



Coronavirus: HR's initial response survey April 2020

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The report includes:

- The full survey article as it appears on XpertHR

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Coronavirus: HR's initial response survey April 2020

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XpertHR asked 400 HR practitioners how their organisations had responded to the challenges facing them as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic dramatically reshapes the economy.

While millions of employees have been thrown into a period of enforced absence from work, HR practitioners have found themselves facing unparalleled demands on their time, knowledge and skills as organisations have pivoted overnight to cope with the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

In a short online survey, we sought to find out about the challenges facing HR practitioners, allowing just 24 hours for respondents to take part so that we could provide a snapshot of the HR world as we approach the end of the second week of legally mandated closedowns, homeworking and new legislation aimed at averting mass redundancies across the entire UK economy.

In all, **400 organisations** from all across the UK and in every industry took part.

Workload impact for HR

We asked respondents how much of their current work is driven by their organisation's response to the coronavirus pandemic (see table 1).

Table 1: Volume of work driven by pandemic response

Volume of work	% of organisations
80-100%	42.8
60-79%	24.8
40-59%	16.5
20-39%	11.0
0-19%	5.0
n = 400 organisations. Source: XpertHR.	

For more than four out of 10 HR practitioners taking part in our research, the response to the coronavirus crisis is currently accounting for all, or almost all, of their daily workload. Just 20 respondents (5% of the total) said that it accounted for less than one-fifth of their work.

Organisational responses to coronavirus

Employers have taken a wide range of actions in the early stages of the epidemic (see table 2).

Table 2: Organisational responses to the coronavirus pandemic

Action	Using	Plan to use	Not using and no plans
Flexible/homeworking and non-standard work patterns	91.0	5.8	3.3
Strengthening health and safety measures	80.5	6.5	13.0
Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme	43.8	28.8	27.5
Postponing/reconsidering start date for new hires	41.0	16.5	42.5
Short-time working	13.3	23.8	63.0
Taking on new staff	10.5	6.0	83.5
Redundancy	5.3	22.0	72.8
Other	15.5	3.0	81.5
n = 400 organisations. Source: XpertHR.			

In other circumstances, the fact that more than a quarter of the organisations surveyed were either already making redundancies or were planning to do so would be considered an economic disaster. In the current circumstances, the fact that three out of four employers have made no-one redundant and have no plans to do so appears to be a minor triumph.

Most have clearly risen to the occasion as best they could by introducing flexible working, homeworking and other non-standard working patterns, either to ensure that employees work from home or are exposed to the minimum risk possible if they are needed at work. Meanwhile, a significant number have either already postponed or reconsidered start dates for new employers (41%) or are planning to do so (16.5%). This may leave a considerable number of people who are currently between jobs in limbo.

Although 62 organisations said they had taken other measures, many were variations on the options set out above. A few told us that they had closed completely - with no indication whether or not they envisaged reopening once the crisis had passed. The most common additional measures, however, were to improve communications with employees who were working from home or on furlough, and to cut pay.

Of those focusing on employee communications, one manufacturer talked about setting up "daily listening groups", others reported the use of SMS and social media to maintain contact, and one services company said it had introduced: "Daily communications to update all staff on business and client developments. Chat groups for all remote workers, use of video conferencing for team and individual meetings, staff welfare surveys and extensive use of instant messaging."

From the information provided, it appears that a significant proportion of those saying they had cut pay were referring to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, which leaves employees at home on 80% of their usual income. However, one international services sector company told us it was cutting pay globally from 2.5% to 30% for the leadership team. And one smaller manufacturer said it was cutting the pay of those who continue to work.

There have been very different approaches to the working hours expected of employees now working from home. At one end of the spectrum, a not-for-profit organisation said: "We are using a working from home strategy; maintaining the standard working hours, meetings and line management one-on-

one all through Zoom. Managers are still helping staff to set targets that are realistic with working from home and engaging our stakeholders through electronic/online initiatives. Field staff have been given work to do from home."

At the other end, a charity said it was: "Allowing employees to decide with their manager, what they can work to deliver critical activity and allow them the freedom to manage caring/childcare and other pressures with greater ease whilst still being able to contribute to work."

Many mentioned the need to upskill managers in how to run - and communicate with - remote teams. Other measures include:

- repatriating staff and dependents from international assignments;
- minimising the number of employees expected to attend work, with staggered working hours to reduce the number of people in the workplace at any one time;
- moving all client appointments to telephone calls; and
- providing temporary hotel accommodation for staff and retraining some employees to cover shortages in other areas - both in NHS hospitals.

Finally, one well-prepared not-for-profit told us: "We moved to a working from home model several weeks ago in preparation for the lockdown. We transitioned over a week and ironed out all the issues during that time."

Impact on pay and bonuses

Nearly half of all employers **hold annual pay reviews in April**, so the sudden impact in March of the coronavirus pandemic has created doubts for both employers and employees. We asked our respondents whether or not they expected their 2020 pay review and/or bonus payment to be affected by the current situation.

More than half of organisations (50.8%) said yes, with a further one in three (32.8%) believing it to be too soon to say. However, a significant minority (16.5%) said they expected there to be no impact on 2020 pay reviews or bonus payments.

A number of organisations with April pay review dates told us that they had been postponed until at least September, with others saying that a decision to freeze pay for 2020 had already been taken and communicated to employees. Some mentioned that there would need to be exceptions to take account of increases in April 2020 to the national minimum wage. However, most commonly, the view was a variation on that given by one private-sector-services respondent, who said: "Potentially no salary increases due to drastic drop in revenue and services."

The main HR challenge

We asked respondents to tell us about the main people management challenges arising from the coronavirus crisis.

For those that have been able to move some or all of their employees to homeworking, the main challenge appears to have been around communication. For some, there have been challenges around managing remote teams with little previous experience. Presumably working largely with IT

colleagues, HR has had to put in place measures and systems to ensure that communication systems were in place - with a number mentioning the use of technologies such as Zoom, Whatsapp and Microsoft Teams.

Homeworking has presented challenges - not least because many employees have to juggle family responsibilities. As one respondent put it: "The main issue is we are having to work around staff only being able to work at certain times of the day to fit around childcare." Respondents talked about the challenge of maintaining staff morale and protecting people's mental health, and about the need to change how decisions were made, often trusting employees to work more independently. One respondent said their challenge was: "Decentralisation of work schedule, arrangement of resources for smooth functioning of business operations, motivating people not to lose hope."

One respondent at a private-sector-services company told us: "We are focusing on making sure we provide support for people and being aware that everyone's circumstances will be different so offering a range of support."

For those organisations that have furloughed employees, communication has sometimes proven even more of a problem, as not all those affected will have access to the communications technology that is often essential for homeworking, and uncertainty about the extent to which they could expect furloughed employees to remain in contact.

Organisations in education and healthcare have very specific additional challenges, with education providers having to switch rapidly to online learning, equipping employees with the skills required over a very short period of time, and healthcare organisations facing enormous pressures as staff face an unprecedentedly difficult time and are suffering high sickness rates even as more is expected of them.

It is also clear that managing the range of interactions with employees is proving difficult for some people in HR. One told us their challenge was: "Ensuring that the team are open and feel supported from a homeworking environment. Additionally, having to have difficult conversations in regards to furlough over video chat." Another added they were concerned about: "Staff welfare and finances during the period when they can't work; concern about losing staff in this period; concern as to whether the business will be able to survive this period."

Finally, there are clearly a large number of HR practitioners concerned about whether their organisations will survive the pandemic. As one said: "Everyone is very worried about their jobs and incomes. We have new/recent starters that are not covered by Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme or Self-employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) who have been let go. Some big contractor firms are using it as an excuse not to pay and have shuttered their departments that pay money out to hoard cash. A number of jobs are at risk of being terminated today, as payroll is unsupportable on the impact to revenue of the past month, let alone the coming months."

Our research

This report is based on original research carried out in the 24 hours to lunchtime on Thursday 2 April 2020. Responses were received from 400 organisations.

The breakdown of respondents by economic sector is as follows:

- 236 (59%) are in private-sector services;
- 53 (13.3%) are in manufacturing and production;

- 39 (9.8%) are in the public sector; and
- 72 (18%) are not-for profit.

Broken down by workforce size, the respondent organisations comprise:

- 243 (60.8%) employing between one and 249 employees;
- 93 (23.3%) employing between 250 and 999 employees; and
- 64 (16%) employing 1,000 or more.

What should I do now?

Visit our [coronavirus resource round-up](#) for guidance, model documents and other helpful information for HR practitioners.

How HR practitioners are coping in the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

The unprecedented circumstances that businesses are currently working in has led to a surge in workload for the HR department. Sheila Attwood looks at how HR is coping as a profession and what steps practitioners are taking to look after themselves.

XpertHR's [short survey of HR professionals](#) was conducted to understand organisations' approaches to the workforce issues thrown up by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. In analysing the responses, we have discovered that HR is often expected to have all the answers (although much still depends on Government guidance and the support available) and to be there for employees who may be key workers, working from home, furloughed or facing redundancy.

We highlight four ways that HR is coping with the challenge.

Staying up-to-date with the latest guidance

Respondents were honest with the extent of the challenge they're up against: "[It is] very difficult [with] lots of questions that HR professionals don't have the answer to, neither do the Government but employees expect HR to have the answer." The pace of change and short timeframes in which decisions have to be made led one respondent to describe themselves as "coping, but in a reactive way", which is a sentiment shared in many responses.

With new guidance emerging almost daily, "ensuring that we stay up-to-date with the latest guidance and initiatives" is a common approach. Online information services, webinars, podcasts and professional networks have all helped in this process.

Communicating with employees

With many questions still unanswered, the consensus is that regular communication with staff to let them know what is and isn't known at each stage is key. "Ensuring that we communicate with our staff, clearly and openly" at a time of uncertainty has definitely helped many.

Communication methods have been turned on their head though, with online tools now the norm, and these have proved vital in keeping lines of communication open. These channels don't always have to be about work, but may also be used as a way to keep employees in contact with each other, as one respondent explained: "Communications have developed to be both personally and professionally focused; sharing home events amongst staff, pets, quizzes and social chat groups to keep the workforce in the loop, have fun and respond individually to personal challenges.

Wellbeing is critical and in the early weeks some people were feeling 'cabin fever' symptoms. We encourage exercise, time out during the day, regular breaks and change of room scenery in the house wherever practicable."

Line managers have played a key role in managing communication chains, with HR ensuring that they are working closely with this group in order to support them, as they support their teams. As one respondent told us: "[We are] ensuring that [HR] business partners are staying close to line managers to provide support and guidance."

Meeting the needs of employees and the business

HR finds itself juggling the needs of employees with those of the business. Key to managing this has been support from above - HR departments are working even more closely with their senior management teams and this has enabled them to deliver their key services to the business. A "senior management team involved in all our decision making around staffing issues" has been invaluable for one respondent, while another highlighted the "great support from the leadership team" as key to helping them in their role. Decisions at this stage may be financial, but also reputational, so a joined-up approach can work best to manage the situation.

Inevitably many HR departments have put non-essential HR matters on hold as wider operational and organisational issues take priority.

Staying resilient and making time for themselves

There is a definite a sense of achievement in meeting the immediate challenge, but equally a feeling that the pressure and long hours being worked by HR are not sustainable.

Even the most resilient HR professional needs to take time to maintain their own wellbeing. Several respondents shared how they are coping:

- "Team calls twice per week and divisional calls once per week, focused on 'how are you' rather than work specifics."
- "Weekly virtual pub sessions with the whole of the wider support team."
- "Daily video conference call with my team (including our children and dogs on occasions!) - making it fun as well as business related."
- "Taking time out/walks and regular breaks."
- "I am speaking to colleagues on a regular basis to check in with them and ensuring I break up my working time by taking exercise and other breaks, whilst prioritising those who need support and guidance."
- "Daily team conference to keep in contact with each other and reduce feelings of isolation."
- "Gently letting employees, managers, customers know we are human too."
- "Challenges on Whatsapp to keep up team spirits."

And aside from a mention of "chocolate" as a way to get through the current challenges, HR teams are often turning to those they know best to help them through: "Using my HR colleagues for support - we have a great team!"