



Progressing towards face-to-face meetings after lockdown

Ailie Ross-Oliver

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Abstract

This article examines potential challenges of the return to face-to-face meetings following COVID-19 lockdown. Whilst current guidelines (in November 2020) do not permit a return to face-to-face meetings, it is important to prepare for a future change in restrictions. By examining recent and relevant research, this article covers the potential social and physical challenges and the barriers to effective working. In section 1, the social barriers include the impact of poor mental health amongst employees and a need to re-learn verbal cues. Section 2 then sets out the physical barriers caused by social distancing restrictions, hygiene requirements, and wearing face coverings. Finally, section 3 indicates the varying impact that lockdown has had on effective working in terms of work-life balance. Altogether, research indicates that the best recommendation for the return to in-person meetings is a flexible and compassionate approach to mitigate potential challenges.

Keywords

COVID-19, mental health, physical health, social distancing, work life balance

Key points

- Lockdown has worsened mental health, which may lead to increased anxiety surrounding the return to face-to-face meetings.
- General anxiety and awkwardness will mean that some people may feel the need to re-learn social cues.
- Physical distancing places severe constraints on the ability to carry out face-to-face meetings and a significant amount of planning will have to go into planning and facilitating these meetings.
- Lockdown has had varied impacts on people's ability to work effectively and have a sustainable work-life balance,
- A flexible and compassionate policy is the best way to ensure a smooth transition back to face-to-face meetings.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown saw a mass shift to a remote working model. In April, the Office for National Statistics estimated that 50% of people in employment across the country were working from home (Office for National Statistics, 2020). By October, this figure was estimated to have risen to 64% (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

At the time of writing, at People Know How almost all staff members, as well as volunteers, interns, and placement students (VIPs) (aside from those working on the essential service Computer Delivery) have been working from home since March. All of their Positive Transitions service projects supporting young people have been moved online, whilst the Reconnect service has been conducted virtually, over the phone, and through some socially distant activity (People Know How, 2020).

As we emerge from lockdown, it is important to identify what barriers People Know How and other organisations may face, in the shift towards a hybrid approach of online and in-person collaboration. Predicting possible challenges will enable an effective return to work policies and structures.

This article analyses three main areas of potential tension; social barriers (re-learning verbal cues and the impact that COVID-19 has had on peoples' mental health), physical barriers (including social distancing guidelines and restrictions), and the impact of return to face-to-face meetings on productivity and effective working. By examining these barriers, workplaces can ensure a smoother transition back to in-person meetings. This will also contribute to wider discourse evaluating the social impact of COVID-19 and the 'long COVID' lockdown symptoms that will continue to affect our daily lives.

Section 1: Social Barriers

1.1 How will returning to face-to-face meetings be impacted by individual mental health?

When the enforced lockdown was introduced in March 2020, many asked how a prolonged quarantine period could impact mental health. In evaluating 24 cases of medical quarantine (for diseases including SARS, Ebola, and MERS) in ten countries since 2004, Brooks, et al. (2020) found that general negative effects of quarantine can include "emotional disturbance, depression, stress, low mood, irritability, post-traumatic stress symptoms and emotional exhaustion". Hyper reduction of social contact and a lack of information from authorities can make people feel anxious, isolated, and distressed (Marshall, et al., 2020., Singh, 2020). "COVID-19 anxiety is estimated to be affecting at least a quarter of people" (Fitzpatrick, et al., 2020), altogether it is clear that "the psychological impact of quarantine is wide-ranging, substantial and can be long lasting" (Brooks, et al., 2020). Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant lockdown have clear negative impacts on the mental health of individuals and communities. As more people are now struggling with poor mental health, we must consider the return to work and face-to-face meetings in this context.

It is important to recognise that mental health should not be generalised and that there is no 'one size fits all' approach; there is not a perfect list of things that employers can do to help their employees and service users with the return to face-to-face meetings. Some may feel intimidated by the return to work or worry about interacting with people every day while others may have concerns about contracting COVID-19 – particularly those with underlying health conditions. Since the beginning of the pandemic, people have been warned about the high risk of contracting the virus on public transport. As a result, some may also feel anxious about travelling to in-person meetings via the bus, tram, or train (Edwards, 2020).

Ultimately, the return to work and face-to-face meetings will be complex because of

the impact of lockdown on mental health alongside the social barriers have arisen. A crucial way in which employers can support the return to face-to-face meetings is through flexibility, compassion and valuing the voice and contributions of employees (SOM - Supporting the Occupational Health and Wellbeing Professionals, 2020). SOM, in conjunction with civil society organisations including MIND, England and Wales' mental health charity, The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and public bodies including Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) and the Business in the Community, has developed an extensive toolkit for the return to the workplace following COVID-19. This toolkit stresses the importance of an empathetic approach to returning to face-to-face meetings, especially with those that have suffered with their mental health during COVID-19 (SOM - Supporting the Occupational Health and Wellbeing Professionals, 2020). I would recommend that People Know How utilise this approach to facilitate a smooth transition back to face-to-face meetings.

1.2 Do we need to relearn verbal cues for the return to face-to-face meetings?

When considering the impact of new social barriers on the return to work, it is important to consider lockdown's impact on our ability to read, interpret, and deliver non-verbal cues. In the Connect Four Journal article that preceded and gave the grounds for this article, Kinahan (2020) drew attention to the concept of 'zoom fatigue', the idea that online meetings offer a unique challenge for our brains. Specific attention is paid to the impact of Continuous Partial Attention (CPA), or "when the brain maintains constant active attention on many different things at once out of a desire, conscious or subconscious, not to miss anything significant" (Rose, 2010; Sklar, 2020). Kinahan highlights that if CPA is maintained for long periods of time, the brain can feel increasingly anxious and under a heightened level of stress, due to a large amount of focus on multiple different videos and screens (Vorgan & Small, 2008; cited in Kinahan, 2020)

This overwhelming level of intense focus leads to zoom fatigue. Whilst CPA is understood to be an in-the-moment psychological reaction, potential long-term and lasting implications of this process requires further study.

Research on the long-term impacts of stress, particularly on retention abilities, indicates that continuous or frequent bouts of stress can limit the ability to retain information and to process and create memories (Howe, 2000., Payne, et al., 2006., Yaribeygi, et al., 2017). Further, in different contexts to workplace settings, there is also an indication that prolonged stress has a long-term negative impact on ability to successfully process emotions and interpret emotional signals from others (Swartzman & McDermid, 1993., Riggio, 2006., Young & Spatz Widom, 2014). Whilst it is indicated that these impacts of stress can be long-lasting, it is not clear if they are permanent. However, from this research, an inference could be made that the effects of stress could mirror long term effects of CPA. However, this is simply an inference as there has been no research on the long-term impact of CPA.

Altogether, Rose (2010) and Sklar (2020) highlight the negative effects of CPA as people are less able to interpret and process non-verbal cues. Research on stress, which shares many properties with CPA, indicates lasting implications for retention, memory processing, and emotional interpretation. At this stage, no research has been conducted regarding the prolonged impact of CPA and therefore no decisive judgement can be given as to whether it will be necessary to re-learn verbal cues. However, as highlighted in section 1.1, since the beginning of lockdown people are reporting higher levels of anxiety (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020). From this, regardless of the effects of CPA, we can assume that there will be general feelings of anxiety and awkwardness in the return to in-person workplaces and meetings. Therefore, whilst the research on CPA is inconclusive, the reality of anxiety and awkwardness mean that we can assume that some will feel the need to re-learn verbal cues. This can be assisted through use of the SOM toolkit highlighted in section 1.1.

Section 2: Physical Barriers

2.1 What impact will the need for physical distancing have on the return to face-to-face meetings?

The Scottish Government has produced guidelines for employers to enable social distancing and make workplaces 'COVID-secure' (Scottish Government, 2020). These guidelines include sector-specific information as well as general guidance for offices. The minimum expectations for physical distancing are that "physical distancing must be maintained wherever possible" (Scottish Government, 2020).

These points are a summary of the Scottish Government's (2020) coronavirus (COVID-19) general guidance for safer workplaces.

1. When working

General guidance for workplaces includes introducing the use of face coverings for everyone, except those that are exempt from doing so. Further reviewing workplace layouts so that people work further apart and introducing screens between people are also key general points of guidance for workplaces.

2. In meetings

The general guidance for meetings advises that at present, remote working tools should be used to avoid in-person meetings. Only necessary participants should attend meetings and should maintain physical distancing throughout. Further, in meetings people should avoid sharing pens or other objects and should hand sanitise when entering and leaving meeting rooms. Lastly, meetings should be held outdoors or in well-ventilated rooms.

3. When moving around the workspace

The general guidance for moving around the workplace advises one-way systems in all buildings and spaces. Clear signage of physical distancing boundaries around all workspaces is needed, and some parts

of the workplace may need to be placed under limited access (for example enclosed spaces such as lifts, limits on toilets and showers and kitchen space/cafeteria). It is suggested that new technologies and systems should be introduced to aid safer working practices – for example, 1-in-1-out LED light systems to indicate when rooms and spaces are at full capacity). Lastly, non-essential trips within buildings and sites should be discouraged.

4. Break times

In terms of break times for meetings and workplaces, it is advised that break times should be staggered to reduce face-to-face contact. Outside spaces should be used for breaks. Workplaces should encourage workers to bring their own food to minimise use of shared kitchen equipment. Screens should be introduced between people in break rooms. Locker rooms, changing areas and other facilities should be regulated to reduce concurrent usage.

5. When meeting with customers/clients/service users

The guidance for meeting with customers/clients/service users varies depending on the nature of work however general guidance is that workplaces should communicate with customers (service users) before arrival and on arrival in order to ensure that they understand physical distancing and hygiene measures. Further it is also advised that customers are discouraging from making non-essential trips to and within buildings and sites.

These guidelines indicate substantial physical distancing barriers, which will impact the return to face-to-face meetings. It should be emphasised here that the current guidelines do not permit a return to face-to-face meetings, as indicated in the summary's second section. When a return to in-person meetings is permitted, it is likely that other guidelines may change, making it difficult to outline the physical distancing barriers that returning to face-to-face meetings may require.

To prepare for the return to face-to-face meetings, employers like People Know How should prepare the rooms and facilities that enable physical distancing. When performed correctly (i.e., keeping 2 metres or 6 feet from anyone in your household), physical distancing is the best way to control the spread of COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The closer contact you have with people, the more likely you are to catch or spread the virus. Therefore, meeting rooms should permit social distancing.

The other key principle of reducing unsafe contact is ensuring that hand washing, and respiratory hygiene are properly maintained. This can be facilitated through regular handwashing for at least 20 seconds, avoiding touching eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands, covering your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, and regularly cleaning and disinfecting surfaces (NHS Inform, 2020). People Know How should ensure that there are adequate provisions of hand sanitiser and tissues, alongside signage noting how to reduce the spread of the disease.

Though wearing a face covering was not compulsory at the beginning of lockdown, this has since become a compulsory part of everyday activities like going to the shops, travelling on public transport, or visiting the GP. There has been a global shift towards making face coverings compulsory in all indoor public spaces, with some countries pushing to make them compulsory outdoors (University of California San Francisco, 2020). Evidence has shown that face coverings have additional value in protecting against the virus, particularly when 2 metre distancing is not possible (Scottish Government, 2020).

Though there are clear steps to ensure safety in the return to in-person working, the current guidelines from the Scottish Government mean that face-to-face meetings cannot happen yet. When they are permitted, People Know How and other employers must ensure that their workspace policies are in line with relevant government guidelines. To ensure safe in-person meetings, physical distancing must be maintained, hand sanitiser and relevant

hygiene items provided, and all employees should wear face coverings throughout meetings, unless medically exempt.

Section 3: Productivity/Effective working

3.1 What impact will the return to face-to-face meetings have on work/life balance?

The COVID-19 lockdown caused a rapid shift to remote working. Schools and nurseries also closed, leaving many parents to work from home as well as manage childcare responsibilities and home schooling. Research conducted at Bournemouth University saw 90% of respondents with children under the age of five report that their work-life balance has worsened during lockdown (Esteves, et al., 2020). Increased childcare duties have mainly affected women, with Anderson & Kelliher (2020) reporting that homeschooling and childcare roles have “reinforced traditional gender roles” as women have had to spend more time during the pandemic doing unpaid work.

In Scotland, childminders could reopen on the 3rd of June, with registered early learning childcare providers such as private nurseries reopening from the 15th of July (Parent Club Scotland, 2020). School nurseries and primary and secondary schools then reopened on the 11th of August (Parent Club Scotland, 2020). Since these reopenings, the pressure on parents has lifted, particularly for mothers. With the return to face-to-face meetings, it is hoped that this reduction in pressure on parents will continue.

However, the same research by Bournemouth University reported some benefits of working from home (Esteves, et al., 2020). For instance, many felt that they could make better use of their time without the need to commute or attend as many meetings, leaving them feeling they had more freedom (Esteves, et al., 2020). Additionally, there is a large body of research indicating that people across the country felt they could “focus more on what is important”, both personally and professionally (Esteves,

et al., 2020., Biroli, et al., 2020., Chapple, et al., 2020). It is important to ensure that the flexibility offered through remote working can continue so that those who have benefited can maintain this. This could include mixing the mode of meetings to have some in person and some online participants as well as ensuring staff can have a good work life balance and ability to continue focusing on what is important.

People Know How should work to ensure that those who have struggled with effective working and work-life balance under lockdown can now re-gain a sense of separation between the different parts of their life. At the same time, the flexibility that lockdown has afforded others should be maintained. There is a large body of research indicating that society's idea of 'productivity' is flawed (Bryan & Joyce, 2005., Pessoa & Van Reenen, 2013., Collins, 2020). This is grounds for further research into the working culture surrounding productivity in People Know How and for staff members working on projects in People Know How, as well as more research more generally for this sector, into how this can be used to improve effective working.

Conclusion

In conclusion, whilst the return to face-to-face meetings is not currently permitted under Scottish Government guidelines, it is important to prepare for when these restrictions are lifted. This article outlines three clear areas where challenges may be faced in the return to face-to-face work and suggested ways to mitigate these challenges. Section 1 describes how social barriers, in the form of overall poorer mental health and awkwardness surrounding non-verbal cues, may affect the return to face-to-face meetings. The use of the SOM toolkit to develop a return to work and face-to-face meetings that are flexible and compassionate to employees may prove useful here. Section 2 outlines how physical barriers, in terms of social distancing measures will be challenging for the return to face-to-face work and meetings. It is recommended for organisations to stay up to date with

Scottish Government guidelines to ensure that they take all necessary precautions when in-person meetings are permitted, especially social distancing, maintaining hygiene, and ensuring mask compliance. Section 3 considers recent research on the impact of lockdown on people's ability to work effectively and productively, noting that mothers have particularly struggled due to increased unpaid responsibilities. It is further noted that some people felt that their work life balance had benefited due to fewer meeting requirements, more independence, and no commuting constraints. Organisations should ensure a flexible and compassionate policy on the return to work and face-to-face meetings to ensure that employees can work in the best way for them.

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People Know How

525 Ferry Road
Edinburgh
EH5 2FF

www.peopleknowhow.org

0131 569 0525

connect.four@peopleknowhow.org

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