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Working Parents and the Corona Lockdown

Case study
June 2020

Executive Summary

In this qualitative case study, you will be taken through the main learnings shared after the Corona lockdown by representatives from 13 diverse Danish companies¹. The main focus has been on learnings related to working parents, however, the results and conclusions reach far beyond handling the aforementioned working parents in the future.

Generally, working parents have been challenged by the Corona lockdown, however it turns out that they have come out of the lockdown mentally healthier and more empowered than expected.

Among the many insights, we here draw out four dominant conclusions from the case study, that we predict will be crucial insights for HR and management in implementing new HR-policies Post-Corona.

Not surprisingly, **Flexibility** will be in higher demand post-corona, as both employees and employers have discovered several positive results of increased flexibility for all employee groups.

As a result of the lockdown, **management** is moving towards more value-based leadership principles, with “nude” leadership, de-centralization, employee self-leadership, and archetypical feminine values gaining more importance in the future.

Interpersonal **communication and meeting culture** have faced a fast-paced change during the lockdown, as virtual meeting attendance has gained importance, setting new standards for meetings, social cohesion and 1-to-1 communication between manager and employee.

Finally, the Corona lockdown has shown **a new gender inclusion opportunity**, as the issues above are now affecting both genders and hence will create a more level corporate playing field for men and women in the future.

¹ TRYG, Vestas, Ørsted, ISS, ATEA, COWI, DSV, Jyske Bank, Kammeradvokaten, KMD, Mærsk Tankers, Salling Group, TDC

Background and methodology

This case study has been created after the Corona lockdown took place in Denmark in March, April and May of 2020.

At Potential Company, we sensed a specific weight on parents that suddenly had to both work and be full-time parents from home at the same time, and since Working Parents is one of our D&I focuses, we decided to put particular focus on the interface between working parents, their employers and the learnings. This way, we offer valuable insights and inspiration that workplaces can be inspired by in their efforts to implement changes quickly and seamlessly in their HR policies in the aftermath of the Corona Lockdown in Denmark.

In this case study, we have therefore interviewed representatives from 13 Danish companies², and synthesized the qualitative data from these interviews to actual learnings for companies and society at large. The case study methodology was based on semi-structured phone/video call interviews, asking each company representative similar questions about their actions and experience connected to the lockdown.

We have combined these with surveys asking Danish working parents about their perspective; the first survey “Who takes the main responsibility at home during COVID-19?” was carried out in cooperation with niche media InnovatorQ in March 2020 as a primarily quantitative survey among 900 parents working from home. The second survey, “Parents at work during the Corona Crisis”, primarily a qualitative survey, was carried out in cooperation with the Danish NGO Forældre på Arbejde (Parents at Work) in June 2020 among 150 working parents.

In the following, we are also including surveys, that have been carried out recently by other parties, related to the topic in question³.

2 TRYG, Vestas, Ørsted, ISS, ATEA, COWI, DSV, Jyske Bank, Kammeradvokaten, KMD, Mærsk Tankers, Salling Group, TDC

3 Convinced ApS and Men's Health Society in particular

Course of events and effect on Working Parents and companies

In the following, we will first show the course of events seen from both a company- and a working parents' perspective, setting focus on the effects on the lives of working parents.

According to our company interviews, **all companies** followed almost the same course of events:

1. Prior to the lockdown, most larger companies had already created a "corona board", a task force with representatives from different departments in the company: Legal, Risk management, Medical, Safety, Financial, HR. The aim of the board was to overlook the global crisis and predict future events and actions at a national (and international) level, that would have an impact on the company. As a result, most companies were quite well equipped for the events in the weeks that followed.
2. This also meant that many employees were already sent to work from home prior to the lockdown. Many companies already had a stocking of down to 50% employees working from home prior to the actual lockdown.
3. Then lockdown was ordered from the Danish government, and within two days, everyone was mandated to work from home.
4. This started a massive communication task for all companies. The first wave was mainly a top-management communications effort, often spearheaded by video messages and emails from the CEO + the rest of the ELT, then via Town Halls, still headed by the CEO/ELT, and subsequently via VPs and downwards.
5. Immediately after, or bilaterally, a new way of communicating in teams was implemented. Often via daily team meetings online, accompanied by 1-to-1 alignment conversations between each employee and his/her immediate manager.
6. Establishing this setup took, for most companies, a few weeks, and then everyone was into a new way of doing business as (un) usual – even after society was gradually reopened, and some people started going back to the office little by little.

Considering the course of events from the **Working Parents** point of view takes a slightly different chronology:

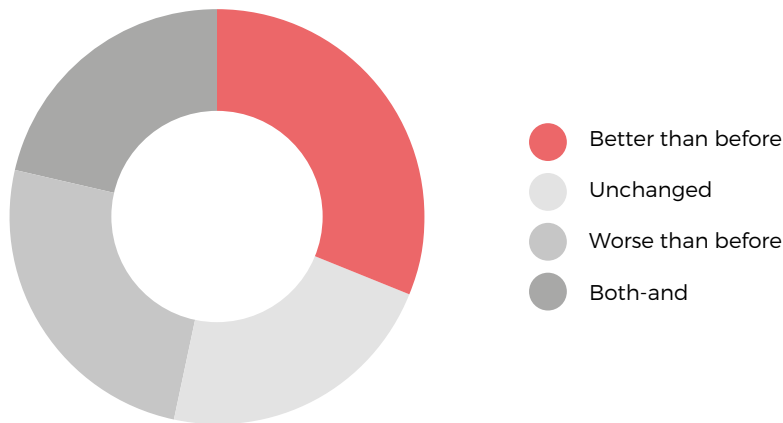
1. Since most parents had been following the news, lockdown did not come as lightning from a clear sky, however most parents entered lockdown without any chances to “brace before impact”, as they had not made the same home-preparatory work as their employers had in the work sphere.
2. This means that most parents were quite unprepared for the double task they were facing when lockdown started, creating new ways of working and new ways of parenting and home-schooling simultaneously. This caused a great deal of stress for many working parents, and a lot of conflicts in the home sphere in the beginning.
3. After a while, many parents had set up their modus for working, both as a team at home and at work. Expectations and capabilities of both themselves, their spouse and their manager at work had been aligned, and everyone was getting used to the situation. It was still stressful however doable at this stage, although not long term. Many parents were also enjoying that they had a chance to spend more time with their family than they were used to.
4. Then, when schools and institutions partially re-opened, many parents went into a sort of “Zen”. Although most children spent less hours in their dedicated institution than before the lockdown, even the few hours without children in the house allowed for a few hours of dedicated work time for many parents, furthermore allowing for actual quality time with the family after institution closing hours.
5. Finally, when society gradually re-opened, many working parents slowly started going back to the office some days per week. Many parents did however still prefer working from home much more and hence spent less time at the office than prior to the lockdown.

Asking the companies about their actions, experiences and take-aways related directly to the topic of working parents, we found several pervasive tendencies:

- All companies realized that they were facing a special challenge in dealing with working parents from day one of the lockdown. This was clear immediately from the conversations managers and their employees had across organizations everywhere. It was, however, also clear that working parents was not the only group of employees challenged: Also singles and managers in general felt challenged albeit not in the same respect as working parents. Whereas working parents were challenged on time to be both employees and parents, singles were challenged on loneliness and managers faced a challenge in leading from a distance at all hours of the day.
- The general response to working parents from their employers was: *“Perform the best you are able to under these difficult circumstances – we will help you cope if you need it”*. This was generally well received by the working parents.
- Managers hence spent time helping some working parents to prioritize tasks and re-delegate where needed. This was generally done based on 1-to-1 alignment conversations between the working-parent-employee and his/her manager.
- However, most companies realized that most families were indeed able to find fitting solutions for themselves with just a bit of sparring from the manager. In this effort, continuous alignment of expectations and capabilities was key to success, no matter if this was part of corporate culture prior to the lockdown or not.
- Furthermore, it seemed that children naturally gained a different position than usually in the new setup. They were no longer “shoved away”, as they were in the room just like any other family inventory and therefore suddenly appeared frequently both on screen and as a new “noise tapestry” in online meetings. This also forced working parents to show their “home face” and personal sphere to their peers, which turned out to be an opportunity to show vulnerability for parents as well as for their managers.

Asking the working parents how they felt about this period of time, the answers fall in 4 almost equally large brackets:

“How has your mental wellbeing evolved during the Corona-crisis?”



Source: “Parents at Work during the Corona Crisis”, Potential Company and Parents at Work, June 2020

Of the factors that affected these outcomes are:

To the better:

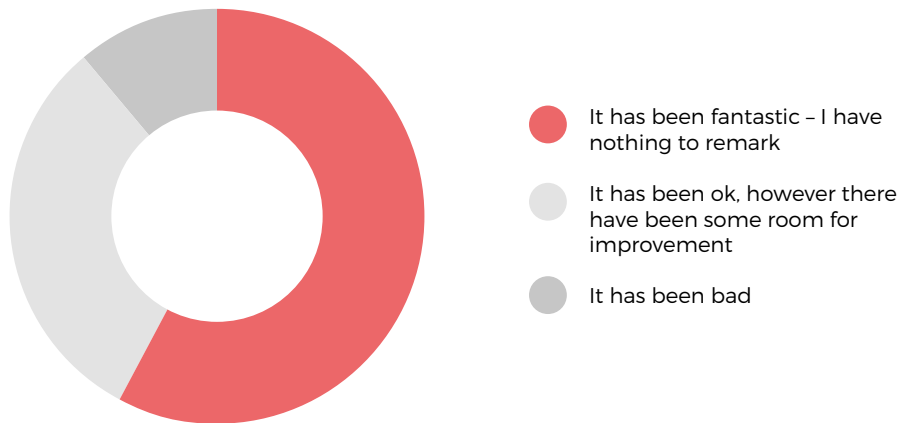
- Less stress because no one in the family had to leave home early and maintain the “hamster wheel” daily
- More time with the family
- “Being set free” by the employer to navigate and integrate work and family in ways most fitting for the individual
- “More fresh air” - both literally as many have spent less time in the office and more time in the garden/on the balcony/in the park, and figuratively, as most people have been forced to try new things to make ends meet.

To the worse:

- More stress because of having to balance full-time work and full-time parenting all at once.
- Feeling boundaries blur between work and family and not being able to separate one from the other
- Fear and worries related to the pandemic
- Missing family members and friends, and missing social outreach in general
- The constant change that was a dominant factor of this time period.

All company representatives in the case study have been very satisfied with their company's response to the crisis, making them proud representatives for their company. Fortunately, this is also the case for the working parents: They have indeed been positively surprised about their employers' way of handling the lockdown:

“How have you experienced your employer's response to your needs as a working parent during the Corona crisis?”



Source: "Parents at Work during the Corona crisis", Potential Company and Parents at Work, June 2020

Consequences for central work culture issues in the future

The Corona lockdown has been a learning experience, and the learnings which many companies are currently working to accumulate into new flex-policies, are accentuated by but not limited to the learnings coming from dealing with working parents during the last months. They concern:

- Flexibility,
- HR, (top) management and leadership,
- Communication, social cohesion, and meeting standards
- Gender aspects

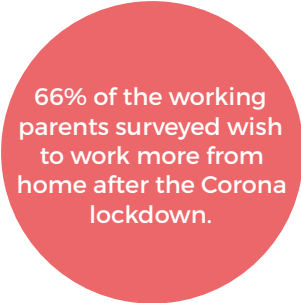
The themes are tightly linked and should be addressed simultaneously; however, they also function each in their own respect, and hence we will address each of these themes separately in the following:

Flexibility

The experienced magnitude of the change at hand during the lockdown very much depended on the extent to which the company in question had been working actively with flexibility prior to the lockdown. Most companies already offered flexibility to some extent to their employees, at least formally, prior to the lockdown. However, social acceptance and to some degree public endorsement of employees making use of existing or enhanced flexibility offers has been pushed forward to an exceptionally large extent during the lockdown. This has resulted in a much larger portion of employees now explicitly marking “Predictable Time Off” or “Family/Kids time” in their work calendars, with avid support from their managers, some of which had been skeptical towards or even outspoken opponents of working from home prior to the lockdown. It also means that most of the surveyed companies in this case study are now looking towards creating new or edited flex policies because of the lockdown.

This movement is happening at a fast pace because of several insights coming from the lockdown:

- Firstly, all companies appear to have gained an epiphany of how flexibility may drive vast savings on both time and travel expenses for both employer and employee.
- At the same time, efficiency and productivity have largely been maintained and in some companies/divisions even improved despite less facetime demands.



66% of the working parents surveyed wish to work more from home after the Corona lockdown.

- Secondly, the need for flexibility differs widely depending on each employees' differences in life phases and type of work. The needs and wants of singles and mature employees with no kids at home may e.g. differ from those of working parents – however, the general insight is that all groups will benefit from a so-called “flexible flexibility policy”. Also, the type of job will define the possibilities of flexible working: Office clerk work, irrespective of seniority, will all other things equal be easier to fit into a flexibility policy than so-called “on location production” (e.g. freight workers, super market attendants and hospital/health workers).
- Flexible working requires new availability standards for managers and peers that could be required to be available almost 24/7 if there is always someone in the team working at any given time.

HR, Management, and leadership

Learnings and consequences for HR, management and leadership principles have also been manifold.

Team meetings have in general become more frequent during the lockdown, as the need for both social and topical catchups has been larger than usual. Most teams appear to have met online 2-5 times per week, many scheduling in a daily morning virtual “standup” team meeting. There have been no overall corporate policies regarding frequency or otherwise meeting design – this has been left up to each team leadership to decide. Furthermore, the frequency of employee-leader 1-to-1 catch-ups has increased dramatically, with the need for alignment of expectations and capabilities ever rising during this time.

KPIs and performance goals in general have remained largely unchanged. As mentioned previously, most companies soon realized that performance had not suffered – quite the contrary – during the lockdown, and hence there has been no need for an extraordinary Corona-related goal review. Most company management teams do however appear to have an unofficial common understanding, that the first two quarters of this year have been extraordinary, and that this must be taken into consideration in the upcoming half-year review.

Top management appears to have changed approach in a number of ways. The previously mentioned mass communication coming from both CEOs and other ELT-members has embraced a number of values that were already present prior to the lockdown, but not widespread or mainstream, namely that of archetypical feminine values: Empathy, consideration, care and vulnerability. Our surveyed company representatives e.g. gave several examples of top management including their families on video greetings, encouraging em-

employees to look after each other when need be, or sharing thoughts or concessions of “mistakes” made leading up to or during the lockdown. Furthermore, ELT has been forced into showing even further confidence in their employee’s self-leadership skills and judgmental abilities, allowing a larger proportion of decisions being made at lower, more “customer close” levels in the organization.

All together, this seems to have led to new discoveries and tendencies in management and leadership in general:

Leaving behind

Centralised management

Hierarchy

Long working hours

Management



Moving towards

Decentralised management

Inclusion

Focus on productivity

Leadership

Source: Tendencies identified by the interviewed company representatives or through synthesizing data from the interviews.

While leading a company through a crisis of the COVID19 magnitude of course still calls for management, the tendency of putting more value-based leadership principles into the equation has furthermore called for a number of **new leadership principles**. Firstly, many companies have seen a window of opportunity for conveying their company values in both communication and actions. Also, the leadership task for both top- and midlevel management has moved towards creating a more “nude” leadership, where the main task has been to lift and convey the community feeling and make sure everyone were thriving to perform in the given circumstances that have been ever-changing and unexplored land for most employees. This means that leadership has been centered around principles like

- Eliminating the zero-defect culture. In a new and ever-changing setting people have had to venture out and commit mistakes every now and then. Hence, leadership has had to promote this type of behavior, while also learning new leadership skills on the go themselves.
- Making room for more self-leadership. With no manager sitting across the table, people have, to a much larger extent than prior, been left to rely on their own judgmental abilities, and in doing so, most managers appear to have realized that most employees have much better self-leadership skills than they (and their manager) thought would be the case.

- A continuous alignment of expectations and capabilities in the given circumstances has been key to managing employees. This has also meant that many managers have conducted employee conversations of a much more personal character than prior to the crisis. Many managers have looked to HR or their own manager for tools and approaches to handle these kinds of conversations. Hence, many of the management related topics that have arisen in HR by demand from mid-level managers have revolved around wellbeing more than numbers, i.e. “How do I secure presence as a leader from the distance?”, “How do I call and talk to my team member for no reason other than checking in?”, “How do I make sure that we are aligned on abilities and performance expectations?”

This has also created a new platform of relevance and status for **HR**, internally in most organizations. The previously mentioned decentralized management and communication structures have created a large(r) need for HR as crucial support and sparring for mid-management, through e.g.

- Coaching management, regardless of seniority, for executing a more “nude and personal leadership”
- Developing strategies, tools, and an ongoing evaluation function to pursue a higher degree of self-management
- Acting as a change agent for the more traditionally thinking colleagues that may not have experienced the changes as a positive impact on the organization, to make sure the whole organization embarks on the change journey onwards.

Communication, social cohesion, and meeting standards

From the offset of the lockdown, communication was very much centered around conveying messages about the lockdown and the companies’ both practical and emotional response to the lockdown. In the beginning this was very much carried out as information conveyance from top management, through town halls, Video messages, intranet info sites, CEO blogs and newsletters or status emails from HQ. The general approach was a combination of both practical information and also “wellbeing during Corona”, addressing questions like “What is going to happen now?”, “What is our company’s approach to the lockdown” supplementing more personal CEO-reflections like “How do we take care of each other?” and “What do I as a CEO see lying ahead of us as a community?”.

Once this first important information conveyance was carried out, companies moved into the next, **dialogue-based phase**. This included communicating more via divisions, mid-level managers and through virtual team or division meetings. Here focus was more so on dialogue and opening to the employees' questions and worries. Questions like "How do we support each other best?", "Securing each others' wellbeing from a distance" and "How do we create great virtual meetings?" supplemented the daily task status in team discussions. Furthermore, most teams experimented with on screen calls, quickly making video-on Zoom, MS Teams or Starleaf calls the standard.

The immediate consequence of lockdown was obviously that everyone stopped having those "informal interactions by the coffee machine" immediately, which also meant that this kind of communication had to be carried out elsewhere. Even small chit-chats would be scheduled in as a proper Zoom or MS Teams meeting, which would lead to full day end-to-end packed calendars with virtual meetings.


This presented a new challenge to corporate meeting culture, as the "meet in person" standard from one day to the next would be replaced by a non-defined "meet virtually" standard. Although virtual meetings would instantly save both time and money with both less (=zero) transportation needed and an ability to keeping to the agenda, it also meant that the rules of engagement and meeting moderation had to be redefined while on the go, and this would lead to a number of experiments, both with regards to meeting moderation, but also with regards to how participating would happen. Below are a few examples from the surveyed companies:



From these experiments, **several diverse learnings** appear to have emerged:

- A virtual meeting leader has a dual task of both moderating the ongoing verbal conversation and potential inputs via the chat thread
- Virtual meetings present new inclusion opportunities for e.g. people with a care responsibility that pre-COVID19 may have had to leave the office earlier than the rest of the team.
- There needs to be a clear agreement on check-in frequency, both 1-on-1 and team-wise for everyone to thrive and feel included in the team
- Combining virtual and physical presence in the same meeting will present new challenges and yet another need for clear rules of engagement for both leadership, physical and virtual attendees.
- Although people have been able to “see the real faces” of their colleagues and in this way move closer to each other, merely by looking into each other’s homes through the lens of the webcam, social cohesion takes a different shape when meeting virtually. This has called for a focused effort to maintain social cohesion in most teams across all types of organizations.

These learnings will be important to implement in the next set of (informal) meeting rules when yet another standard has to be combined when making a third move, namely to the combination of in-person and virtual meetings that will most probably happen in the Corona aftermath⁴.



54% of the surveyed working parents want a larger share of their meeting participation to be virtual in the future

Gender aspects

Most of the company representatives that were interviewed for this case study had not experienced a significant gendered difference among working parent-employees in Denmark and in the Nordics in general. According to experience in their organizations, childcare and house chores were largely shared evenly between fathers and mothers during the lockdown.

For those companies operating in countries outside Scandinavia, the picture appeared to be somewhat different, however. There, gender roles are more traditional, and hence specifically women were much

⁴ For more concrete insights into Corona-related learnings on online meeting, please refer to a survey conducted by Convinced ApS

more challenged than their male counterparts to be both full-time home-schooling parents and full-time employees working from home.

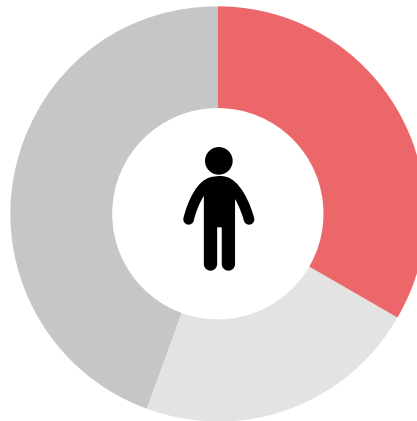
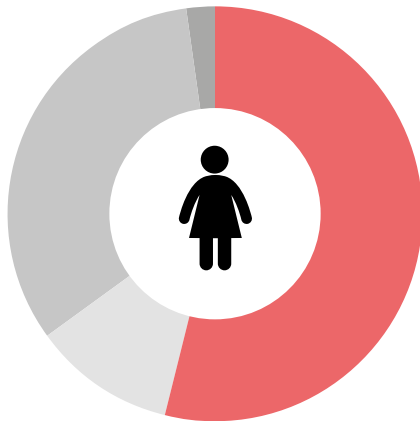
There are however a few indicators that although Denmark (and Scandinavia in general) are performing better on gender parity than then rest of the world, we are not yet at complete par.

It appears, that women are still the ones that are primarily taking the consequence of lockdown learnings for working parents, also supported by the fact that more women than men report that they feel they have taken primary responsibility for the family during the lockdown, as the figure below shows.

22% of the surveyed parents at work consider asking for part time after the Corona Lockdown
87% of these are women

Who has the primary responsibility for your children in work hours during the lockdown?
(Mother responses)

Who has the primary responsibility for your children in work hours during the lockdown?
(Father responses)



- I do
- My partner does

- We largely share responsibility
- A third person does

Source: "Who takes the home responsibility during COVID19?". Potential Company and Innovator Q, May 2020

Other factors, however, point towards a movement of fathers also taking big leaps when it comes to combining work and family during and after the Corona lockdown.

In a survey carried out by the Men's Health Society in Denmark, the lockdown has indeed caused fathers to experience a stronger family

connection than before. 62% have played more games, talked more, and went on more walks with their children. 85% feel it has had a positive effect on their children, and 87% feel it has had a positive effect on themselves. Furthermore, more than half (51%) of the respondents respond that they think the Corona lockdown period will have a significance for their relationship with their children in the future⁵.


Several company representatives in our case study also reported on male managers as well as employees that had reflected on the lockdown as being an eye opener to them with regards to the qualities of being more present in family life, and wanting to allocate more time for this in the future.

This points to an important movement for Working Parents resulting from the lockdown: Whereas the issue of being a working parent with all the work-life-balance challenges that follows appeared to be primarily a women's issue prior to the lockdown, it hence appears that there has been an unprecedented movement towards making working parents a gender inclusion opportunity, as more men have found joy and fulfillment in taking a larger part in family lives. This could lead to a tendency that working parents, regardless of gender, now can and will set up new family friendly demands towards their employer, challenging the employer, but also handing the employer a new inclusion opportunity if they seize the agenda and work with it.

5 Source: "Coronakrisen har styrket fædres forhold til deres børn", Forum for Mænds Sundhed (Men's Health Society), June 2020

Is this a window of opportunity for companies to create a new gender D&I approach?

The above mentioned inclusion opportunity has a number of consequences. They may be accentuated by working parents, but the opportunity and results go beyond that of working parents:

From		To
Employees aligning their lives to company modus		Company aligning its modus to employees
Work-life-balance		Work-family integration
Working at the office		Working from home
Management		Leadership
Being physically present		Combination of being present and virtual communication

Source: Tendencies identified by the interviewed company representatives or through synthesizing data from the interviews.

Whereas the general sense prior to lockdown was that employees were requested to align their lives to the way their employer operated the company, many company representatives in our case study now sense a willingness to also align the company modus to how the employees are living their lives. This gives the employees the opportunity to more so integrate work and family than before, by e.g. working to a larger extent from home, it is also changing the culture of physical presence to becoming a combo of being virtually and physically present, and it has pushed management in the direction of becoming a question of more value-based leadership in the future, as discussed in previous sections.

What needs to be taken into consideration, however, is that two important factors have been in place for the Corona lockdown to become a unique learning lab for a new inclusion mode:

- Firstly, there was an unprecedented burning platform to get everyone on board. In fact, it was impossible to stay off the bandwagon.
- Secondly, all imaginable resources were allocated for execution

This means that the lockdown period has been unique and although learnings outlined and reviewed above can and should be transferred to create future changes, it is not realistic to expect a perfect 1-to-1 transfer of actions and learnings moving forward. According to our case study respondents, this is particularly because several barriers

will be in place for the future implementation of change, and these must be taken into consideration in the work that lies ahead:

- General social cohesion at the workplace will be heavily challenged when resorting to a high degree of working-from-home and virtual meeting attendance
- Innovation, brainstorming, and development projects have suffered during this time and will be heavily challenged in the future if we keep resorting to primarily virtual presence
- Informal sparring has disappeared as we know it, and many employees are starting to miss the “coffee machine chat” for better and worse
- Although many teams and companies have appeared to come up with physical challenges while summoned in front of the computer screen, physical health has been challenged from sitting still for longer than prior to the lockdown.
- Particularly older generation representatives appear to be moreso clinging to an old “culture of presence” as opposed to a new “culture of flexibility”, and will expectantly be doing their best to maintain old habits post-lockdown.
- Many managers have a fear of being superseded, as management is moving towards new forms in many companies. Hence, they are seeking to return to “the old management style”.
- It has been a strenuous and bumpy 3 months with change overload for many employees. People are missing returning to the normal, and although they know and want it to be a “New Normal”, they feel challenged in overseeing what lies within this term.
- COVID19 Wage Compensation has given the affected employees a sense of being “broken up with”, and will hence feel a smaller degree of loyalty and advocacy towards their employer when they return after their wage compensation break.

Next steps:

So, what lies ahead of us? Although working parents do not constitute the entire workforce, it seems that their challenges accentuate many of the insights made during this time. Therefore, in our view, companies must first and foremost make sure that the most imminent findings are implemented asap:

More teleworking and flexibility will be requested. The Corona lockdown has taught us that performance does not necessarily suffer, just because more employees work more from home, and hence performance objectives are now regarded more important than facetime objectives in the office. In the surveyed companies, flex policies are now being reviewed with a span of 0-40% of working time being up for new flex initiatives. Some companies are however focused on not creating a one-size-fits-all policy, because they have also realized that the need for flexibility depends on lots of factors such as life phase (single – family with children – other caring responsibilities etc.), personality traits (introvert vs. extrovert – integrator or separator when navigating between life spheres), and other personal circumstances (married – divorced etc.).

Physical and virtual meetings are now almost at par in people's minds. Prior to the lockdown, many companies had a “culture of presence” where being present would trump virtual meeting attendance at any time. This seems to have changed over the last months, so that virtual meeting attendance now appears to offer the same input quality for the meeting output, especially when considering that virtual meetings save time and money, making it a potential asset to both employer and employee. The perfect implementation of virtual and physical meeting presence does however require new meeting rules, as combining the two meeting modes also requires a combination of “meeting rules and roles” that belong to each of the meeting modes.

Working Parents and flexibility is now a diversity and inclusion asset rather than a liability. The lockdown has been a catalyst for gender inclusion in the sense that the prior tendency to view work-life-balance-related policies as an offer to primarily female employees has changed. More men will in the future be demanding the same measures as those that were earlier unconsciously reserved for women, to be able to integrate or balance work and family. Furthermore, as both genders will engage more equally in family, this movement will not only affect work-life-balance related issues, but will also have an effect on management principles, as well as working- and meeting cultures in the future of organizational strategy as shown in this case study. Companies should use this opportunity to start addressing the tendency in their D&I efforts.

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