



WIG

The Whitehall & Industry Group
connecting the sectors

2020 in review: A summary of WIG member outreach during COVID

From the start of the pandemic, we have kept in close contact with our members to ensure we are able to understand their challenges and support where we can. This document summarises the Intel gathered from 141 calls with WIG member organisations over the COVID-19 period. The main focus centres on how they reacted to the pandemic and details what our members are doing, the challenges they face and what WIG can do to help during and after this difficult time. Since the early stages of the outbreak of the pandemic there has been a shift in focus from digital infrastructure, policies around the physical workspace and short-term economics to mental well-being and the long-term economic impact.

COVID-19

How have our members coped with the initial transition?

On the whole, WIG members are confident that their employees have transitioned relatively smoothly with few technology issues. It is important to note that some organisations have some restrictions on platforms e.g., Zoom and YouTube. A range of members have reported a mix of having essential workers who still need to travel to work, a large proportion of staff who are now working from home and a proportion of employees who have been furloughed. A priority raised by a number of our members in regard to this transition focuses on employee wellbeing and isolation and how this is a key priority for them. Some have policies in place already, others expressed slightly more concern in how to manage this.

What are our members doing?

NHS

A number of our members are working directly to help the NHS with PPE, testing and ventilator production, vaccines, digital health solutions, accommodation for medical staff, supporting the government on COVID-19 national testing service and remaining heavily involved with the PM's office.

Business

Some of our members have identified significant losses to their business and reflected on the challenging times we are in. Others have noted an emphasis on new or different areas of the business. It is clear that many of our members work in essential services and need to keep their business going. Other members are receiving a higher level of demand from their customers.

Some more specific concerns in relation to each industry were mentioned. Some face reputational risks of the industry, for example, people's confidence in how worthwhile insurance currently is. Other concerns around finances were raised and although companies are trying to be lenient at the moment, how long can this last? When will people be able to pay loans/bills back?

Whilst some organisations reported an inability to forecast financials, a surprising number are focused on levelling up, improving external reputations and generally thriving and growing. The construction industry, in particular, seems to be holding up very well, coming together to work through challenges.

Business growth seems to be largely determined by internal capability and proactivity as well as the ability to work effectively with government.

Airline industries and real estate remain the largest sectors affected by COVID-19.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

In light of COVID-19, a number of our members are consulting across the sectors to advise one another to make sure the right decisions are made, and their work continues to be as effective as possible. Member calls highlight that private sector organisations are advising Government around COVID and non-COVID matters and these are useful partnerships. However, other members noted challenges with this cross collaboration and communication concerns. The importance of trust, reputation, working collaboratively and reach effective solutions is of paramount importance. Most private sector members have been seriously impressed by relations with the public sector which seem to have improved exponentially. Most notably, some have reported an explosion of public sector work. This is not the case with all, with some find it hard to build relations with the government, reporting finding them at times 'slow and unresponsive'.

Member challenges

Internal Culture

As members from all sectors adapt during this time, they also found that they have multiple challenges in common. Key points around internal culture focus on the operational and emotional challenges of self-isolating and working from home, as well as comments around focuses on diversity and inclusion. Keeping staff motivated at this time and an awareness of the importance of wellbeing of staff at all levels was mentioned. Questions more specifically around senior leadership and adapting to new ways of leading/working together were raised. Moreover, member concerns about external reputation were also revealed and the importance of being seen to 'do the right thing'.

Given the positive feedback on home-working and a future hybrid response, it is beneficial to take note of what organisations are doing to improve internal culture during this time; keeping staff engaged and informed, remaining flexible and understanding of fluctuations in productivity, recognising caring responsibilities, having regular meetings with the whole team, the use of pulse surveys, a focus on wellbeing, internal webinars, remote working advice, encouraging volunteering programmes and funding for some 'home office' items.

Other key points were around a focus on senior leaders and the pressure on them and many reflected on their significant focus on diversity at these levels.

Most members are taking a people-centric approach and remain flexible around how their staff choose to work, some committing to an entirely flexible way of working. Most reports have mentioned that people have never felt busier, with either increased business and/or collaboration to navigate, or policies to finalise. Despite this, people do feel comforted by systems and support in place. The reported results of this are that it has brought Executive teams closer together and closer to the staff, by removing barriers.

Due to COVID-19, some of our members have gone through an internal restructure, some forming a public affairs group across all arms of the business. Other organisations have experienced turbulence due to people being sent home from the office and then brought back. Others have battled with the perceived notion externally held that they are doing well, when internally they feel this is not the case.

Working from home

Since any easing in lockdown restrictions, overall, it does not appear that members have altered their working from home stances. All members who mentioned places of work, stated that most of their employees were working from home and only key workers were in the office/out in the community. There appears to be greater confidence in working from home, many have found the experience a positive one. Some common comments around the crisis prove that this was possible and that everything is running as effectively and in fact, in some cases there has been an increase in productivity. Some have made better use of regional offices. There is a divide between the private sector, which mostly has decided it will not be opening their offices until 2021, and the public sector, which is easing people back into the office, with 1-2 days a week encouraged.

Changes in work

A proportion of member calls highlighted there had been a drop in business and/or their previous priorities had changed. Furthermore, many members expressed specific constraints they faced during this time focusing on themes such as the importance of time and getting things done now, the challenges around supply chains and limitations around exports and economic implications.

Focus and planning ahead

After dealing with the initial transitions of new ways of working, many members have begun to start planning ahead and altering their main priorities. Questions arose around how we get back to 'normal' and what the 'new normal' might look like, specifically around technology, working from home and how we can improve environmental impact. Keeping the momentum of remote working, focusing on lessons around crisis management and how COVID may impact priorities over the next few months. The future of sustainability and environmental factors appear to be at the front of mind for many.

The focus has shifted somewhat from planning around COVID-19 to the effects of Brexit. Future trade and exports remain a critical discussion point. Some are focused purely on managing the financial fallout, whilst others are navigating the road forwards confidently, with a focus on people, learning and development, environmental targets, and further digitalisation.

The new normal

After the positive responses around working from home, it is not surprising that this has raised many questions about what the 'new normal' will look like.

Some organisations have hinted that there is minimal rush to get people back to the office. This leads into what to expect in 2021. In regard to returning to the office, it appears that a hybrid response is favoured by some. Some organisations are focusing on new working from home policies and have questioned the amount of office space they need.

On the other hand, others have raised the point that some are looking forward to getting back to the office and to begin networking and connecting with others again, depending on living arrangements and what support networks they have available to them.

Whilst most members have amplified familiarity with their internal digital infrastructure and have cited increased productivity, there is a growing concern around fatigue, burn-out and mental health. Staff welfare and well-being was at the forefront of their agenda. The transition to using Zoom and other video calling platforms was, overall, successful, but signs of fatigue are evident. However, a positive aspect in that there is much more connectivity internally and inclusiveness.

Others, whose work requires physical attendance, have focused on the implementation of policies and procedures around health and safety (particularly in regard to social distancing) to ensure their suppliers and clients felt confident that personnel would be safe.

Some members have reported impressive levels of collaboration with government during these times, hinting that the new normal would be a digitally enhanced, and more cohesive, communicative world.

What can WIG do to help?

The challenges our members face (mentioned above), alongside specific themes/ideas members have requested, give WIG many different opportunities to help. The key focus areas are listed below:

- Encouraging employee participation/involvement
- People – mental health, diversity and inclusion
- International travel restrictions
- International perspectives and comparisons
- Future working patterns
- Economic landscape
- Government's procurement project and programme
- Environmental impact, sustainability and carbon neutrality. Environmental targets – what are they and how is everyone working towards them?
- Digital – how this is transforming government
- Government – who will settle the bill of COVID-19? How and when?
- Brexit mobility, future of services, impact on economy – what will this all look like?

Networking

- There has been some concern on the impact on learning from others, opening up and creating meaningful connections on leadership programmes when these are not held in person. Most have appreciated the drawbacks faced by us all and have been hugely complimentary of how successful WIG webinars have been in keeping conversations across the sectors alive and relevant. There has been expressed appetite for us to host small, socially distanced groups for our leadership programmes, depending on what the government advises.

- Some have said that continued networking digitally has led to online fatigue. Others have requested breakout rooms to be with smaller groups of people and to be more relevant and would like to be invited to relevant roundtable briefings.
- Others have been really impressed by our unique ability to continue facilitating networks to engage with one another. They have found peer networks and the exchange of information most valuable.