**Working in the world of the pandemic**

**Compiled by Luke Tredinnick and Claire Laybats.**

**Abstract:** this paper compiles a series of responses from key information professionals to the novel coronavirus pandemic of 2020. Respondents were invited to answer the questions how the pandemic has impacted on their work, and how it might change the way of working in the future. Contributors to the article include Scott Brown, Steve Dale, Denise Carter, Alison Day, Hal Kirkwood and Emily Hopkins.

**Introduction:** In 2020 the world has been dominated by a single issue that has caused more significant and sudden change across all areas of life than anything in recent memory. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way in which we meet and communicate. It has altered the flows of traffic across cities. It has grounded airlines and silenced theatres and venues. But as carbon emissions have dipped for the first time in decades, indicative of a dramatic turndown in economic output, data flows have proliferated. Turning away from face-to-face contact across the globe people have turned to online communications and virtual-working.

We obviously do not know what the long-term impact of Covid-19 will be, but it is becoming clear that patterns of work have been profoundly changed perhaps permanently. For this issue of Busines Information Review we asked key members of the business information community to reflect on the impact of the pandemic, and the ways it may change the future of work.

**Scott Brown Senior Cybrarian at Oracle Inc. and owner of Social Information Group**

After a global pandemic was declared in March, the shift in the work environment for librarians, information professionals, and knowledge workers was sudden. Few of us fully realized the profound and long-term impact. It’s still very unclear what work will look like in the long term. That said, here are some of the changes I think we’ll see.

**More flexible working arrangements will become the norm, rather than the exception.** Before the pandemic, the conversation around remote work tended to favor being on-site. Many people had never worked remotely, and the sudden shift was tremendously disruptive. Even for those who had worked remotely, working with newly-remote colleagues and teams presented unexpected challenges. The pandemic also laid bare the failure points of our workflows, and made clear which services can’t be performed remotely. Yet there have been many anecdotal examples of organizations adapting their workflows and continuing their services effectively. While it may not always be our first choice, we’ve proven to ourselves that, in many cases, we can work well outside of a physical setting.

**More materials will be digitized, and we’ll have less physical space**. The pandemic has highlighted the high cost of real estate, especially as organizations pay for space unoccupied by workers. Many organizations are weighing the cost of offices with the work performed there. At the same time, those that work with physical collections have felt particular pain in being cut off from their collections. The pandemic has made clear the importance of digitized materials, and will accelerate changes in having more materials in digital formats. As collections get digitized and employees work more flexibly, physical spaces will be repurposed, shrunk, or eliminated.

**Maintaining our working relationships virtually will be a more conscious effort**. Physically being in a library or office allows us to more easily socialize and maintain our working and personal relationships. Working remotely, our relationships deteriorate faster. Rather than just adding more Zoom meetings to our calendars, we need to make a conscious effort to connect with our colleagues, customers, and leaders in different ways. This means scheduling formal and informal online check-ins, and investing time and effort to bring our social selves to our working environment.

On a societal level, we need to support the reality and needs of the immunocompromised and of working parents, among other things. During the peak of the pandemic, we all got a sense of what it’s like to live as an immunocompromised person. The disruption of the work environment has also been compounded for parents of babies and young children. The flexibility we need going forward applies not just to “lockdown” mode, but to our everyday work lives.

I do not believe our experiences are for naught. If nothing else, the collective experience of the pandemic, for workers and managers alike, strengthens our ability to respond more quickly and effectively when the next disruption comes.

**Biography:** Scott Brown is a Senior Cybrarian at Oracle, where he works with strategic teams and initiatives across the company to make better decisions with information. He has a strong background in research and information work in high-tech settings, having previously worked at Qualcomm and Sun Microsystems. Scott is the author of the book *Social Information: Gaining Competitive and Business Advantage Using Social Media Tools*, serves as adjunct faculty with the iSchool at San Jose State University in California, and teaches regularly for other information science programs. He has presented at a multitude of information industry conferences. He is also a past member of the Business Information Review Editorial Board. He received his library degree from San Jose State University in California in 1999.

**Steve Dale, BIR Editorial Board**

To quote from a recent article by [Lee Bryant](https://www.linkedin.com/in/leebryant/), “What and where is the fabric of your organisation? How would you describe it? When the buildings are empty and the conference rooms are silent, what actually *is* the organisation? Some might argue it is the sum of conversations, or processes, value chains or organisational structures. But where is it and how is it manifested?”. He goes on to say:-

In the digital era, the digital workplace should be that fabric. But it isn’t. At least, not yet. It has largely been co-opted and wrapped around the existing organisational structure and hierarchies - team spaces here, open “comms” space there and executive discussion spaces we know not where. The digital workplace has been a useful place of communication - mostly talking about work rather than doing work - and collaboration, but it is not yet a place of distributed, self-managed work and value creation.

But if its development has been slow and incremental thus far, could the current crisis lead to a sudden change in how work gets done?”

This is a good starter for thinking about how the current pandemic has disrupted just about every aspect of both business and personal life. There is a talk about the “new normal”, where we must start to accept that maybe life and the way we live it cannot return to the way it was. Every encounter with people outside of our “bubble” is a potential risk. Queues for shopping have to be tolerated. Eating or drinking out is going to be socially distanced for the foreseeable future. Economies and businesses that have relied on the footfall from city workers may no longer be viable.

Since the Industrial Revolution, a largely compliant workforce has accepted the corporate mantra that the only way that work can be done is by centralising people in one place at one time. For manufactured goods, this is probably still the case, but why should it apply to office work? We’ve had the digital tools to enable remote collaborative working for the past 20 years or more, so why haven’t they been the catalyst for wholesale change to the way that work is done? At least part of the answer is the unshakeable belief in hierarchies and centralised control. This is particularly evident in the public sector, but also remains prevalent in in most large corporates. The effect of a 3-hour daily commute to and from work has no appreciable economic effect on a business because they don’t pay for that time. However, the effect on the worker has started to be recognised, particularly on those entering the workplace now, who are more concerned about the work-life balance. Credit to some employers who have recognised this and have implemented far more flexible working conditions, enabling staff to work from home more frequently.

So, coming back to the preamble to this piece, could the current crisis lead to a sudden change in how work gets done? I believe the answer is “yes”. There is now the incentive for government and business to reflect on the inherent inefficiencies of the past, and to actively explore new ways of working. However, access to digital technologies and more flexible working are only part of the solution. The biggest challenge will be how to fully integrate these tools and methods into business processes. This will entail a change in behaviours, where there must be far more emphasis on communication, collaboration and knowledge sharing within and across the organisation. There will be no place for decision-making hierarchies, departmental fiefdoms or inter-departmental rivalries. Most importantly, there must be trust. Trust by managers that their staff can work independently and make decisions, trust between staff that are working towards a shared goal, and trust that managers are working in the interests of their staff. In my opinion, work and how work is done is going to change for the better, but **everyone** has a responsibility to make this happen.

**Biography: please insert copy of the bio from the editorial board bios**

**Denise Carter, Managing Director and Principal Consultant at DCision Consult, Geneva, Switzerland**

**Will the working world become the introvert’s paradise?**

Initially for myself, running my own business from a home office, lockdown made strangely little impact. Only the awareness that the familiar routine noises I heard from my desk – early morning traffic, children playing in the nearby school yard at break and lunch-times – were absent. I provide information services to pharmaceutical companies and I have been fortunate that the pandemic has brought me additional work. So, at least, unlike for many, for the immediate future my job and security are not under threat.

Speaking to friends however who were now suddenly working from home and finding the initial transition a shock, it was interesting to hear their initial stumbling blocks. The number one issue mentioned was spending an increased number of hours at the computer screen. The reason for this was because in-person meetings were replaced by online meetings. And they felt unable to take actual coffee breaks away from the computer – apparently because these breaks were normally were taken chatting with colleagues – so they considered that still working. The practical issues mentioned such as working on a small laptop screen when some were used to one or even two large screens; slower internet connections; and ergonomic challenges – the right desk height, the right chair seem to have been worked out, either by the company or themselves, as time has gone on.

However what does not seem to have changed is the requirement to meet online, for lengthy (but broken into chunks) meetings, and some teams having additional social online get togethers. In many cases the number of meetings seems to have increased. I wondered initially if this was a question of trust. Is it a way to control and monitor staff from a distance? Many bosses have previously resisted employee home working because they believe people will not work as hard and spend company-time doing non-company activities. What is clear from this pandemic is that most anecdotal evidence points to the contrary – most people are working even longer and harder.

Then another thought occurred. It is one I have no evidence to support so I offer it as a hypothesis only. Is this meeting imperative also a question of the extroverted versus introverted personalities? As an introvert myself I found the transition to working from home an energy boost like no other. Like many introverts I’m not shy and will happily present, but large groups and constant contact with others leave me drained. Home working means energy I had previously expended in day-to-day social engagement can now be channeled to when I need it most for presentations, client contacts, and finally leaving even some over for my family and friends at weekends. Office life, especially open-space office working, is definitely biased in favor of the extroverted personality – those that feed off the energy of others, especially in large group gatherings; in being able to talk through ideas out loud, brainstorm and strategize almost everything. Is this another reason that the number of online meetings are not diminishing; is it a way for the extrovert to recharge their energy supply?

While some companies are slowing moving back to in-house working, it seems clear for many companies this change to home working will become more permanent. Certainly, many of my friends are keen to build a significant portion of their working week as working from home going forward. So, I wonder now if it is the introverts who will benefit most in this new order, and the extroverts who will need to make the biggest adjustments. Going forward will that impact who rises to the top? And will that change business when they get there?

**Biography:** Denise Carter (denise.carter@dcisionconsult.com) is the Managing Director and Principal Consultant of DCision Consult, a competitive intelligence & business analytics service provider to the pharmaceutical & biotechnology industries. She has 30 years of experience working in library, information management, and competitive intelligence roles in multinational corporate organizations.

**Alison Day: Project Manager, Knowledge for Healthcare, Health Education England**

**Re-setting NHS Library and Knowledge Services in a post-lockdown pandemic world**

NHS organisations across England are re-setting health services post-lockdown, working out how routine health services can be delivered safely in a pandemic, and in tandem NHS library and knowledge services are shifting the way they work. Health Education England (HEE), as the steward for the 184 NHS library and knowledge services across England, stepped-up during the pandemic to coordinate access to the evidence base; developing a Covid-19 search bank, a repository of current awareness bulletins and signposting trusted online information for patients and the public aiming to counter the wave of mis-information about coronavirus. The national team at HEE continued their role of providing advice and support to the library and knowledge workforce on the ground, based in hospitals, mental health trusts, commissioning organisations and practices. With a focus on wellbeing for over a thousand library staff they pulled together specific resources, maintained regular contact and linked people and experience together to make the case against total redeployment of expert library and knowledge staff, stressing the need to retain services at this critical time.

This advisory role has continued as NHS Library and knowledge services re-set and deal with new challenges - how to provide much needed socially-distanced study and reflective space for all health staff, how to effectively work embedded within healthcare teams in a virtual environment, how to provide study, information skills and digital literacy support to NHS staff in a socially distanced manner and how to ensure that lessons from the pandemic response are adequately captured and used?

Agile working has been embraced, offering hybrid virtual and Covid-secure face-to-face services and becoming adept at facilitating online learning and knowledge exchange events to meet the needs of our communities. Building upon new partnerships and relationships with colleagues forged during the pandemic it has been possible to make an even stronger case to use the expertise of librarians and knowledge specialists, ensuring that all decisions in the health service are informed by evidence from research and knowledge of best practice.



Over the next three years HEE will continue to drive the strategic direction for health and care library and knowledge services with the vision that *NHS bodies, their staff, learners, patients and the public use the right knowledge and evidence, at the right time, in the right place, enabling high quality decision-making, learning, research and innovation to achieve excellent healthcare and health improvement*, [HEE 2014, Knowledge for Healthcare](https://www.hee.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Knowledge_for_healthcare_a_development_framework_2014.pdf). An upsurge in requests for synthesised and summarised research evidence and proactive working with teams to capture, share and use their knowledge, forming communities of practice and facilitating action learning sets and retrospectives are expected. Meeting the information needs of patients and the public will continue to be key, promoting health and digital literacy and working with other information providers to ensure that every citizen can make an informed decision about their own health and care.

**Emily Hopkins, Knowledge Management Service Lead, Health Education England**

**Knowledge Management as a key enabler for organisations in a time of change**

While Health Education England (HEE)’s Library and Knowledge Service team have led the way for NHS library and knowledge services to respond to the pandemic, the example of HEE’s own internal Knowledge Management Service gives an example of the role of organisational knowledge management in facilitating rapid change. HEE experienced change operationally within the organisation itself, and also facilitated change as a national body responsible for system leadership in the National Health Service (NHS) in England. HEE’s role is “to support the delivery of excellent healthcare and health improvement to the patients and public of England by ensuring that the workforce of today and tomorrow has the right numbers, skills, values and behaviours, at the right time and in the right place.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In response to the pandemic, this included the rapid deployment of healthcare staff and final year students into practice, ensuring this was done safely, as well as creating an e-learning programme[[2]](#footnote-2) to give healthcare staff a refresher on key skills needed.

HEE’s Knowledge Management Service ordinarily offers literature searching and evidence reviews, and the height of the pandemic was no exception – with demand for updates on new information pertinent to workforce issues and Coronavirus. The team drew on, and contributed to, the Covid-19 search bank for such requests. Decision makers needed to keep up to date with the volume of information being published by bodies such as Royal Colleges, including guidance and statements, and ensure these were reflected in e-learning. The team quickly produced a summary of these organisations’ latest publications, with updates added daily both via automated RSS feeds, and also checked manually for assurance that nothing was missed. The team’s core skills were applied in this fast-paced situation to ensure HEE staff could make sense of this deluge of information.

Such a rapid change to working remotely following the lockdown necessitated some events such as recruitment and training days to be quickly transformed into virtual events. HEE teams revised their plans and rearranged events in a matter of days. The Knowledge Management team’s role to facilitate after action reviews and retrospects helped ensure the learning from this very rapid activity was captured for future events, and gave the staff involved space to reflect. Given the ongoing need for social distancing, it is likely many such events will continue to be held virtually where feasible, and the learning points from the initial events have been captured to improve future iterations – and also help staff understand what can and cannot be replicated virtually. This space and facilitation to reflect and learn has been vital at a time of rapid change.

The role of library and knowledge professionals can contribute to the rapid ingestion of externally generated evidence and information, as well as ensuring the organisation learns in a positive way from its experiences and actions in response to an extraordinary situation.

**Hal Kirkwood, Bodleian Business Librarian, University of Oxford**

When the lockdown was put into effect, my team responded extremely well with coordination and teamwork throughout the last couple of days to ensure everything was handled on site and everyone was set up with what they would need from home.  Since then we have all been working remotely from a variety of locations around the UK.  We were able to continue to provide access to databases and datasets, as well as enquiry support to our students and faculty.  We have made extensive use of Zoom and Slack to stay in communication with each other.

The pandemic lockdown has been an interesting, frustrating, and challenging experience.  My team adjusted admirably to the work from home.  We all came to grips with several facts of consistent remote working.  Everything takes longer; whether it relies on communicating with other people or simply getting things done.  Working from home surrounds you with a significant number of distractions.  Morale and motivation are an issue.   It was common for some of the team to have days where they just couldn’t focus or get very much done.  It was important to understand that this was the case, and to assist and empathize as much as possible.

Students, and faculty, still need assistance and access to information resources.  We were consistently busy throughout the term and throughout any given day.   Everyone seeking assistance was generally understanding and appreciative of the services and access we were trying to provide, even when things didn’t always go as planned to meet their needs.  Data and information are still needed and in demand.  Some companies are not remote learning friendly; if this happens again or if issues of increased remote working and learning remain in place several companies will need to dramatically change their access and possibly their business model to accommodate this new environment.

Looking to the future we realize we need to develop more online modules and point of need training to facilitate information seeking and to continue to support developing business information literacy.  We are aware and are concerned about students we are not reaching.  When we are not in the same building providing the opportunity for study space and for assistance, we know that many students are struggling with what they already know and failing to expand and develop their abilities in seeking quality information for more informed decisions.  There is much to learn from this experience, some we are not yet even fully aware of as we begin to phase services back onto campus; and discovering how shockingly complicated these return to work initiatives are as far as planning and implementation.

**Biography:** Hal Kirkwood has been a, mostly business, librarian for over 25 years. He is Bodleian Business Librarian at the Sainsbury Library in the Said Business School, University of Oxford since 2018. He has research interests in business information literacy, competitive intelligence, and concept-mapping. He has been published in the *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship*, *Online*, *Library Journal*, and *Business Information Review*. Hal is Past-President of the Special Libraries Association in 2020.

**Reflections**

This small set of experiences and opinions touches on a whole host of challenges and changes the Covid-19 pandemic has brought us. As editors we had speculated that this situation which has effected everyone and everything across the globe would be the catalyst for fundamental changes to the way we work, move around and live our lives in the future. Writing this reflection in August 2020 it certainly seems that until there is a vaccine at the very least the adjustments that we have had to make to our way of life can be considered semi-permanent. I read an article on the BBC news app at the weekend that speculated on how office life would change in the future even after a vaccine for Covid-19 had been produced. It covered everything from the change in the way office space is used and the materials used in within that environment to the consideration of a home office set-up as most office work would completed at home. Face to face work was reserved for special times when the richness of that communication form could not be replicated to the required level online.

It seems that the effective integration of people, tech and business processes, seemingly an evergreen challenge for knowledge and information management professionals is a key component here. Steve Dale also reflects on the importance of trust, trust in others, trust in the system. Trust comes with a feeling of connectiveness to others something that within our current environment takes a lot more effort. Scott Brown touches on the importance of bringing your social self into the online workspace, this can help with connectiveness however, it can be easier said than done. I have been working remotely for several years full time and yet I still find it difficult to promote what I have been doing outside of work in an online environment. It seems to take a lot of extra effort whereas it would be fairly effortless in a face to face conversation. Is it a personality preference as Denise reflects or could it be a generational thing or is there some else? From my own perspective and experience online has always been very focussed and work orientated. Touching on the social side has felt a bit frivolous.

To conclude this reflection, all have risen to the challenge of change, some organisations such as the NHS illustrations have involved rapid change and response to needs and a new way of working. We are still developing and adapting as the situation evolves. Some areas such as new ways to connect, develop trust through connectiveness, new paths to share knowledge to replace that chat over coffee in the kitchen or chance meeting in the corridor need further development. I would speculate that there is no going back to the way we were, only forward. It would be interesting to look back in another 12 months to review the changes.

1. <https://www.hee.nhs.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.e-lfh.org.uk/programmes/coronavirus/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)