

Soft skills in hard times: why good people management matters more than ever

A virtual roundtable

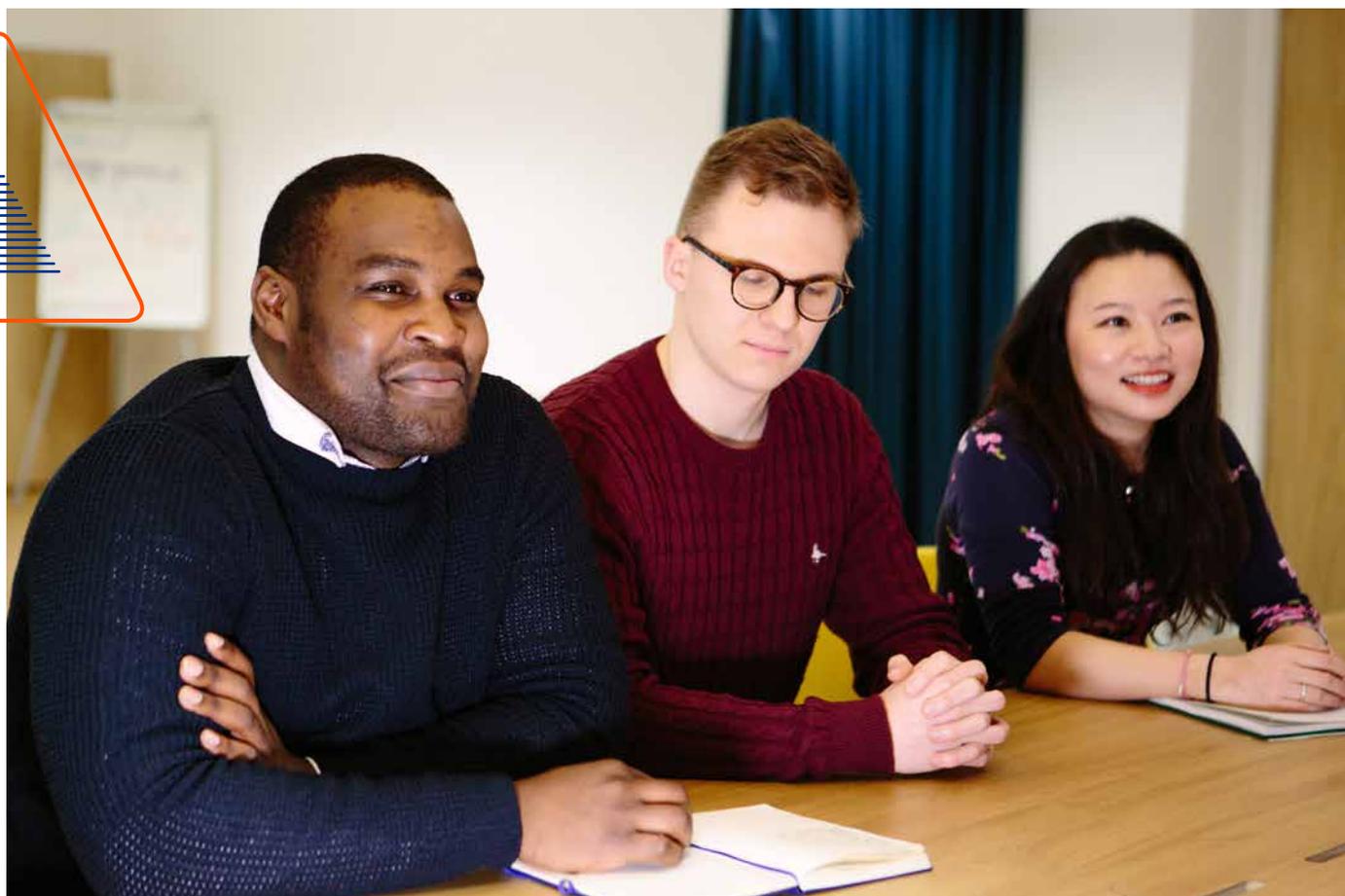
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‘Soft Skills in Hard Times:’ A virtual roundtable



The Coronavirus pandemic has transformed the world of work on an unprecedented scale, with a host of challenges for both employers and employees. Line managers are facing an ever more critical role in ensuring employees make the safe transition to more home and hybrid ways of working, but also that they are motivated and productive.

This conversation brings together the views of a cross-section of Greater Manchester’s business leaders and HR experts from a virtual roundtable event – in collaboration with the Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter, CIPD and Acas. In this discussion, our speakers addressed the management challenges the pandemic has presented, and that lie ahead as the economy recovers, along with the importance of good people management.

Thank you to our panel of Greater Manchester speakers, for such an insightful conversation. And our host, Robbie Hurley at Acas, for chairing what is one of the key discussions to agile management.

Introductions

Hosted by

Robbie Hurley, Media Manager, Acas

Panellists



Elaine Johnson,

Head of People, Rochdale Boroughwide Housing



Sharon Russell,

Senior HR Business Partner, Transport for the North



Jim Liptrot,

Managing Director, Howorth Air Tech



Jonathan Bourne,

Managing Director, Damar Training



Louise Brown,

Vice Principal, Wigan and Leigh College



Carl Hampson,

General Manager, Allied Bakeries



Nicola Ryan,

Colleague Support Director, Rowlinson Knitwear

Reactions to the start of the pandemic



For all businesses, the fast-changing pace of the pandemic and the changes it brought, came as a surprise. We discussed how employers felt during the first lockdown.

Nicola starts off by saying “It was a shock, we were worried about our traditionally lower paid employees. Our leadership team actually took a 10-50% salary reduction to support the lower paid and remove those considered vulnerable, into a safe environment.”

Louise added “It wasn’t simple, we put our students first. We needed to consider not everyone had the relevant kit, broadband access, or space to learn. However, fast forward 12-14 months, we probably catapulted the organisation 5 years ahead in its development.”

We keep our staff involved, we told them good news and we told them bad. But we made sure they felt safe. - Jim

“I initially thought, how will our IT support system help our engineers work from home? It was something new every day. My biggest concern was how do we keep our people safe and in jobs. We also took pay cuts and were touched to see people come forward for voluntary pay cuts. Communication was key, so we

introduced live monthly company updates, where over 90% of our workforce attended and continue to do so” said **Jim**

Echoing the points raised, **Sharon** says “We, at Transport for the North already work in an agile and flexible manner. Because we already have this flexibility, our ability to adapt to the circumstances that were forced on us was a relatively easy transition for many colleagues. Although, we did find ourselves transitioning our people sooner than we expected, our supportive communications and transparency of approach were the key credentials.”

What you thought you knew today, was completely irrelevant the following day. - Carl

“Safety, survival, and crisis management was so important during the pandemic. We were very honest with everybody. We worked hard on keeping our team up to date, with robust communication channels, clear guidance, and a strategic plan. We also accelerated some of the technological development already underway, such as our staff intranet.” A point very well made by **Jonathan**.

There are natural barriers to change, which **Elaine** covers: “We found prior to the pandemic there were barriers to providing laptops and devices to help individuals work better. As soon as the first lockdown came around, those barriers were lifted. Our team have worked so hard to become digitally enabled.”

Commented on by **Carl**, he says “I was surprised to see how quickly things escalated. Cultural change and necessity is the mother of invention... and it is.

In a bakery, it was difficult keeping people safe in world you knew nothing about. Second to toilet roll, breads demand went up by 25%! Which meant we had to adapt and focus on our core products.”

We should all be extremely proud of the British workforce, they have shown such resilience and worked so hard during the pandemic. - Elaine

How to provide something new for staff:



Resilience and wellbeing programmes



Online gardening



Sharing local routes for walks



Cooking clubs and sessions

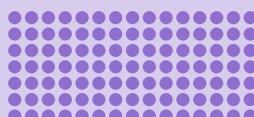


Wellbeing champions



Support groups

Health and wellbeing is a strategic issue, one which needs to be embedded in all business decision making. - Elaine



We've learnt the difference between okay managers and really good managers

According to CIPD research, only 40% of line managers receive any people management training. And 'management style' is the second biggest cause of work-related stress (behind unmanageable workloads).

Sharing their thoughts on the obstacles the pandemic caused for their organisations, participants discussed a variety of tough challenges they had to overcome; from keeping hospital workers safe, keeping the business afloat, to supporting workers with their wellbeing and mental health.



Jim said "We've got engineers in and out of hospitals seven days a week, servicing their equipment, so my biggest fear was how are we going to keep them safe.

Communication was key for us. We implemented regular video meetings between line managers and their people; not to check up on them as such, but so that managers could see if staff were visually okay.

Stockdale paradox helped to reaffirm that we should focus on the present day. Our live briefs always finished on physical and mental fitness. And at Howorth Air Tech, we have engaged with an organisation called Rugby League Cares where ex rugby league players run sessions to talk about their own mental health problems and having role models such as these has been really powerful."

Nicola spoke about the challenges of furloughing 80% of their workforce and supporting staff suffering from poor mental health.

"Leaders knowing their people and teams is really important to us; and being able to identify when their staff are struggling and not themselves. We're pleased to say we were able to help support a colleague (who had lost a loved one during the pandemic) suffering from PTSD. I don't know what would have happened to them if their line manager hadn't have identified that they didn't seem themselves."

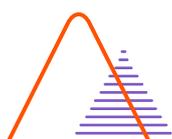
Echoing the importance of line managers supporting workers with their wellbeing, in a changing world of work where many workers are facing social and digital isolation, **Elaine**, stressed that the pandemic has highlighted that health and wellbeing is a strategic issue.

"We've learnt the difference between okay managers and really good managers. We've seen a completely different relationship evolve between managers and their people, based around trust. You can't hide on Zoom or Teams; you can pick up on how authentic people are being and identify those who perhaps need more support."

Traditionally, we've had workplaces that have been built around extroverts, but in the last 12 months, the people that have thrived are the introverts. And now we're looking how we can keep that balance between the two." Said **Elaine**.

It wasn't easy but the strong foundation across engagement and strands of wellbeing allowed us to hold up well during this difficult period. - Louise

Louise also commented: "The constant engagement meant that we jumped from 1 to 3 stars for world class engagement and included in the top 100 large companies for 2021. It wasn't easy but the strong foundation across engagement and strands of wellbeing allowed us to hold up well during this difficult period."



The conversation of returning to work

As the economy continues to recover, participants agreed that there are many positive outcomes of the pandemic that they will be looking to take forward in their organisations.

“Previous home working was less than an average of 1 day a week, now we have seen an increase of 2/3 days home working, resulting in an increase of 196%. So, the pandemic has taught us a lesson in how our people want to work, and we’re finding ways to support them,” said **Sharon**.

Echoing this more hybrid approach to work, **Jonathan** added: “What works for our people in terms of flexible work now, might not in 6-12 month’s-time, so we have a spectrum of flexible options available for staff, which may change as the business changes in the future.”

98% of our people have told us they are comfortable working from home. - Sharon

some of our estate which we no longer use (due to more staff working from home) which will be repurposed for our students”, said **Louise**.

Carl was able to access a range of support and useful connections from his local council and business community which has led



Meanwhile, **Louise** spoke about how a more remote approach to work has helped catapult the organisation forward by five years.

“We’ve benefitted hugely by adapting and supporting different ways of agile working and introducing creative online ways of engaging with our staff and students. We’ve also remodeled

to him offering more wellbeing support for staff and providing bread for vulnerable people.

He commented: “Stockport Council have been amazing, along with my business community. I’ve now got links with some really great and useful connections, and this has helped me to keep the resilience of my team going.”

What we’ve seen in the last 12 months is a completely different relationship between managers and trust. Leadership has to be much more authentic. - Elaine

Managing conflicts between your home and the workplace

Depending on the type of industry or job role, some employees are required to work from their workplace whilst others continue to work from home. That does raise concerns on the fairness of an employer's approach and the conflict this could present.



Carl said: “different teams did feel a distance to those coming in. We use RAW to revisit our rules of the road, preferences and how people work. The more we share and discuss, the better informed we are on managing conflicting views.

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Jonathan says: “infinite flexibility can be a scary prospect for people. We all like living with a sense of rules, to some extent. Moving to a world where, potentially, there are no clear limits on working hours, or clear divide between home and work – that can be stressful and problematic. So, to help our colleagues manage the transition we have set some clear boundaries and, within that allowed some freedom for managers to have good conversations with colleagues about what works best for them and the business. There is a “spectrum of flexibility” – where people are on, that will vary as lifestyles and the needs of the business change.”

Nicola drew on those impacted by furlough. She says: “those on furlough felt a different type of anxiety, they didn't know when and if they could come back to work and were looking for a sense of purpose again. There were practical measures we took such as, rotating furloughed staff, checking in with everyone affected and sharing quotes from staff on separates ends of the table.

And over the Christmas period, we introduced ‘Festive Friends’. Which included a third of our staff who were happy to be contacted and provide support to those who needed it the most.”

The future: challenges and opportunities ahead



As we look to the future, the panel acknowledged that there will be challenges including how to manage conflict between workers that can work remotely, and those that can't. But participants agreed that flexible options, where possible, and open and honest communication between managers and their people, about how they want to work, will be vital in helping to ensure all staff are treated fairly.

The future dynamic between introverts and extroverts was also raised, with participants agreeing that the pandemic has seen introverts thrive as they've engaged more with others and in new ways of working, that weren't necessarily possible before. However, many extroverts have struggled with the lack of face-to-face contact and energy from other people in their place of work.

Jim said: "If we are open and honest with our people; with good news and bad news, they will engage. We want to change our people's lives for the better by giving them the flexibility that they need, and I honestly believe we can do that."

Elaine also added: "Each organisation needs to take from their learnings from the pandemic. They need to think about their values and purpose and translate that into something that works for them and how they want to treat their employees."

The session ended with participants agreeing that every organisation must now take their learnings from the pandemic and think about their values, behaviours, and purpose in order to help them create good and fair work opportunities and an inclusive culture with productive teams.

For more insight and resources on how to help line managers support and manage their people in the changing world of work, download [Soft Skills in hard times: the importance of good people management](#)



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