

Insurance POST

Spotlight: Future of insurance work: transitioning back to the office

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When lockdown happened in March some insurers and brokers were better placed than others to continue operating remotely with little or no impact on service. These firms had already been invested heavily in technology to enable more flexible working and so could adapt quicker, but what does the future look like once the return to the office is viable?

“From a **technology** perspective, we were well placed to adapt to the lockdown. Pre-Covid we had significantly bolstered the capacity of our virtual private networks, and everything needed to access our systems sits within that VPN environment,” Steve

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The Future of Insurance Work is an editorially driven campaign across *Insurance Post* that aims to provide a platform for people to discuss and share ideas, advice, best practices

Collinson, Zurich's head of UK HR, told *Post*.

"Before Covid-19 about 75% of our people were already working flexibly to some degree, so lockdown restrictions weren't such a shock."

Alex Wolny, Gallagher's commercial director said: "We already had a digitally-enabled workforce and all UK employees had the capability and IT tools to work from

home prior to lockdown. They were already supplied with laptops and secure routers to access our systems remotely and had technology enabling remote meetings. So the switch to full remote working went smoothly and we could operate at full capacity."

Sedgwick, too, had already significantly invested in technology, with around 80% of staff able to transition instantly to a work-from-home environment. Neil Gibson, UK chief operating officer, said: "We transitioned to home working within a week and little extra was required. Since then further deployment of remote working tools, such as collaboration apps and digital claim visit software, mean our shift to the new normal has been smooth and swift."

Regional broker Brokerbilty was also up and running. Chairman Ashwin Mistry remarked: "Pre Covid-19 we had adopted a very flexible way of working, encouraging people to work from home if they could. So frontline staff and some brokers were already geared up. What Covid-19 has done is get more people doing what we've already adopted."

Elsewhere, others needed to do more. Direct Line said it had to quickly set up 9,000 people working from home, 6,000 of which had never worked from home before. This involved moving 1300 monitors from its sites into homes

and experiences as the sector looks to reset and restart in a post-Covid-19 world and look beyond the pandemic.

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and undertaking a rapid repurposing, scaling up and alteration of its telephone service to support customer-facing staff.

Digital democratisation

Marsh's HR director Steve Woodhouse said: "From an IT viewpoint, Marsh's vast scale has helped us as we haven't needed to ramp anything up thanks to robust structures and processes already in place, so could roll with it more than perhaps smaller companies."

Insurance has tended to operate in a more traditional way than other financial services. Marsh's chief operating officer Aileen Croft added: "Brokers are definitely embracing technology; for some it wasn't such a big change, for others it was."

For those companies that can't necessarily afford to invest millions in a mass digital transformation, there are other avenues. Aventus, for example, says it can provide insurers and brokers centralised key technology functions within one simple-to-use operating system.

Also, Covid-19 has been accelerating the adoption of cloud-based technology, which allows different types of connectivity.

"For Zurich it's a real enabler of our customer strategy – it gives us increased ability to deliver digital services to customers and brokers without the infrastructure you would have had to build on your own premises in the past," remarked Collinson.

According to RSA, Covid-19 will result in the following technologies: Automation of low-value, repetitive processes through [robotics process automation](#) to enable employees to focus on higher-value, more rewarding activities; access to real-time data to enable employees to gain greater insights and on-demand information to handle customer queries and streamlined workflow solutions to ensure that the right tasks, are completed by the right people, at the right time.

Peter Goodman, CEO at Aventus said: "The biggest problem in insurance is cross-selling. So many companies sell one product really well but don't have the data at their fingertips to realise that their client might also need something else."

“You will always need personal relationships in insurance, but you need better data to manage those relationships. An informed broker will be a much better broker. If you have more information about your customer when you are talking to them, you can serve them better.”

Cyber attacks

Collinson told *Post* Zurich has had to become more vigilant over security, for example, regarding phishing emails, which have increased significantly during Covid-19, and bolstered its IT staff.

Remote working exposes users to cyber security vulnerabilities: from using outdated personal devices and applications that are compromised; connecting to unsafe Wi-Fi where the company hasn't provided VPNs; or not using multifactor authentication to access work networks and data.

Peter Margaris, head of product marketing at Skybox Security, added: “Business leaders also need to be concerned with attackers' ability to use home workers and home networks as an entry point that could lead to ransoms being demanded, data being stolen, or regulatory fines being imposed.”

In the clouds

Cloud adoption plans have been accelerated by Covid-19. Sarah Whipp, chief marketing officer of Callsign, an identity fraud, authorisation and authentication company, told *Post*: “In some cases, organisations' cloud adoption plans have been reduced from three years to just three weeks, which brings a variety of resource and logistical problems.”

“According to research by Snow Software, 82% of IT leaders have ramped up their use of cloud in direct response to the pandemic and the shift to remote working, with 60% saying their use of off-premise technologies had continued to grow since then. However, this momentum has to be retained to keep up with the changes required as companies continue to adjust to the 'new normal'.”

“Consequently, any authentication journey solution being implemented needs to have the functionality to adjust to any changes, with minimal input from the security team.”

“These attacks aren’t just an IT issue – if successful, they could wreak serious financial and reputational damage.”

Human factor

Woodhouse remarked: “As we went through lockdown, Marsh’s focus shifted from the virus itself and family responsibilities to wellbeing support as fears grew over how long it would last, the economy’s resilience, and impact on one’s job. We provided a lot of support around mental health, including webinars, colleague resource groups and mental health first aiders.”

Vicky Hodson chief operating officer at UK General, said: “Early on we had a claims surge and huge workload, so

the ability of walking away was very important. Are you sitting in your living room with your laptop, or able to move elsewhere. Some people simply do not want to turn their home into their work space.

“Everybody can work from home, but it’s also having interaction with others that had been missed. It’s often a huge relief to be able to engage with other people.”

Adrian Jolly, strategic development director at the British Damage Management Association, added: “The industry’s eyes were already being opened to the importance of the health and mental wellbeing of employees, which has only been amplified by Covid-19. Particularly in the damage management sector, where responding to urgent situations is part of the day job, recent months have placed staff under additional strain. It is crucial that,

Whipp proposes intelligence-driven authentication. “Because you are provisioning the identity of a person, rather than the device, it doesn’t matter who or where the user attempts to access their company’s networks. Using machine learning, businesses can collect as many data points as conceivable about the device being used, behaviour and location of the employee, and retain a complete understanding of the employee and the security profile of the device they are using.”

“Furthermore, applying intelligent authentication also helps reduce the chance of sensitive data being accessed or internal systems compromised in the event of a device being stolen or mislaid because a robust identification process means the criminal will not be able to access confidential company data.”

as an industry, we pay real attention to how we can support our people, not just for their own wellbeing but to maintain the professional, high-quality service we want to provide to policyholders.”

According to Keith Richards, chief membership officer at the Chartered Insurance Institute: “How to adapt to a fully dispersed working environment has been the major focus of a review undertaken to help develop an ‘Anytime, Anywhere’ approach. Technology and equipment aside, we’ve been exploring questions like how you can remake the social and collaborative aspects of the office when sitting in your own home office, virtual meeting etiquette, reading the room when you can’t be in the room, minimising email and meeting overload when a two minute corridor conversation isn’t an option, gaining and maintaining internal presence when you’re not physically present, and looking after your own and other’s wellbeing when you can’t see how people are doing.”

Also, how do you bring new people into the industry? “We’ve done a lot around developing a training competence framework. Even so just sitting with somebody who’s very experienced has become much more difficult,” commented Hodson.

Meanwhile, Marsh has put back its graduate intake from September to next January.

Offices reopening in the future

According to Jolly: “The office environment undoubtedly brings benefits in terms of collaboration and creative thinking, while also avoiding the potential downsides of homeworking, whether that’s feelings of isolation or being unable to avoid distractions. In practical terms, however, the size of a company’s office space and its occupation level will influence how many employees can return with social distancing measures comfortably in place. As such, people will continue to work from home in the medium or, perhaps, long term, and employers will need to consider practical measures to support their productivity and implementing structures to maintain a sense of teamwork when workers are split across office and home environments.”

Returning to the office for some, while others work from home could also generate ‘fairness’ issues, according to Hilary Scarlett, consultant at Scarlett & Grey, and author of *Neuroscience for Organizational Change*.

“Those who have to be in the workplace full time, or much of the time, might perceive that it’s unfair they have to take the risk of travelling on public transport or being in the office. They also have to go back to the daily commute which for many might be a real bind. On the other hand, those who continue to work from home, might feel it’s unfair as decisions will be made in the workplace and they might well feel their voices are not being heard. The brain naturally tends to dwell on where we feel we are being dealt an unfair hand as opposed to where the unfairness plays to our advantage. So managing fairness, or at least a perception of it, will be very important in the months to come.”

The companies we spoke to had, before the government update last week, given staff the flexibility to choose a mix of home and office work as they gradually reopen offices.

Marsh had planned for its office capacity to be about 40% by October to maintain social distancing. “It doesn’t mean this will be fully utilised as we allow people to decide themselves how best to operate,” said Croft.

Sedgwick did a survey of its employees and found over 80% said they wanted more flexibility in future working arrangements. Meanwhile, Direct Line and Aviva are currently assessing how best they can offer a mix of office and home working going forward.

Zurich is waiting until after Covid-19 to make any big strategic premises decisions. In contrast, UK General has already reduced physical space.

“Working from home has been a success and we questioned whether we need to go back to the office. We decided to move office during this time as we would need much less space and have introduced a rota to have people in two days a week. It is our long-term intention to have people working in the office two days a week and three days at home,” explained Hodson.

Catalyst for change

According to Gibson, Covid-19 has presented opportunities to become more efficient and flexible. “Firstly, where site visits are required, some customers prefer the flexibility and safety aspects of a remote digital visit for routine claims, or where we could avoid a follow-up inspection visit. Secondly, in the way we use our office space to work, meet and collaborate.”

“We are investing in new technology to book desks at our larger locations, for example, so we can more efficiently provide a Covid-secure workspace. We are also developing omni-channel communications to give customers greater flexibility and choice of how they want to communicate with us.”

According to RSA, its teams have remained productive throughout, so greater flexibility in terms of working patterns is a real possibility. “We all prefer different ways of working, but there is scope to improve staff retention and engagement by enabling more remote working to continue as we transition out of lockdown.”

Would change have happened without Covid-19? “Possibly long term – but we would have been afraid of doing it because of the challenges. Because we’ve been forced to, we’ve found ways of doing it. And now we’ve got a more flexible model going forward,” suggested Hodson.

“It is unlikely the sector will go back to the same way of working. We certainly plan to use what we’ve learned as an opportunity, whether that’s a better work/life balance for staff, or looking at the amount we travel. Having said that, insurance is fundamentally a people business and we are keen to get out and see our clients face to face again. So we think it will be a combination of the old and the new,” concluded Wolny.

The information is based on guidance at time of going to press.

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