People Analytics: The return to work (22/06/2021)

The fourth People Analytics SIG Annual General Meeting was held on 22nd June 2021 with the theme of returning to work. It included presentations covering how work has changed, how we have adapted in the way we work, and what the challenges will be for People Analytics.

The group’s first presentation was from Gill Dix, Acas, who considered **the future of work and how we reopen, rebuild and reimagine work following the pandemic**.

In reopening we need to consider the employment challenges around safety, including vaccinations and mental health. It is important there is parity for mental and physical health. There has been a move from flexible to remote working. Employers now need to establish the balance between the home / office in a hybrid working. Change management, ranging from hospitals to reopening the local pub presents significant challenges for business and managers as workplaces reopen.

We need to rebuild the economy from a base of low productivity combined with regional inequality. In rebuilding the economy both job retention and quality is important. This also highlights issues of measurement; how do we measure wellbeing and inclusivity?

In reimagining work some would say there has been a growth in common interest. In terms of the workplace contract, we have seen an upturn in managers and unions working together and the greater democratisation of work. However, many organisations are struggling to survive, with a backdrop of social and regional inequality that has grown during the pandemic.

Gill highlighted the importance of data and capturing the baseline and considering behavioural impacts on the way data is reported e.g. the variability on sickness absence reporting. There are also challenges around longitudinal data.

Dr Matthew Davies (Leeds Business School) drew on ESRC research **adapting offices in response to COVID-19 & hybrid working**. Matt considered the links between organisational layout and behaviours, sharing some lessons from existing literature to help the group understand about the workplace and the data that we are missing

For many people the move to homeworking challenged conceptions around the space needed. From early on people predicated the end of the office, therefore can we do away with office? At the height of the first lockdown ONS data showed 44% of people were working from home, up from 12.3% pre-COVID. Findings from a survey of CBI members showed over half of large employers see their work post pandemic not being solely in office-based. These changes are being reflected in leases for office space. There is however still an idea by some that we will gradually move back to the office.

Matt recommended looking at survey and employee data to see what the impact might be. What we do know from the research is e-working and working from home is consistently link to higher levels of job satisfaction. This is partly explained by greater autonomy, but not solely as in the pandemic may not have had the autonomy as some people are not in these types of roles or because of the constraints of lockdown.

Looking at evidence from the pandemic suggests that working from home provides an increased level of flexibility with evidence that women benefit more from these arrangements. This can be seen as positive and negative – providing more flexibility versus entrenching gender roles. We are seeing that women are more reluctant to come back to the office.

Homeworking and productivity: we have managed to sustain productive outputs kept up in knowledge-based jobs which has been seen as a validation that this will not come at a productivity cost. However hours worked has gone up, whereas wages have stayed the same and outputs have stayed the same, so in fact productively has gone down.

There is literature on tipping points in terms of the amount of time that people spend in the office. Job satisfaction goes up as the time people spend away from the office increases, but it is not linear and seems to plateau at around 15 hours. May indicate where the balance for hybrid working should lie.

The office employees left last March will not be the office they step back in to with changes to ventilation, practical steps to opening windows and getting outside, clear desk polices, PPE, reducing touch points within the offices, restricting use of shared facilities and travel patterns. Also managing the expectations that these adaptations may set up e.g. social distancing in offices will start to see norms and habits around these changes around what people expect and feel is necessary for safety. This is accelerating what we saw before the pandemic to move towards an activity-based environment. How to incorporate needs for those who still require an office set up and do not have access to suitable space at home. Finer grade analysis of individual needs will need to be fed in to office planning. This provides opportunities for the data that we will collect in future (occupancy flow, booking for desks, meeting). Big challenge for HR and analysts to balance variable demands across the week. How do we control that, booking systems, rules? What are risks?

The data we have is what employees think they want when they return to the workplace, thinking about the workplaces they left last March. These preferences are likely to change as we return to the office. Need to be careful to base long-term change on the assumptions of evidence collected in experimental circumstances.

Andrew Webster, People Analytics Manager for Wesleyan, a financial mutual, outlined their experience of using **Microsoft Workplace Analytics (WpA)**, what the analysis has showed and how they will be using it going forward. The organisation has gone through a significant period of change including cultural change. Looked at changes in culture and how those influence the business, introduction of a culture survey and sentiment analysis. Also carried out a feasibility study on Microsoft Workplace Analytics to support the measurement of cultural change. Prior to the pandemic workplace analytics was able to show there was little use of collaboration tools, with a focus on meeting culture instead.

Over the last 15 months a lot of focus on remote working, furlough, sickness and annual leave. A lot of monitoring of terms of annual leave. WpA, takes all the information of your employees from products such as Outlook (Calendar and Email) and Teams. Enabling them to look at how Wesleyan operated as a business, how they can look at the culture and the impacts of COVID-19.

The tool has a number of features that can be used to advantage: Organisational network analysis, identification of influencers, cohesion between teams and outliers. Can then analyse time spent in meetings and use to set targets to drive the culture and behaviours that the organisations that want. With some downsides in terms of the complexity of the measures, the changing nature of the product and the associated costs both in terms of analytical overheads and system costs.

They were able to assess the impact of the pandemic, for example concerns around time spent in meetings had been exacerbated in moving to remove working. A 30% increase in the time spent on email and meetings since lockdown and a 2500% increase in instant messaging. Looked at impacts on wellbeing, overall sickness has reduced but proportion of mental health has increased both in terms of proportion and volume. Microsoft has an indicator of burnout risk.

More engaged individuals were those who had a coaching relationship with managers, however increased managerial workloads has started to impact on the amount of time spent with staff. Looking for signs on any impact on attrition.

Have looked to change the office layout, with staff survey reports that staff do not expect to be in for more than two days per week. Have introduced a collaboration charter, about meetings and accepting meetings, clear agenda and clear as to why you are accepting a meeting.

WpA has been really useful, but it requires both time and resources to support it. Changes in working behaviours due to COVID-19 have created opportunities and risks with greater remote collaboration requiring different behaviours to avoid burnout and disengagement. This means the new normal is a evolving process and they will continue to monitor the changes.

As part of the AGM a new committee were elected. A vote was carried out and it was agreed by attending ORS members that the committee would be formed thus: Chair, Katie Gronow (DfT) and Secretary, Catriona Smith (Acas) and events, Hazel Challenger (MoJ), Emma Watson (MoJ) and Maureen Usiagwu (University of Southampton). Other volunteers are always welcome to reflect the diversity of People Analytics work carried out across sectors and to help with organising events or suggesting speakers, or to take a core role on the committee – please contact Katie.Gronow@dft.gov.uk.

Following the AGM the SIG will organise a series of webinars, the first of which will consider the utility of job vacancy descriptions for providing insight into workforce skill requirements within a public sector organisation. Details of this and the SIG’s meetings and seminars can be found at <https://www.theorsociety.com/who-we-are/society-groups/special-interest-groups-and-networks/people-analytics/>