



PRAESTA

Opening the office – Panacea or Pain?

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What is important now? is a question we continuously hear our clients asking of themselves. Growing revenue, (re) building their businesses, managing stakeholder expectations, creating new working arrangements as well as the day job of leading teams and hitting targets. How do all these priorities stack up against one another, and how do you ensure the plates keep spinning?

There is no magic bullet. These are the current leadership dilemmas, but maybe there is some value in knowing you are not alone, and that progress is not necessarily linear. We are collectively moving towards the unknown. Mistakes will be made; this is a time of trial and error.

How quickly you recognise what has happened, learn and recover is **what is most important now**. It is helpful to remember you have survived the unthinkable and you will get over these bumps too; and there is always opportunity in change, being open to that will be critical for future business success.

A common topic in our conversation with leaders at the moment is:

What does re-opening the office look like and mean for us?

Organisations are actively planning for this transition and trying to balance the desire for flexible working with the desire to 'get back to normal'. We have captured the headlines from these conversations and have added some of our own observations and reflective questions which you might find useful.



Anticipatory Anxiety

The term 'Anticipatory Anxiety' is creeping into our language about the post-pandemic approach to how and where work will be undertaken.

Some people will want life to 'go back to normal' while others fear that it will. They are concerned that the insights gained during the lockdown will be lost, as well as the flexibility to 'manage life' more easily.

Anticipatory anxiety is where a person experiences increased levels of anxiety by thinking about an event in the future. Many people become stressed thinking about what the transition to a new way of working and relating to colleagues will mean for them. The emotions associated with Anticipatory Anxiety range from mild discomfort to catastrophising and seeing only the negative aspects of the transition. We are all listening to the media, our friends, and our families as well as to the communication from our

workplace and it is easy to get caught in the slip stream of others' stories.

As we experienced over the last 16 months, all change is personal, and what will be easy for some will not be for others. Leaders of organisations may be more ready to return to full-time office working than those whom they lead.

Consider:

- *Do I really know how my team is feeling about the office re-opening and have I provided a sufficient opportunity to listen?*
- *Are my plans for remote and hybrid working arrangements widely known and accepted?*
- *What can I communicate to ease my employees' minds even if I don't have full clarity yet?*
- *How can we collectively take advantage of the opportunity in creating a new way of working?*



Role of the Office

We are seeing leaders reflect carefully on the role of the office in the future with discussions around the importance of the office as a social space, a culture space, facilitating connections, enabling learning, and fostering unscripted collaboration.

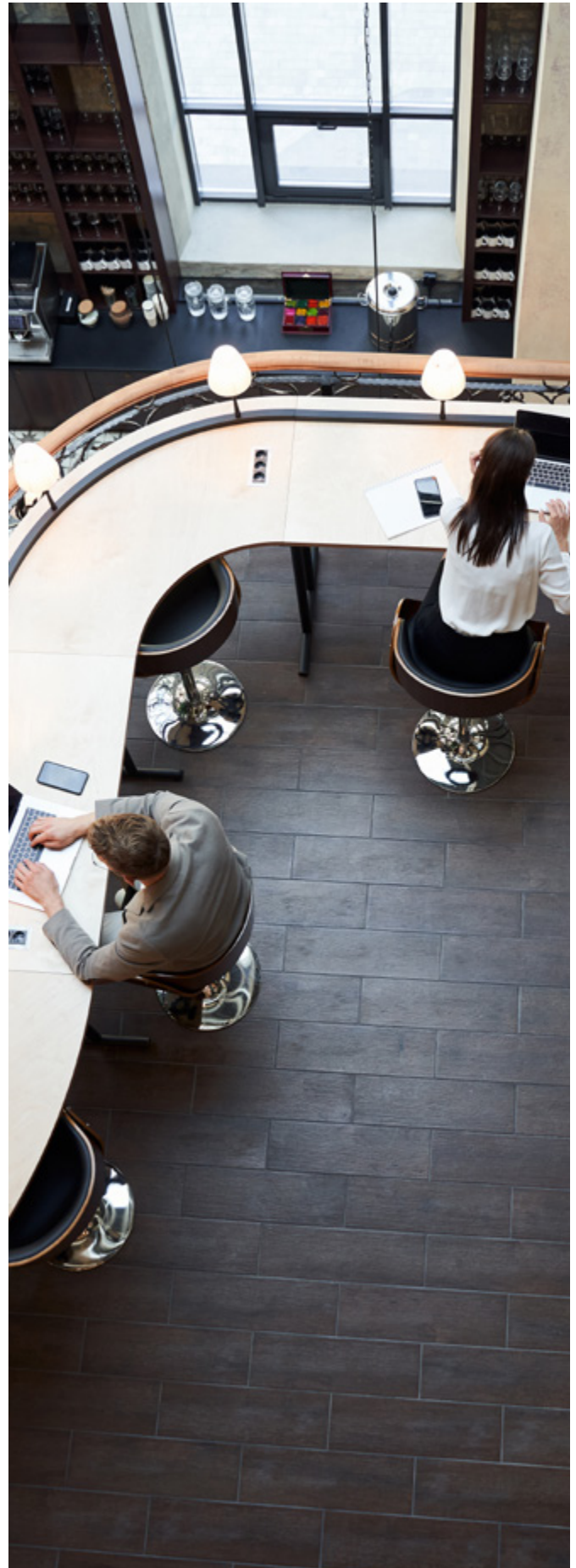
A challenge we see is that as leadership teams re-imagine the office there may be a risk of misalignment with their teams' expectations. Some leaders want to have their teams in the same physical space, seeking the familiarity of working in the way that has proved successful for them in the past, while many team members want greater flexibility and hybrid approaches.

No-one yet knows the longer-term impact of either. A new way of working, previously not thought possible, was forcibly created and the next new way of working is now in development. This is new territory for everyone.

Whatever decisions leaders make about the role of the office being clear about the 'Why' will be important as staff prepare to make the transition.

Consider:

- *How does my re-imagined office support on-site and off-site working?*
- *How can I support my teams to thrive through the change?*
- *What leadership behaviours will I and the leadership team need to consciously model?*



Bringing everyone on the journey

Leaders are conscious that this pandemic has had an unequal impact on employees. Working from home has suited some and it has not been easy for others. Recognising this inequality of experience is important in planning the next transition phase. Now more than ever, we are seeing the importance of empathy and compassion in leaders as they help their teams navigate this next stage recognising that the inequality of experience will impact their attitudes about a return to the office.

What we have noticed is that while high level arrangements have been agreed not everyone has a shared understanding of what that means for them and their teams and this is building an additional level of uncertainty and frustration. Making sure 'what this means for me' is constant work as is managing an uncertain environment.

In best practice we are seeing a strong focus on two-way communications, listening, and sharing to create a common vision of how working life can be shaped for collective benefit.

Consider:

- *What can I learn from the way we managed the changes in the past 16 months – what will I keep doing, what will I change?*
- *How can I show empathy and compassion to my employees as they navigate this transition?*
- *How effective is my communication strategy; am I listening enough?*

Keeping an eye on talent and re-building employee engagement

We are hearing a lot more from our leaders about their efforts to re-build employee engagement. The transactional nature of work over the past 16 months has brought a sense of distance from the wider team despite the virtual coffees and town-halls. The big change we are seeing is that employees have shifted in their expectations of their workplace. They now know that remote working is entirely possible and flexible working is important to them and their sense of well-being. Ensuring that employees feel valued as well as productive is further up the leaders' agenda. We are hearing a lot of emphasis on employee retention and on the need to build digital capability to allow employees work well from anywhere.

Consider:

- *How am I capturing the pulse of the organisation right now?*
- *How are we managing key talent?*
- *How can I ensure we are the organisation of choice for our people?*

The adaptive challenge

Managing the gap between aspirations and reality is the real adaptive challenge in this transition. There is a lot of emphasis on managing right now, and in this piece, we are also emphasizing the need to listen to understand where employees are coming from to minimize the reality gap. The real opportunity is, however, in leading your organisation through the transition period by creating the capacity to see beyond the immediate demands of changing circumstances to the opportunities and competitive edge that it will enable.

