (such as with race-related discrimination due to COVID-19) can be challenging for employees to report. Without effective reporting tools in place, many will suffer in silence.
- **Encourage bystander support.** According to a 2007 study on the Experience of Bystanders of Workplace Ethnic Harassment, 69% of US employees have witnessed discrimination against a colleague. These people are essential to address the challenge above
- **Acknowledge third-party harassment. E**mployees may experience or witness harassment or discrimination by a third-party such as a customer or visitor. Although the employer might not be liable for discrimination it is their duty to protect the employee
- **Take reasonable steps to prevent discrimination and harassment**. Typically, employers will only avoid liability in the event of a discrimination case if they can show they have taken 'all reasonable steps' to protect employees, such as implementing an effective and secure solution for reporting sensitive issues that take place in person or digitally

*Employers will be liable if they fail to protect employees from harassment by third parties and the employer?s failure is itself due to discriminatory reasons.*

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*Employers will only avoid liability if they can show that they took all reasonable steps to prevent employees behaving in such a manner.*

-Lewis Silkin LLP

Vault Platform has added a COVID-19 reporting feature to its enterprise mobile app

Help HR stay on top of the crisis by enabling employees to report directly via the app when showing symptoms or testing for COVID-19

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