

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a white and blue striped shirt, is smiling and looking down at a laptop. She is holding a pen in her right hand. The background is a blurred office setting with a chair and a window. The image has a blue geometric overlay.

SMEs and the post Covid-19 world of work

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The long term impact of Covid on business

Covid-19 has been one of the biggest challenges ever faced by modern society and the long-term consequences for many businesses will be significant.

For some, it has been a battle for survival, while for others it has opened the door to new opportunities and growth in new markets never before considered.

The advent of a national vaccination programme means there is finally light at the end of the tunnel, but there remains some way to go until a 'new normal' is reached.

What is clear though, is that the experiences businesses have had during the pandemic and the many lessons that have been learnt – particularly in the areas of technology and digitalisation – may result in new ways of working for the long term.

So, how do businesses envisage their future in this post-Covid world?





Long term operational changes

A number of studies have been undertaken that focus on what the world of work may look like, following the pandemic. For example, in relation to where and how team members carry out their duties.

One of the major impacts of Covid-19 has been the forced shift to home working and it looks to be a trend that is here to stay. Studies have found that many companies are planning to make permanent changes to their employment patterns, with flexible working becoming commonplace.

A survey by Deloitte has revealed that 97% of bosses expect to offer home working in the long-term. This could see up to a quarter of British employees working from home for good.

And it is a move that appears to be welcomed by office workers themselves, who reportedly value this flexibility so highly, they would consider taking a pay cut for the privilege.

Research by Citrix has found that 75% of UK office workers would take hits to their paycheques in exchange for greater flexibility, with three-quarters of respondents revealing they would accept – or have accepted – a pay cut in return for a fully remote role.

The role of technology and digitalisation

During the pandemic, the capabilities of company IT systems and digital tools have been tested like never before. Those businesses who were already ahead of the curve and had invested in digitisation, instantly gained a clear advantage.

Digital tools and infrastructure have enabled most companies to switch to remote working and to continue delivering their services (at least in part). But making such changes hasn't come without its challenges.

While the short-term focus was on getting up and running fast and minimising service disruption, some of the ongoing concerns raised by businesses, include:

- How to ensure the safety and security of remote working
- How to ensure effective communication and team member collaboration
- How best to monitor productivity and manage employees working remotely



Businesses in the spotlight

At Dragon, we have been supporting SME businesses for more than a decade, providing cost effective, outsourced IT services. Much of our focus in recent months has been on helping businesses transition to remote working – often at scale – and always in a safe and efficient way.

So, what has the experience of dealing with Covid19 really been like for businesses? And will it act as a catalyst for long term change?

We asked the leaders of four SME businesses we work with, to reflect on the impact of Covid-19 and what it has meant for their operations, strategy and future plans.

Here, they share their stories and reflect on what the post-Covid world of work may look like for them.

Mark Billingham

Entrepreneur and property developer

Mark Billingham is a West Midlands-based property developer and investor who runs a number of successful businesses within the Birmingham area. The pandemic has impacted on his companies in different ways and has also presented new opportunities that the serial entrepreneur is now looking to capitalise on.



Impact of Covid-19

“Before the pandemic struck, we had a team of 15 people working from an office in Birmingham, so one of the first things we did was to make the move to remote working. This was a straightforward process, thanks to the support of our retained IT services provider, Dragon Information System.

For our car parking business, the pandemic has been particularly challenging. Less people travelling has resulted in a reduction in occupancy and revenue and we have needed to furlough staff. However, we know that the business will return to its former level when we return to the “new normal”.

Within our IT business, our software developers were already geared up for working from home and would do so occasionally. After the pandemic, I suspect this could flip to home working becoming prevalent. However, the office will still be an important place for social interaction, collaboration and training.

The changes we have seen as a result of Covid-10 may have taken 5 or 6 years without the pandemic but have been fast tracked out of necessity. For employers and employees, the challenge is to pick the best bits from the changed working practices and ditch the worst. The optimum will inevitably be different for each business and it will not be a one size fits all solution.

It is this change in working habits and also speaking to other professionals that flagged up a potential opportunity to me. As more and more companies move away from having permanent offices as a result of the pandemic, this will create an increasing need for flexible and versatile shared workspaces. Added to this is the growing work force who want a traditional working environment but local to where they live, to avoid the commute. This has created demand for suburban or rural offices that offer flexible work space.”



The post-Covid world of work

“I strongly believe the office is not dead, it is simply going to be different in a post-Covid world. There is likely to be far more flexibility for when and where employees can work, with a mix of both office-based and home-based working. For those businesses who do relinquish having an office completely, there will be a need for somewhere physical, where team members can work or get together and collaborate.

While some employees thrive on working from home, it doesn't suit everyone, and many people will be looking for somewhere professional to go that meets their needs. Which is why we will be constructing a small, shared office facility, to capitalise on that need.

Called The Lodge, the small rural office building will offer a host of facilities, in exchange for a monthly membership fee. There will be a number of exclusive rooms, meeting rooms, open plan workstations, a kitchen and a business hub, complete with printers and scanners. The expectation is that the users – be they businesses or individuals – will be very local. We will be responding to their wish to reduce the cost and time involved commuting, whilst still having an office away from home, with all the expected facilities.

We will also be creating individual Wi-Fi networks for members and providing phone numbers if required, with the support of Dragon, to ensure the whole network is both safe and secure. This is a key requirement for us and is something all businesses must start thinking about. I believe some companies have had their eyes closed in this respect.

I believe that those businesses who adapt and embrace flexible ways of working for the long term, will have a competitive advantage. Not only will they be more efficient and more productive, but they will be more attractive to potential recruits.”



“With many large organisations reducing their static stock as a result of Covid-19, we’ve spotted a commercial opportunity in the growing requirement for shared workspaces.”

Mark Billingham

Entrepreneur and property developer

Tim Andrews

Hollywood Monster

Hollywood Monster is one of the largest digital printing and signage firms in the Midlands, generating annual revenues in excess of £10M at its peak. But the arrival of Covid-19 and a subsequent freeze on the events industry, has seen the company battling for its survival. This has led the company to pivot and also to need to make some difficult decisions. However, chairman Tim Andrews remains positive about the future.



Impact of Covid-19

“Before March 2020 and when Covid-19 was being somewhat downplayed in the UK, our business was already feeling its impact. Projects in France and Italy started being pulled and it wasn’t long before the UK followed suit and we found ourselves in lockdown.

For a business like ours, which was previously generating 60% of its turnover from the events industry, it was a devastating blow. Orders were being cancelled and we weren’t being paid for work we had already done. This was further compounded by the fact that being a manufacturing business, we didn’t qualify for any grants.

We needed to furlough some staff and sadly had to make around 20 redundant. From turning over around £1M a month and employing 70 people, we quickly utilised the Government’s furlough scheme, with just a handful of employees working on a rotation basis.

Luckily, we managed to pivot into some emerging markets. We started producing 2 metre distance stickers, one-way signs and other health and safety signage related to Covid-19, which retailers, shopping centres and other businesses needed.

As well as utilising our existing skillset and supply chain to deal with enquiries for safety-related signage, we also started offering perspex sneeze screens. Together, this is what kept the business going throughout the summer. As the economy slowly started to open up again, our revenue grew to around £100k a month.

And we have subsequently pivoted again, this time going into the supply of antimicrobial screen covers for touch displays, such as those you find at petrol stations and fast-food restaurants.

One of the reasons we’ve been able to continue working at all, is thanks to the support of Dragon, who helped us quickly move to remote working and to stay connected. We’ve been speaking to each other through online conferencing tools for the first time and it’s shown us that we don’t actually need to be in an office to do our work.

While we’re all longing to get back to some level of normality and to be together again as a team, we’ve seen the potential for new ways of working and plan to utilise our technology in different ways moving forward.”



The post-Covid world of work

“The business has fundamentally changed as a result of Covid-19 and we are still fighting. When life returns to a new ‘normal’, I expect things will look very different for us.

It is difficult to know if we will ever get back to the position we were before. Realistically, the events industry is unlikely to resume this year and that represents a significant hole in our revenue.

Operationally, I expect one of the long-term impacts of Covid will be improved efficiency. One of the biggest lessons we’ve learnt is that we could be utilising technology and the capabilities of our systems, a lot more.

We had never used online collaboration tools before. Connecting in this way has the potential to help us save time and money. For example, by reducing the need for business travel. We have also realised that as a business we can operate with fewer people.

Our emphasis moving forward is going to be on having a joined up approach, with improved software and systems that allow us to work out of a central base.

We expect interest in our latest innovation, the antimicrobial screen cover for touch displays, to continue to grow and for it to be a key product for us in 2021. Which is great, as it complements our existing offering in the area of health and safety signage, while seeing us enter new markets and capitalising on new opportunities.”



“It’s been a fight for survival and one of the biggest lessons we’ve learnt is that we could be utilising technology and the capabilities of our systems, a lot more”.

Tim Andrews
Chairman
Hollywood Monster

Phil Johns

Centrick Group

Centrick Group, based in Birmingham, is a specialist property services business that is active in a range of different areas, including sales, lettings, asset management and block management. Employing more than 130 people, managing over 250 developments and 11,000 units, and with offices in Nottingham, Solihull and London, the company remains on track for rapid growth.



Impact of Covid-19

“Covid-19 had the potential to impact heavily on our business. Because we are a services company, everything we do is about service delivery and had that been disrupted, our business would simply have ground to a halt.

As our staff are predominantly office-based, when we got a hint that a lockdown may be on the cards, we reacted very quickly to implement a home working solution. Dragon, our IT services provider, worked with us to look at our existing infrastructure and hardware, to ensure everyone had access to a laptop and the systems they needed.

By the time the first lockdown was officially announced, we were already up and running and the impact was minimal.

Another step we took was to film all our lettings properties, so we could offer virtual viewings. If we hadn't had the foresight to do this, then that side of the businesses – which is usually high volume – would have been severely impacted upon.

As for our team members, working from home was a big change but they adapted to it really well. We have always had a very positive workplace culture and quite a young team, so the social side is something many people have missed. One of the ways we have tried to support them with this is by using tools like Yammer to share regular videos of the exec team. We've also been very honest in sharing how we're feeling, and generally encouraged staff to know it's ok not to feel ok. We even opened a virtual pub called the 'Centrick Arms' for regular socials on a Friday!

On the technology side, another way Dragon has helped us is by monitoring, diagnosing and advising on any issues that may arise, such as with connectivity. We've also updated our processes to make greater use of the technology that is available, such as by sending customers digital contracts.

For staff members who do need to go into the office for any reason, it has been Covid-proofed, with one-way systems, coloured zones, team bubbles and other measures that limit interaction and minimise risk.



The post-Covid world of work

“I think one of the biggest long term changes we’ll be making as a result of the pandemic, is to offer flexible working. I’ve personally always been a fan of it and going through this process has demonstrated it is possible.

What we are thinking about now is our people strategy and how best to support and manage employees who are working remotely. For example, by making better use of the data we hold, to create central dashboards of key information. That way everyone knows what is expected of them and is given the autonomy and trust to work as they wish. As long as they are delivering what is expected of them, and both our staff and customers are happy, then nothing else really matters.

Our staff work hard and play hard, so many of them are keen to return to the office to be with their teammates. They are missing the in-person interaction, so a blend of office and home based will be the preferred option for the future.

We will also be looking to accelerate innovations we had been exploring pre-Covid. For example, by introducing virtual tours of our sale properties, which can be viewed by potential buyers via a VR headset in the office. This could have many benefits for both the sales and lettings teams.

For the developments we manage, we have found hosting virtual resident meetings to be very effective. Previously we would have held such meetings at the development or rented out a local space. But the virtual meetings have been very popular, especially for those residents who do not live in the area. It has supported resident engagement and so we plan to continue with it.

We’re delighted to say that overall, our business continues to record strong results and we expect to expand significantly in the coming years. We’re very ambitious and forward-thinking and think our openness to innovation and digitalisation will support those growth ambitions.”



“As a services business the lockdown could have had serious repercussions, but we reacted quickly with a focus on our remote capabilities and team member wellbeing, and it gave us a clear market advantage.”

Phil Johns

Group Managing Director
Centrick Group

Rowan Caffull

36 Group

36 Group is one of the UK's biggest chambers, with 180 barristers servicing clients across a diverse range of specialisms, including commercial, international trade and shipping, family, public & human rights, and criminal law. With a focus on efficiency and a commitment to making data-driven business decisions, the organisation has reaped the benefit of its forward-thinking culture during lockdown.



Impact of Covid-19

“Our aim at 36 Group is not to be the biggest but to be the market leader in each of our respective fields. As such, we’ve always been a very forward-thinking organisation and continue to push the boundaries, especially in areas where chambers have traditionally been lagging.

Thanks to our long-standing adoption of cutting-edge technology, and the support of Dragon IS, who we’ve worked with for many years, we were able to react quickly during lockdown - unlike many others within our sector. As we already had the capability for remote working, it was a simple enough exercise to get all office-based staff up and running at home. There was zero impact on our services and for our barristers, who would usually work remotely between court appearances, nothing really changed.

This gave us a huge advantage. Many other chambers struggled and, in some cases, it took months to implement what was needed, so we picked up a lot of work as a result.

However, in the early days of the pandemic, we, like many others, were in survival mode. The major problem for us was the closure of the courts, with 75-80% of our work relying on courts being open. It was a pretty difficult time, as we couldn’t see an end at that point.

But the courts eventually opened with limited capacity and also introduced the option for remote hearings. This meant our work could continue at a reduced volume and overall the market remained relatively unaffected in most areas. Indeed, our shipping team ended up having the best year they’ve ever had.”



The post-Covid world of work

“When the pandemic is under control, we expect to see some long-term changes in the way we work.

Our office-based staff used to be in the office full time, but we will be offering greater flexibility moving forwards. Depending on their role, some team members will need to be in the office as their job requires it. We also know that some staff cannot wait to get back in the office environment, as they prefer to work that way. But overall, we expect to see working patterns becoming a mix of home and office based.

For our barristers, we see a lot of potential in remote hearings. It saves a lot of time and money, due to the reduction in travel and it’s also a far more efficient system. For example, a criminal barrister may historically have managed 2-3 court appearances in a day, as they would be physically travelling between courts. They can now do multiple hearings, as there is no issue with geography. Doing things this way is also beneficial from a client care point of view, as they are more likely to maintain the same barrister throughout.

While some parts of the judicial system will always need to be done in person (you cannot have a jury trial on Zoom), other aspects, such as short hearings to list a trial, are definitely suited to being held remotely. So, we’re interested to see what happens there.

For 36 Group, our goals for the future have not changed but our plans for how we might achieve them has. One area we’ve diversified in is marketing. We’re making huge strides in the social sphere and with our online marketing. During lockdown we began hosting 3-4 webinars a week and also launched three podcast series. All of which will continue.

Another development for us, which was already in the pipeline long before covid-19 struck, is the introduction of specialist monitoring software. It is designed to allow us to better measure productivity and crucially, to spot any inefficiencies within our systems. The information we collect will also help us ensure we are making business decisions that are driven by data. Together, these elements form a crucial part of our long-term growth plan.”



“Thanks to the cutting-edge technologies, systems and processes we had already implemented, we were able to react quickly during lockdown, unlike many others within our sector.”

Rowan Caffull
COO, 36 Group

The future world of work? It will be digital

By Lionel Naidoo, MD,
Dragon Information Systems



Covid-19 will long be remembered for the impact it has had on all our lives.

It has been an extremely challenging time for many businesses and our thanks go to those who have shared their experiences with us here.

Looking to the future, alongside greater employee flexibility, one of the long-term effects of the pandemic is likely to be an acceleration of digitalisation.

It is an evolution that was already well underway before Covid-19 hit, with 85% of businesses worldwide estimated to be making use of cloud technology.

In the UK, in 2010 the cloud adoption rate was just 5%, while the most recent estimate puts that figure at a whopping 88%. And you only need to look in the direction of agencies such as HMRC and it's push to 'make tax digital' to see that things are changing at every level.

While digitalisation presents many new opportunities and efficiencies for businesses, it also opens the door to different risks and threats. Understanding how best to implement such systems and managing the potential security risks is key to making a successful transition. And it's our pleasure to be supporting our customers to do just that.

Whether your business is an early adopter of technology, or currently rooted in old-school systems, processes and behaviours, the future of business is digital. It's time to embrace it.

About this guide

This guide was brought to you by the team at Dragon Information Systems.

Technology is our passion and for more than a decade we have been supporting businesses to enhance their performance, through specialist IT consultancy and support.

Throughout the pandemic, we have worked closely with our customers to help them deliver their services remotely, and in a safe and secure way. We are also supporting them to accelerate their digitalisation plans, ensuring they have robust and scalable business operations for the long term.

For more information, please call us on 0330 363 0055, email lionel@dragon-is.com, or visit www.dragon-is.com.

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