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The Great Social Experiment

With the outbreak of Covid-19 completely disrupting how businesses operate, we have all been thrown into a massive remote working experiment. C&A takes a look at how companies in this sector are adapting to the 'Lockdown' together with the information and technology available and useful tips on successfully managing working from home.

Covid-19 Pulse Survey

Earlier this month we conducted an online survey of rental companies which yielded a few unexpected results.

The following questions were posed to a wide variety of rental companies, mostly in Europe and including the UK. The results are the simple averages of the responses.

What is the current status of your staff?

56% furloughed
14% working from home
30% onsite/in office
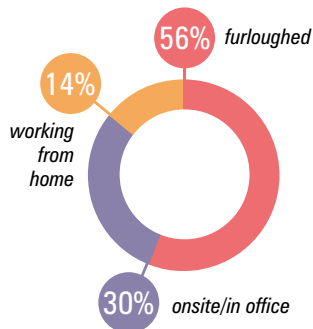
Perhaps unsurprisingly, the average percentage of furloughed staff throughout Europe was high at 56 percent. In some cases as high as 90 percent, with companies either running a virtual business or completely shutting down for a period. Many larger rental companies such as Nationwide Platforms and Kiloutou closed locations, focusing instead on serving essential projects and contracts from a few key locations.

Among the respondents the percentage of the workforce still working as normal, including office, workshops and mobile (delivery drivers and mechanics), averaged 30 percent, not surprising given the nature of the business.
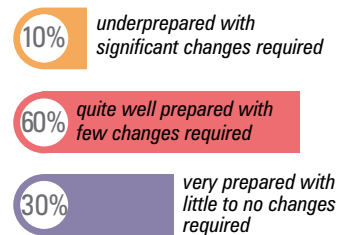
Remarkably, only 14 percent of employees have been working actively from home, possibly due to that fact that few companies are set up to enable this to work for more than a few staff. The fact that so many are furloughed is also a factor. There have also been cases of furloughed staff being asked to work from home but not in our industry of course! In most countries this is illegal, however training is allowed while furloughed and with so many courses now online this might be the time to improve staff skill sets?

What has happened to utilisation?

DOWN 60%

Even with high levels of staff furloughed or working from home it seems that most rental companies have managed to maintain utilisation rates at between 30 and 60 percent, although a lot depends on their location and the customer base. It is also encouraging that companies have reported gradually improving utilisation rates as restrictions are eased and normality begins to creep back.

How prepared was your business to work remotely?

10% underprepared with significant changes required
60% quite well prepared with few changes required
30% very prepared with little to no changes required

Even before the outbreak of Covid-19 rental companies have been moving towards putting more if their services and customer interactions online. Perhaps this explains how many companies were able to quickly adapt to their office staff working from home. Reliable broadband speeds have been an issue, along with the ability to remotely access company systems and rerouting phone systems.

What is the risk of you going out of business?

45% zero risk of going out of business
40% able to survive the next 12 months
20% able to survive the next 6 months
5% high risk of going out of business

Overall respondents were confident of their resilience - even if the pandemic drags on for an extended period - with 45 percent confident that there is no risk of them going out of business, while a further 40 percent can continue operating for 12 months or more. On the flip side, a quarter of respondents will struggle to survive more than six months if things do not improve, and a small number look set to fail. Much will depend on the policies adopted by finance companies and government support programmes which range from grants to loans and tax holidays.

Will you change the way your business operates Post Covid-19?

80% Yes
20% No
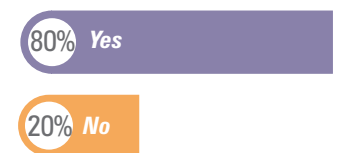
Many companies said they will implement further safety procedures when business returns to normal, but it might also relate to companies becoming more open to new technology and more flexible for staff to work from home.

Working from home

While 'working at home' is relatively common for field sales staff, it will come as a shock or challenge for those whose job is usually office based such as those working in accounts, marketing, HR or even internal sales such as hire desk clerks, dispatchers and service co-ordinators. There is plenty of

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advice available on this subject but here are a few tips:

Find a suitable workspace

Try have a designated space to work from. Ideally turn a spare room into an office but if space is limited, find a desk or table that can be dedicated to work. Avoid the temptation to sit on the bed or sofa with the laptop at all costs.

Get dressed for the day

It sounds obvious, but it is all too easy to roll out of bed and straight into work. If you do not get ready for the day, your day never really starts - you are just at home and doing some work.

Make a schedule

Schedule the day ahead to give it structure. It helps to keep set work hours - but that need not be '9 to 5' - and take regular breaks throughout the day.

Reduce distractions

Under usual circumstances working from home allows you to escape workplace distractions. But with the whole household at home with you, avoiding distractions will be a challenge. So do yourself a favour and avoid adding TV or social media to the list.

Determine the end of your workday

A common challenge is knowing when to shut off from work and prevent it impacting your personal life. You need to have clear separation between when you are at work and when you are not.

Healthy living

Snacking can be a challenge - having healthy snacks on hand helps. Stop for scheduled meals as if at work and leave the house for a little exercise and fresh air each day.

Online sharing - DropBox

Pro: Can be used to store, access and share all types of files anywhere around the world

Con: Reliant if stable broadband speeds, strict storage caps

Cost: Free up to 2GB of space - Paid plans available

Video conferencing - Zoom

Pro: An online platform for video and audio conferencing for up to 1,000 participants

Con: Poor broadband speeds severely impact its use and effectiveness

Cost: Free sessions up to 40 minutes - Paid plans available

Staying connected - Slack

Pro: A group messaging or team collaboration app that simplifies communications

Con: Individual chat functionality can become a distraction among workers

Cost: Free up to 10,000 chat archive - Paid plans available

Project management - Trello

Pro: A visual project management tool for both individuals and teams that clearly displays tasks in a to-do list format.

Con: Limited integrations with other project management software and calendars

Cost: Free - Paid plans available

Microsoft packages - Teams/To-Do/Skype

Pro: Microsoft Teams combines video conferencing software with its other team collaboration tools such as Skype and To Do

Con: Can be an expensive option if you do not have Microsoft

Cost: Free with existing Microsoft packages - Paid plans available

Time Management - Toggl

Pro: A time management tool to help individuals better track their time and provide insights on how long is spent on tasks.

Con: Manually activated means that there is scope for incorrect readings

Cost: Free - Paid plans available

Phone systems - Cisco

Pro: Allows for phones to be rerouted using the internet and can allow for one number to ring multiple devices.

Con: Requires a VoIP- enable equipment or software

Cost: Wide ranging but can be expensive to set up

Just for fun - Kahoot!

Pro: A light-hearted game-based learning platform to create, share and play trivia quizzes. Perhaps one to boost team morale.

Con: Limited use in a business capacity

Cost: Free for small numbers - Paid plans available

Upskilling during downtime

Even though furloughed employees are unable to work for their company they can undertake training relating to their work, and with an increasing number of training providers now offering online courses and seminars it is a great opportunity to upgrade employee skills.

One major opportunity that the crisis offers is for staff and companies to become more familiar with the software they use. Most companies or staff only exploit a small part of what their systems can provide and there is never any time to learn when work is busy. That has all changed now - the benefits once business returns to normal could be transformational.

Rental software companies such as Point of Rental, inspHire and MCS are all providing customers with online seminars and training and helping them create more efficient processes to ensure they are fully utilising features available before returning to work.

MCS managing director Guy van der Knaap, said: "As well as online seminars and general additional training, it has also become apparent that many of our customers are taking on new roles and need extra support to step into their colleagues shoes to cover absences."