



Paper

New ways of working

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Introduction

Pre-Covid, Wellcome, like many organisations, was a relatively traditional employer when it came to flexible working. I confess I was probably too content with the status quo to really push the boundaries, despite its obvious benefits to those with caring responsibilities, staff with certain disabilities and the progress to a more inclusive culture. I had other things on my agenda that were taking my time and I wasn't going to take on changing the attitudes of hundreds of line managers and their assumptions and practices around flexible working! Ironically, the year before we had just refreshed our flexible working policy, taking far too long to get it out and making little progress as we struggled to gain agreement across the senior management group community. We didn't know that all our assumptions and prejudices were about to be upended by a virus.

On 14 March, two days ahead of the national lockdown, Wellcome sent all staff home and we closed our buildings, both our office and the adjoining [Wellcome Collection](#). We told staff to work from home, and prioritise their own wellbeing and that of their loved ones. Our foresighted Digital and Technology Team had previously upgraded everyone to the latest version of Microsoft Office, including Teams. At the time, no one knew how much we would be using that platform and how much of our work could be enabled by it. We missed the daily human contact, we tried our best to support colleagues who were having a hard time and still we can be proud of the things we collectively achieved in the strangest of years.

So the pandemic was proof, to those who needed it, that it was possible to work effectively in ways that we had previously thought unimaginable. After the horrors of 2020, across the organisation from the top to the bottom and from every corner, there is a desire to take the learnings and put them to good use as we look forward to living and working more normally. Whether Churchill authored this phrase or not, it is just as relevant, even if the context is different; we should never let a good crisis go to waste.

At the end of 2020 my brilliant team (Anna Myers, Becky Thomas, Lisa Rigby Smith and Charlotte Johns) started to draw up a way in which we could address the following questions:

- What have we learnt from the pandemic about how we work?
- What is our vision for how we want to work in the future?
- How will we go about making and implementing these decisions?

This paper takes you through how we thought about what we wanted to create and how we leveraged the pandemic experience to bring about changes in the way that we work to deliver a more focused, healthy and inclusive environment. The first part of the paper explores three important contextual areas, critical to understanding the norms, assumptions and beliefs that we were working with in addition to our ambitions as an organisation. The second part of the paper introduces our vision and the four dimensions we considered in bringing about that vision:

- **Who** should decide the way our employees work?

- **Where** should our employees work?
- **When** should our employees work?
- **How** should we best facilitate the new ways of working?

The final part of the paper explores how we made these decisions and why we thought it was essential to engage with our staff in the process.

Part 1 – The Context

There are many things in the context of Wellcome that are important to exploring, deciding and implementing a change in the way we work. In the interests of time, I will only talk about the three biggest influencers: our pandemic experience, the confluence with our new strategy and associated identified cultural shifts and finally, our desire to create an inclusive culture with support and respect for individual wellbeing. In my experience as an HR practitioner over the last 30 years, context is everything and needs to be attended to in order to achieve a successful outcome. Context, however, should never limit ambition.

Our pandemic experience

Wellcome employs approximately 1,000 people (on a variety of different employment terms; permanent, fixed term and contract) to distribute approximately £1bn of annual funding to the research community (mainly in the UK but also in many lower- and middle-income countries), run the Wellcome Collection and manage our £29bn asset portfolio. Overnight, we sent our workforce home with their laptops, business continuity plans and told them to carry on as best they could. Despite caring responsibilities, illness and unprecedented uncertainty they surpassed what we could reasonably have expected, delivering phenomenal results in all areas of the organisation, showing huge amounts of compassion, creativity and determination.

We ran two staff surveys; one in June and the other in September to better understand how people were coping and what, if anything, we could do differently to support them. The survey had a high completion rate (92%) and so we were confident that the information had high validity. This information was key to guiding policy decisions and following actions. It also gave us key information about what our people might want in terms of future ways of working.

Our conclusion from this is that our staff wanted a much more flexible way of working. The majority of people can work effectively from home and want a different balance in how they spend their time between work and home. Moreover, as we have proved that working from home can be very effective, we must move on from our previous assumptions, concerns and prejudices about what staff do when they are not in the office.

Our new strategy and associated culture shifts

In December 2018 Wellcome embarked on a review of how we fund science. In September 2019 that work morphed into a strategy review of all our activities excluding our Investment Team and the Collection. The strategy review took a 360-degree, holistic approach and had three work streams: our vision and ambitions, our people and culture, and our operations. The Board approved our new strategy in June 2020, including the culture shifts that we identified we needed to make to deliver on our vision and ambitions.

The culture shifts target the key changes we need to make in the way we work to make it more possible for us to deliver on our vision and ambitions. A key part of the shift is for us to have one clear strategy, supported by everyone knowing how their roles and objectives contribute. We want to bring the efforts of our people together and concentrate them on the four areas where we want to make our dent in the world.

What this tells us about our ways of working in the future is that we want one policy that applies to all our staff. We want to create a joined up, collective sense of endeavour across the organisation and this is supported by staff feeling that they are treated equitably, with common underlying principles and mechanisms. Our challenge is that we do not have a uniform workforce; while we do have a lot of office-based staff we also have staff that work in the Collection, which is open to the public, including at weekends. It is vital that what we come up with includes the voices of staff within the Collection and is inclusive of their work patterns and work type.

Inclusive culture with support and respect for wellbeing

Over the last five years Wellcome has been on a journey to improve the diversity of our workforce and those we fund. A key part of embedding this change is to take steps to create an inclusive culture. We want to create the conditions for everyone to be valued, feel psychologically safe and perform at their best. We also know that people will only perform at their best over the long term if they are maintaining, and supported in, their own wellbeing. We have embedded this in our strategy but it is worth pulling out the details as they are key to our thinking about the new ways of working.

What this tells us about what we need to consider is that our working practices need to be flexible and adaptable, with a good degree of individual choice. We know that when individuals have personal agency over their work, they feel better. And when they feel better they will perform better over the long term. We want our staff to feel good about what they are doing and how we are treating them as people. We will deliver our strategy because of our people and not despite them.

Part 2 – Who, when, where and how

I take no credit for how we looked at the situation; framing up the issues and leading the organisation through to a good conclusion was the work of my team (big shout out to them, you know who you are!). We started by creating a draft vision of what we wanted. It was important for us to approach this from a creative angle rather than a problem-solving perspective. We believed that this would give us the best chance of delivering a progressive outcome for all our people and ultimately in the delivery of our strategy.

The starting point for our vision was:

‘Wellcome provides a collaborative and flexible hub for both our employees and our partners, offering flexibility where employees feel empowered to choose how, when and where they work to best fulfil their role in delivering Wellcome’s strategy.’

Early on we wanted to connect how we work to what we do; so we focused on delivering our new strategy and embracing employee wellbeing. The vision will doubtless change as we discuss with the Executive and the rest of the organisation. The important feature is that it is a mechanism for aligning around what we want to create and having that debate up front. If we do not do this, then we will all be arguing from unconscious assumptive perspectives at every decision point, making the process much harder to conclude and more likely to result in sub-optimal compromise.

Then we introduced the four dimensions of decision making to help us identify our new ways of working. What was going to help us create our vision and what could we support and make work in our day-to-day practice?

Who should decide the way our employees work?

On a spectrum from organisation-led to employee-led ways of working, who makes the decisions? The things to consider here are how we create a community feel and consistent approach to the total employee experience when we want to give individual choice. In addition, we know that employee choice is a key component of wellbeing and productivity, so everything being decided at the organisational level is not likely to help us in delivering our vision. Finally, feedback from our employees indicates that a one size fits all approach will not work and will not help us in building an inclusive culture.

Where should our employees work?

On a spectrum from historical practice at Wellcome (mainly five days a week in the office) to what we have experienced during the pandemic (mainly working from home); how much time should we spend in the office? Once again considerations of community versus individual choice are present. While many employees are not actually needed in the office at all to do their work effectively, we have some employees in the Collection who cannot do their work without coming into our buildings. This will not be easy to square and give an equitable employee experience across the organisation.

Depending on the choices we make, another challenge will potentially be hybrid working; where some employees will be in the office and others will be working from home. It will be very easy for employees who are working from home to feel left out of the side conversations that take place before and after meetings. Hybrid working practices will be a key area of focus to get right. We can perhaps be comforted by the fact that everyone adapted to remote working very quickly and although hybrid working is more complex, we do have a level of consciousness that did not exist before and I think this will help us in working it out. We will also be supported by a learning mindset here; no one yet knows how this will work but together we can figure it out.

Finally, there are also some inclusion and wellbeing considerations. Employees with low incomes may benefit from daily access to office space. Employees with certain disabilities may find it helpful not to have to commute into London every day, whereas from a wellbeing perspective it may be easier to miss warning signs without face-to-face contact.

When should our employees work?

This needs to be considered as a spectrum from what was historically consistent practice at Wellcome (9 – 5, Monday – Friday) to what has been done throughout the pandemic (35 hours worked Monday – Friday at any time). There are some considerations that are present that we have discussed previously; team and inter-team collaborations and the challenge of including colleagues who work set shift patterns in the Collection. In addition, we need to consider if we want to have different working hours when we are in the office and when we are working remotely. This would be especially welcomed by staff with caring responsibilities but might make collaborations more difficult. We also have to consider how this would operate for those working part-time hours.

How should we best facilitate the new ways of working?

On a spectrum of how we have worked before at Wellcome (individual desks in set areas) to hot-desking across the whole organisation, how can we best facilitate our vision?

Overall, our building configuration and our technology infrastructure will need to align to our vision of how we want to work. We will need to work out our footfall and usage, meeting room requirements, video conferencing, shared work spaces, and confidential spaces etc. Once we have worked out the answers to the first three questions, we will collaborate with our colleagues in Facilities to understand the best way to support how we want to work.

Part 3 – Our decision-making process

Wellcome is a highly consultative organisation and the voice of the employee matters a lot. Our staff have told us that in the past we have over consulted and under delivered. We are consciously working to address this and one of the ways we are doing this is to build engagement plans into our work. On something as significant as deciding our new ways of working it is not only essential that we consult our staff but that they feel and trust we are truly listening to what they are saying, not going through the motions.

With that in mind, we have set out the vision and decision-making framework as a first draft to then take a step by step process of iterating and improving to finally deciding and implementing. Our first step is to gain early input from the staff networks (disability, parents and carers, etc). Then we will take it to the Executive for overall guidance and input and then we will go through a more extensive staff feedback process. Following that we will pull together a final iteration and take recommendations for the Executive to approve.

Conclusion

This is exciting and heady stuff for HR practitioners and staff across the spectrum. There are many ways in which we can make progress on our wellbeing and inclusion agendas that have previously remained stubbornly stuck. Our staff can revel in new levels of managerial trust that a day at home does not mean a drop in productivity; they have consistently shown us that over the last gruelling 10 months of enforced home working.

However, there are challenges too that we need to address. Organisational cohesion cannot be taken for granted if individuals alone decide how and when they work. We have discovered that it's much harder to keep a look out for a colleague you're worried about if you can't see how they sit at their desk or interact with people; working remotely we might even miss that we need to look out for someone. These challenges will accelerate the complexity and expectations of managerial jobs. Movements such as #metoo and #blacklivesmatter have demanded that the ordinary manager ups their game, and these challenges will too. It will take more than a round of management development to help grow capability.

There are plenty of challenges for HR teams too. Making sure that our policies and processes support a change in our working practices is essential back up for managers and staff. This will cover the range of HR processes from onboarding and performance management to managing exits and handovers. When everyone is working from home, that is one thing, but when we have a blended working culture we will have to ensure that our visibility bias is balanced by more than our assumptions.

The final challenge for us will be amplified in our society and pushes us further down a path that has led to some of the current divisions we see. Some of our roles will not have the choice to work from home or the office as it pleases them; some of our roles can only be done in our physical buildings. So, the benefits of this new way of working are only available to some; the majority in our organisation but more in our economy. Being able to have some agency over when, where and how you work is great and will support lifestyle changes that improve health and wellbeing but only for some. The workers left out of this progress are the workers who are so often left out; those who work on shifts, are working unsociable hours and doing double shifts to make ends meet. They won't have the social and health benefits, and this will further divide our society. We must all be aware of this and take steps to include those who are either in our direct employment or are contracted to us through third parties. We must think creatively and be bold to ensure we don't further divide our society.

Addendum

Since writing this paper we have now made our decision and we are going to run a 6-month trial from September with everyone back in the office on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. We are now in the process of developing the supporting policies and also the success measures we'll use at the end of the trial.

The author

Kathy Poole is Director of People at the Wellcome Trust. Since 2019, Kathy has served as Chair of the Board of Trustees at the Institute for Employment Studies and has been a Board member since 2017. Kathy has previously held senior HR positions in a range of organisations including British Airways and Channel 4.

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