**Editorial: Clear communication in times of crisis**

**Luke Tredinnick and Claire Laybats**

At the start of the year few had heard of coronaviruses, and those who had paid them little heed. The United Kingdom was reeling from the political turmoil of the Autumn and preparing to finally leave the EU at the end of January. The United States was gearing-up presidential elections that promised to be more divisive than ever. Those events looming large on the horizon as the new year arrived have now been cast into shadow. Twenty-twenty has become the year of Covid-19.

Over the past six months the coronavirus pandemic has bent our world out of shape. It has thrown public and private sector organisations into crisis, pulled government agendas into its orbit, and changed the ways in which we live, shop and work. The scope and scale of change rendered by the novel coronavirus is unprecedented; no part of daily life and no sector of the economy has been untouched. Restrictions on movement that months ago would have been unimaginably authoritarian now feel prudent and mundane. The magic money tree withering through a decade of austerity has sprung back into blossom, with vast increases in public spending dwarfing the response to the financial crisis of 2010. Now the urgent political divides are around the efficacy of face masks and conformity to social distancing advice and regulations. Nevertheless while the extent to which our economies and lives will continue to be impacted into the future remains uncertain, it has become clear that some things may never be the same again. We will be living with the economic and social legacy of the coronavirus pandemic for many decades to come.

Of the many and diverse changes over the past nine months, most central to *Business Information Review* are those related to the workplace. Over a two-week period during March 2020 the nature of work changed for millions of people, and commercial and public sector organisations alike found themselves undergoing rapid and largely unplanned shifts in business processes. The UK higher education sector for example abandoned its campuses and buildings in a sector-wide shift to online provision. An enormous amount of largely unplanned work was done to manage the transition across the sector, at all levels of each organisations. Teaching was put online, research was rescheduled, meetings held virtually, and support put in place for vulnerable and isolated students and staff, including providing IT equipment to those without access to the new online resources. The ways in which degrees were examined changed as institutions sought to make-up for the impact of the pandemic on the attainment of students just weeks away from their finals. Thousands of academics and professional services staff in hundreds of institutions were directly involved in making those changes happen. But universities carried on teaching, largely without breaks in provision. Research continued where it could. Subject to enormous pressures of rapid transformation, Universities continued to function in recognisable ways as teaching and research centres. A sector not known for its agility transformed its business operations overnight with comparatively little friction.

This pattern of transformation and innovation in response to the crisis has been repeated across many of the economy. Teachers adapted themselves to supporting home learning. Business services companies turned themselves into virtual organisations, relying on collaborative software and virtual teamworking. Broadcast media adapted its output to new modes of recording and performance. Journalists filed copy form their homes. Film distributors have turned to digital streaming releases. Supermarkets reacted to surging demand while transforming the layout and flow of their shop floors. Restaurants switched focus to delivery services. Across the economies of the developed world the patterns of business and the patterns of work changes. And individuals responded to new pressures, balancing home working with home schooling, and adopting different more flexible work patterns, captured in the idea of the *new normal.*  The ubiquity of teleconferencing – which has become so dominant as a response to the crisis that it has supplanted more familiar modes of communication such as email and telephone – conceals a more fundamental shift in work. Teleconferencing is the totemic symbol of home working but most home work has been done in other ways.

Underpinning this change has been information. The foundations of the economic agility displayed during the last nine months were laid over the past thirty years in the cables and satellites of the global information infrastructure, in the collaborative software developed to take advantage of it, and in the increases in digital and information literacies of the workforce who have become comfortable with hybrid ways of working and flexible engagement with the notion of work. It is the flow of information rather than the flow of goods that has kept the economy functioning and kept people connected. Business has benefited form significant improvements in consumer broadband, mobile broadband, and uptake of facilitating consumer technologies such as mobile telephones, tablets, and netbooks.

This is perhaps the first moment in history in which the kind of transformation to work and business processes we have seen as a result of the coronavirus pandemic has been possible. Even ten years ago this outcome - as damaging as it has been to large swathes of the economy - would have been unimaginable. It may have taken the coronavirus pandemic to prompt the shift, but the potential for change was already there within organisations. That latent potential is the most significant reason why some of the changes to work that we have experienced are here to stay.

As we move into the attrition phase of the pandemic, many organisations are exploring how the experience of virtual working might be embedded within business processes. In response to the challenging economic circumstances, public and private sector organisations are looking to reduce office space, and embed changed workflows. The model of the virtual organisation will likely become much more common across business services. The coronavirus pandemic is effecting what has been the promised outcome of the information revolution for four decades since Alvin Toffler’s reflection on the electronic cottage in *The Third Wave:* the rise of home working, flexible working, and virtual network organisation. In this issue of *Business Information Review* we explore some of the changes to which work has been subjected, and begin to map-out some of the longer-term consequences of the global health crisis.

One of the issues that has become increasingly apparent is the importance of clear communication in managing the coronavirus crisis, and the consequence of getting that communication strategy wrong. As Martin White writes in this issue, global health crises are also information crises. It is not second-guessing the public health measures that have been enacted to observe that communication around those measures in the United Kingdom and in the United States in particular have often been confusing and contradictory. That is to say that quite aside from debates about the most efficacious policy has been a question about the communication of public health messages, and it has been in that communication that the starkest failures of governance have been visible. The public health message has often been subservient to political expediency. This has been starkly contrasted by those countries that have managed public health communication with far greater consistency and clarity, most notably Germany and New Zealand. It is then perhaps unsurprising that public confidence in handling of the pandemic broadly correlates with the relative successes of these communication strategies.

The ways in which different government have managed public communication through the crisis has resonance for public and private sector organisations. It is clear that many organisation have also confronted the challenge of communicating clearly and effectively with stakeholders. Those organisations that managed the transition in working practices enforced by the pandemic have on the whole been those who identified the risk early, communicated that to stakeholders clearly, and maintained that clear and consistent communication through the development of the response to the crisis. They have responded to the challenges presented by the changing regulations around social distancing, rather than shoring-up the defenced around their existing working practices. Those organisations that have experienced greater resistance to that transition have often been the ones that failed to fully identify the risk, concentrated on communicating the importance of business process continuity long after it was clear that was not a realistic outcome, and consequently failed to generate stakeholder buy-in.

The many successes that commercial and public sector organisations have achieved in their response to the coronavirus pandemic have not been a consequence of leadership per se, but of workplace communities coming together to collaboratively confront what was often an existential threat. But where management has had a role is in facilitating that enforced change, in understanding that the ways in which people work, the places in which they work, the times at which they work, and the context in which they work suddenly different, in facilitating individuals in continuing to undertake their roles by placing change at the centre of their response rather than reproducing existing workflows in virtual contexts, and in clearly communicating expectations and flexibility.

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This issue of Business Information Review reflects our first attempt to respond to the transformations that have been rendered by the Covid-19 pandemic. We have not attempted to define those challenges in absolute terms, since it is clear the challenges will continue to mutate. Rather we have begun to identify those issues that are going to emerge as most pertinent to business information work over the next few years. This is something that we will continue to in the future.

Our first professional article explores how the pandemic has impacted on the work of members of the Business Information Review community. We asked key information professionals to comment on how the pandemic has impacted on their work, and to reflect on the longer-term outcomes. *Working in the World of the Pandemic* draws together these responses, and includes responses from Scott Brown, Steve Dale, Denise Carter, Hal Kirkwood, Alison Day and Emily Hopkins. We would like to thank everyone who participated in sharing their experience and insight for this paper.

Our second professional article for September was written by longstanding contributor to *Business Information Review* and a central figure in the wider professional community Martin White. Entitled “Information management, corporate risk, computational ethnography, enterprise search” Martin explores the complexity of information in the workplace reflecting on the impact of Covid-19. He writes “in the wake of Covid19 organisations are going to have to operate in a rapidly changing business environment. Unless the flow of information is better understood short-term changes may be implemented which turn out to be of limited benefit or even undermine the rate of achievement of new business objectives”.

Our third professional paper was contributed by Sarah Wolfenden. Entitled “Using coaching tools to develop professional practice holistically” the article provides an overview of a few select tools to help teaching and training professionals articulate their purpose, craft a teaching identity and philosophy, and get the most out of training received. Sarah writes that “the days of being a professional robot are over and people will increasingly be bringing their whole selves to work. Emotional intelligence, kindness and compassion will be paramount to look after ourselves as well as those we serve” and provides very useful advice on developing teaching and training practice.

Our final research paper this week addresses Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the academic library. It was written by Muhammad Yousuf Ali at the Faculty of Health Science Library in the Aga Khan University and is entitled “Artificial Intelligence Tools and perspectives of University Librarians: An overview”. The paper explores the possible application of AI tools in Pakistani academic libraries, particularly those areas of library technical and library user services where AI could be applied in the near future.

Hal Kirkwood returns with *Perspectives Revisited,* mining the wider literature to uncover issues relevant to information professionals. In this issue Hal explores articles on business strategy and the information environment, the curriculum of business schools, and gender issues in business faculties. Finally, Stephen Phillips returns as a contributor to *Business Information Review* with the revitalised *Initiatives* column. Initiatives has been a regular part of the journal for many years, developing insights on issues of professional concern. From this issue we are alternating Initiativesand *Out-of-the-Box*. Stephen’s *Initiatives* column this issue is entitled “Working through the pandemic: accelerating the transition to remote working” and explores the changes to the nature of work through the coronavirus pandemic, and their implications for the workplace of the future.