**Blended workplaces**

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Over the past year *Business Information Review* has tracked the ways in which the coronavirus pandemic has impacted working lives across the sector. Last September we explored the role of communication in managing crisis response (Tredinnick & Laybats, 2020), the ways in which the pandemic had impacted on the working lives of business information professionals (Tredinnick & Laybats, 2020b) and the acceleration to virtual working (Phillips, 2020). During 2021 the journal has addressed the impact of the pandemic on learning (Webb, 2021) and the *BIR Annual Review* (cite) has taken a wider look at changes to work and professional practice. Now that the pandemic is perhaps beginning to abate, some changes to the nature of work look set to become embedded in a “new normal”. The commercial world heads towards a post-pandemic consolidation of new work practices wiser and perhaps more wary about the threats of global shocks to business operations but also bolstered by the resilience of the sector to the challenges of the recent past. But the shape of the new normal is still emerging, and as it does, *Business Information Review* will continue to track changes to the commercial information section and to professional lives.

Gradually, the shape of the post-pandemic workplace is becoming clearer. Investment banking has been most closely associated with the return to pre-pandemic norms, companies like JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs Group among other making clear policies for a return to the office. Many other commercial organisations have on the other hand shown more caution in their planning, allow for more flexibility in future work practices. Some companies are beginning to show unease about the flexibility of remote working, implementing surveillance systems to monitor employee engagement. As the contingency of crisis-response give way to a new normal, the mutual trust that made the transformation to remote work so successful for many organisations is giving way to more familiar anxieties about engagement and productivity.

At the forefront of changes to the world of work is the wider adoption of blended workplaces. Blended work combines the advantages of physical and virtual work environments, allowing hybrid modes of work where individual dip in and out of virtual and physical spaces. Many organisations, keen both to learn from the experience of the pandemic and take advantage of a new willingness to engage with virtual work practices, have begun to explore ways of developing more hybrid business models. Yet while the blended workplace seems an obvious solution, it brings with it new complications in the organisation and delivery of work that will not necessarily be straightforward to resolve. The post-pandemic world may perhaps involve an extended period of negotiation and planning around new working practices, as contingent changes in the nature of work give way to more permanent patterns in the establishment of a genuinely sustainable “new normal”.

Some of the issues with hybrid and blended workplaces arise from the complications they bring to workflow and planning. When the workforce is either entirely office-based or entirely online as was the case for many organisations prior to and during the pandemic, the needs and availability of all employees are broadly similar and predictable. The blending of different modes and styles of working introduces practical complications around scheduling of work and teambuilding. Employees working to different patterns but ostensibly performing similar roles are likely to encounter inequities arising from the consequence of informal social interaction. Many organisations may have a false confidence emerging out of the pandemic that they have mastered virtual working, but in the different context of the post-pandemic world there will be new challenges in the successful implementation of the blended office, and in establishing boundaries are around work and home. We are perhaps only at the beginning of a far more significant shift in the nature of work that may change the ways we live our lives long into the future. The negotiatiations involved in making these new styles of work function successfully both for individuals and organisations are likely to be complex and ongoing.

One issue that has come to the fore over the past eighteen months has been the difficulty in mentoring young workers and new employees without ongoing face-to-face contact. This highlights perhaps the social and knowledge capital that emerge in physical workplaces, the ways in which informal relationships and practices contribute to the performance and identity of organisations and teams. It also highlights the role of tacit knowledge and expertise, and the difficulty of successfully reproducing informal employee social networks in the virtual sphere. The increased difficulty in inculcating the values and practices of the organisation are only the most obvious example of the ways in which a loss of face-to-face interaction with impact both the experience of work and the establishment of successful team roles.

Commercial information work is of course affected by these more general changes, although also perhaps better prepared to confront the challenges of the blended workplace. While the growth of digital resources and digital delivery mean that business information work and business research can be done remotely, the value of business information services to organisations often relies as much on the development of personal relationships with user groups and stakeholders of different kinds as from the product of that work. This is something that has emerged in the BIR Annual Survey over many years, with a greater emphasis on interpersonal soft skills rather than analytical research skills highly values in the sector. Business information work of different kinds therefore also emphasises the degree to which the manifest product of work is a smaller contribution to organisational success than wider organisational culture factors.

Perhaps the most important thing to recognise in the post-pandemic workplace is that changes to the place and style of work also offer an opportunity to rethink the culture, organisation and function of the workplace. Organisations and individual teams that seek to translate office-bound practices into the blended workplace, simply reproducing the structure and organisation of office-based work into the virtual sphere are likely to find the advantages of a virtual workforce escape them. On the other hand organisations and individual teams that take the time to properly negotiate the new terrain of blended work may find the flexibility and efficiency of hybrid models brings its own rewards. What is clear is that the commercial world is facing a period in which the nature of work, and the nature of business in both unstable and uncertain for the foreseeable future.

**September Business Information Review**

Several articles in this September 2021 issue of *Business Information Review* explore different aspects of the ways in which the coronavirus pandemic has changed the world of work. First up is Lee Bryant’s article entitled Lateral layers and loops: Why managers need to curate the fabric of the digital firm in a post-lockdown world. The article addresses the role of collaboration and co-creation of knowledge in the post-pandemic world, planning a path away from arguing that the fabric of modern workplaces is made-up of networks, information landscapes, communities, shared systems and platforms that connect people and coordinate their work. Bryant writes that “The sudden, almost overnight switch to so-called remote working, due to the pandemic and lockdowns, is what really marked the border between old ways of working and what looks like being a new normal of post-pandemic working” and explores ways of capitalising on the new shape of work.

Our second article explores an issue that in of increasing importance in the post-lockdown world, Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) management. Chigada and Daniels write that BYOD “is the use of personal mobile devices, like laptops, tablets and smart phones to access networks, systems and company confidential infomation in an organisation” and address the security implications of BYOD policy within financial services. Entitled “Exploring information systems security implications posed by BYOD for a financial services firm” the paper concludes that “BYOD is an area that financial services organisations grapple with and will become more of a contentious issue in the work environment going forward”.

Our third paper explores more traditional territory for the journal. Returning author Tony Russell-Rose from Goldsmiths University London is joined by Philip Gooch from Scholarcy and Udo Kruschwitz from the Universit**ä**t Regensburg, Germany as co-authors of the paper entitled “Interactive query expansion for professional search applications”. The paper investigates different query expansion methods applied to a collection of Boolean search strategies used in a variety of real-world professional search tasks and demonstrates the value of context-free distributional language models and the use of linguistic cues to optimise the balance between those traditional measures of information retrieval, precision and recall.

Alison Day returns to *Business Information Review* with co-author Carol Giles in a paper entitled “Is there a role for an embedded knowledge specialist in an organisation like an Academic Health Science Network? A retrospect of a one year pilot”. The paper explores a pilot to to explore how a knowledge specialist role could bring benefits to the specialist business of an Academic Health Science Network in the South West of England that took place in 2020, addressing the rational the pilot, what was achieved in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, and reasons for successes and disappointment. It outlines the unique contribution embedded knowledge specialists bring in producing tailored knowledge management services that save time, keeps staff informed and connected, and evolves to meet changing priorities of complex service provision.

Our fifth paper also addresses changes brought about by the Coronavirus pandemic and its consequences. Written by Rosemary Nunn and entitle “Knowledge and Innovation in Time of Uncertainty” examines the shift in the nature of work arising out of the response to COVID-19, and the development of hybrid working practices. Nunn writes “it is very clear that the pandemic represented a significant disruption, however, the post pandemic world, whilst remaining disrupted from the pre-pandemic state, also represents an opportunity” associated with new hybrid working practices and rethinking organisations around a people-centered knowledge architecture.

Closing the September 2021 issue is the final part of the latest BIR Annual Survey. The BIR Annual Survey has been a mainstay of the journal for over thirty-years, going through various iterations since the initial coverage of business information resources, and continuing to provide an invaluable insight into the changing face of professional practice. This year Stephen Phillips takes over the reigns and in the third part explores supplier relations, client engagement, and priorities for 2021. Phillips writes that “during the course of the COVID-19 crisis, IS teams (and their stakeholders, clients and colleagues) came to realise they are ‘more service than we like to think’. The crisis accidently demonstrated their value proposition at a transactional level”. We would like to thank Stephen for the work he has put in to the Annual Survey which is an enormous undertaking, but one greatly valued by the BIR community.

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