

OR, LOCKDOWN AND YOU: BREAKOUT WORKSHOP REPORTBACKS

1: Are you 'working from home' or just 'trying to work whilst at home' – experiences, issues and what might help?

We were an international group (including Brazil & Sweden) and a mix of academics, practitioners and students. Everyone was at home (either their own or their family home). We had quite mixed experiences as a group with some living only with other adults and others looking after children. The following were suggestions of things that have helped:

setting up a dedicated place to work

organising the place of work to replicate the usual work desk

taking regular breaks to get a drink and to break from work

working flexibly to take account of home-related priorities eg childcare

feeling more connected – taking advantage of opportunities for regular catch-up meetings with colleagues

formally taking time off work and trying to work regular weekly hours where possible – eg not working weekends, taking holiday entitlement to ensure a break

taking care of sleep to help address issues such as anxiety levels.

2: Remote teams: tips for managing and collaborating, opportunities and pitfalls

[to follow]

3a: The impact of lockdown on development and progression: risks, concerns and opportunities

Risks:

- Miss the 'off-line' discussions in the margins of meetings and in the coffee room, where valuable contacts can usually be made, networks formed more easily - especially for newcomers, and working relationships enhanced.
- Miss seeing the body language at meetings, which can say a lot about what people are really thinking.
- Miss the opportunity to talk to the chair (or other key people) immediately after meetings to query some of the decisions quietly.
- Loss of practice of face to face interaction with students might affect skill set.

Concerns:

- Felt to be especially hard for those women with small children (who need frequent attention and divert their mothers from the matters they are working

on). Especially hard to find support/childcare during lockdown. Makes it difficult for mothers to be seen to be ahead of the game.

- Firms/universities may require fewer staff in future so it may be harder for everyone (especially those with child care responsibilities) to find suitable posts (not clear whether it will be easier to find part time jobs or not).

Opportunities:

- More quality time with family which can boost morale, reduce stress
- More chance to learn new things on line, undertake self-development
- A chance to shine in difficult circumstances – be seen as an innovative team player who gets the job done (women often have a particular sense of responsibility, can juggle several tasks at once, self-starters).
- More time to study the job market, look for a new job, and attend interviews with less chance of the current employer knowing!
- Chance to try out new things (new aspects of Zoom) given reduced travel requirements.
- Chance to be moved on to different, more important work (eg connected with Covid-19)
- Health benefits of reduced travel.

3b: The impact of lockdown on development and progression: risks, concerns and opportunities

Concerns:

- Recent Guardian article
- Report on diversity in the public sector
- Combine a full-time job with childcare responsibilities
- Difficult to keep to a 9 to 5 schedule

Risks:

- We are not good at promoting our own brand
- No opportunities for career progression
- Life and promotions on hold

Opportunities:

- Easier to attend online events/Conferences
- Enhance social media presence
- Increase visibility if you prefer to work at home
- Easier to contribute to online discussions
- Business as usual in some places

5: Do women have it harder than men?

In the group of 5, 3 women had childcare responsibilities; one was a young adult staying with her parents for lockdown, and by so doing was foregoing support for her grandmother, and one was sharing a house with several adults. All either had supportive employers, or were self-employed.

They considered it a moot point whether the problem was that women have it harder, or make it harder for themselves by setting higher standards for things like housekeeping, carer responsibilities and mental health and wellbeing. There may be a small number of 'inevitable' aspects like being on maternity leave.

That said, it was generally agreed that:

- they felt that they personally had found it hard to balance work and caring responsibilities;

- they had to have the confidence to ask for help from employers;

- and they valued help from others in similar situations, helping them see what was manageable and manage any guilt about what was being dropped.

6: Fairness during lockdown – what issues are there and how do those who are privileged help those who are not.

There were 4 of us including me, so it was easy to talk without talking over each other too much. We could have talked for longer but equally could have cut it shorter without losing much. Nice spread of Government / Academic / Freelance, and one from outside the UK, which gave a different perspective.

A few themes:

How are we feeling? Fortunate, and angry about the inequalities being played out. Not generally feeling guilty – that's just me then! One felt that some of the early messaging didn't reflect the reality of people's lives – i.e. advice to use separate bathrooms/toilets, when many people are sharing houses and flats with limited space. Also people were missed out of the messaging – e.g. with language barriers, and were not aware of what was going on. A lack of access to information as well as supplies.

Desire to help: we had found opportunities to help or offer help – although offers are not always taken up (e.g. NHS volunteer).

Observation of support organisations: We had seen (in the UK) the emergence of local self-organising voluntary groups with enthusiasm - but not necessarily expertise - in the early days, supporting an immediate need earlier than more well-established organisations eg. Local councils, charities. Also we heard of existing small charities using their networks to good effect but re-focussing their work. In the non-UK country represented, there was no significant community self-organisation, and the government/existing organisations had to become fast to meet the needs.

Other ways to help – aside from volunteering locally or via national schemes, we were supporting local small businesses and online small business, and extending our networks to check in with people we wouldn't always be in regular contact with. Or using OR skills: one member had used OR skills as part of a think tank looking at COVID bed allocation - but could OR staff who aren't at full capacity offer pro-bono assistance.

8: "What next": what are the issues for OR and Women in OR as we exit from lockdown and move to the new normal

What might a new normal look like?

- Maintain social distance
- More home working (cultural change needed to make this a success)
- Acceleration of smart working.
- Increasing questioning of what the purpose of the office is
- Learning more about colleagues as 'bring whole self to work' actually becomes a reality for most
- Relationships building in a new way
- New work relationships building
- Networking will be different with spontaneous catch-ups becoming harder
- More leisure time for people as commutes disappear
- Different type of expectations to manage, i.e. if lockdown comes again.

People were missing:

- Their normal routine. For some this involved travel down to London and other places on a weekly basis.
- The culture of an office and for some the culture of different locations they work from.
- Being part of a 'tribe'.

What issues might this present for OR?

- The way universities and schools are teaching – the '2020' cohort (and more) will be different as they enter further education and the workplace.
 - This may also be the case beyond the current situation too. For instance, more remote teaching so students building teams in new ways.
- Learn from academics on delivery of courses – especially doing things remotely (a practitioner comment).
- OR Society to do more courses on-line.
- Involvement in COVID immediate response and planning for future pandemics.
- Lots of new things for OR to analyse.

- Digital media – development of tools and techniques to gather and analyse this data.
- ‘Thrivers guilt’ - lots and lots of data to analyse. BUT the whole situation has highlighted the structural problems in the UK and the inequalities.
- Lots of opportunities for OR. For example, queueing in supermarkets and beyond; locational planning. In essence, support to re-planning everything to be as efficient as possible with social distancing in place.
- Lots of uncertainties around policy changes. OR has a role here to help explore different alternatives.

Added afterwards

- Need for remote
 - Facilitation;
 - Model building; and
 - Client interaction.

What issues might this present for women in OR?

- Reduction in publications from women, which is storing up a potential stalling in female progression in academia.
- Who will go back to the office? Men or women? There is a potential risk associated with this as those in office may have greater visibility and be on hand to support different tasks.

10: ‘How could/should the OR community be contributing to the current circumstances?’

- Parallels were drawn between the COVID-19 crisis and OR’s origins in World War II – it was felt that the OR community could and ought to rise to the challenges being faced as a result of the pandemic, like it did in the war.
- However, people were experiencing various barriers to this, such as:
 - Linking up with the need/decision: we have generally been finding it hard to identify which decisions really need answering and whether or not they are already being tackled with OR.
 - Linking up with the decision-makers: many of us were finding it difficult to know who to speak to in order to understand more about the problem and feed OR in to decision making channels. Existing collaborations and networks were proving fruitful in terms of doing responsive work, but otherwise it was challenging to match up the OR people/ideas with the people in need and making decisions.
 - Getting hold of data has been problematic.

- Some were worried about just contributing to the noise – lots of people seem to be trying to help, so what is useful and what is just adding more noise?
- Funding and staff availability: It is easier if existing projects are flexible to incorporate / be redirected towards COVID-related issues, but harder to contribute if all resources (i.e. people) are tied up with existing work and no funding is available to support them taking on COVID-related work instead. Some people had had bad experiences with COVID-related funding calls, which were thought to be poorly run and not very flexible.
- Initiatives aimed at mobilising researchers (e.g. RAMP) seemed to be black holes with people finding that none of the things they had registered with had got back to them.
- It was felt that either OR hasn't been contributing much to the response so far, or else its contribution hasn't been very visible compared to, for example, epidemiology and medical/basic science (e.g. vaccine development).
- We also discussed operational research's USP, particularly in relation to some of the other disciplines that have been contributing more visibly, mostly around optimisation and contributing to operational decision making in the medium-term response.

ANNEX 2: FEEDBACK

Great experiment. Just a few thoughts in response to your query:

Sound quality was pretty good apart from one of the delegates who spoke very quietly, and a few not serious sound problems from your end right at the start (just a bit of wobble). Video was fine on the whole with just a few wobbles here and there. At one point a message shot into view from the ORS (can't remember from whom) and I pressed the x to remove it so I could see the video better but this resulted in taking me to a different plain Zoom screen - just ZOOM in the middle of the page- and I had a devil's own job getting back in!

It was all a little bit too rushed I felt which is rather what you imply below, but the format was OK - maybe just one talk at the start to set the scene would be simpler.

Be good to send out the link the day before so it doesn't get lost in the pile (I struggled to find the earlier one as I couldn't recall who had sent it!) and as a clear reminder and asking people to let you know if they can't attend. Also to give people a mobile phone number to contact if they can't get into the system for some reason?

My main difficulty was my own ineptitude! As we had a very small group it was possible to spend a bit of time on each aspect of the question set with all 3 of us commenting, had we had a bigger group, I think as facilitator I would have divided the question up between members and asked for swift bullet point answers. The member of mine who spoke first wandered away from the point quite quickly on to the difficulty of having small children and I wasn't quick enough to divert her. If we had been able to send group members specific aspects of questions in advance to think about, that might have speeded things up on the day (clearly that wasn't possible this time round because of various constraints but might be worth considering for the future.)

From my perspective it was great fun – I personally find online events a really easy way to engage with people as if the kids or my husband etc need anything, no-one minds if they just pop into the picture for a minute. One consequence of online events is that it's harder to “stop/block” those who want to hijack the conversation []

- In principle I love the format and would like to see more of them.
- Technical/organisation – people (and by that I mean everyone) will get better at managing themselves in online meetings (and collectively we'll get better at managing those who won't shut up...) Whilst I certainly didn't mind not having to work and just join in I can see that would annoy others. Given the inevitable dropout rate for free online events, perhaps set the groups at a minimum of say 8 and below that you'll be allocated to your other choice. That way you're more likely to have stated groups run. Also like many I am in Zoom hell on many days with back to back meetings. I'd limit an event to an hour tops.
- Themes/format ideas:
 - “poster sessions/speakers corner” from conferences – basically speed networking on your research/project. You get a strict 3 minute spotlight to talk and show slides, after that you're muted. This could be targeted

at post grads/researchers, early career OR or anyone who wants to show their conference work off but can't. 10 presentations, then networking so 45 minutes at most

- Speed networking – random group allocation, 90 seconds to introduce yourself, again 45 minute session at most
 - Soft skills development – managing people remotely (oddly as all my lovely staff are remote this is something we've always done but it's been brought into sharper focus at the moment)
 - Audio – you were still crackly I'm afraid but much better than last time, and frankly it's just something we all have to get on with isn't it!
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a) The format generally worked well, but I agree that there was a bit too much on the agenda for the time we had. From my perspective, one plenary talk might have been sufficient, with more time for the breakout discussion and networking

(b) I thought the technical / organisational things worked very well. The surveys are nice and should be encouraged, but perhaps need to be a bit slicker and better integrated.

(c) A possible theme could be around women as leaders in crises. Not a theme as such, but do we want to explore mentorship opportunities through WORAN? In terms of format, less might be more and the breakouts and networking sections were really good so more time on that and a bit less plenary (including less plenary feedback).

My own additional feedback about using zoom from the perspective of a presenter/breakout group host:

- Technology was easy to use eg sharing screen as a speaker and using the chat facility
- Thought the whole event went smoothly in terms of handing over between speakers and then moving into breakout groups and then back to plenary
- Worked well to have a single host (Ruth) to chair & form the links between the various parts
- I made simple mistakes:
 - one person's name wasn't exactly as on the breakout list so didn't pick them up in the group
 - didn't see all people in group – for some reason only saw 6 of us – didn't realise there was a second screen until very late in the breakout session
- Struggled with working 'blind':
 - Host couldn't communicate with me whilst I was presenting and I forgot to hit my timer at start of my bit. Similarly with breakout session though

I knew what time we were expected back so that was a bit easier to handle

- Would like to have been able to chat with Amy/Tatty re any issues in breakout group but we had no system for this set up
- Hand raising – I asked people in our breakout to raise their hands but none did – not sure whether they didn't understand how to or not...ended up using a round-robin approach – didn't feel much like a discussion but it served its purpose. The more I do this sort of thing the easier I'm sure it will get.
- Having the preparatory documentation was helpful (notes & hints from Ruth + list of breakout participants from Amy)
- Breakout group size was 6 which was just about manageable in the time – everyone got 2 opportunities to speak – a larger group would have been more difficult to manage.

Suggestion for next time:

- Explore a parallel system that allows hosts/organisers to communicate off-line eg simultaneous skype /teams meeting with only them in or something similar – we did this at Warwick for a recent virtual open day and it was a god send as the team could communicate in the background whilst the event was live. At home I have more than one device (laptop + smart phone) so can run different programmes on different devices if I need to which helps in these situations.
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