

# “WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER”

*Flexibility has become a key trait for employers and employees in order to cope with changes taking place at an increasing pace over the last two years, notes John Gallagher, Founder and Chief Health Officer of Cognate Health Ltd. He writes that many employers have come to realise the benefits of allowing employees to work from home during these uncertain times.*

It is only two years since the World Health Organisation declared the Covid-19 pandemic. For some people it has been the longest two years of their lives whilst for others time has passed imperceptibly.

Your perspective on this probably depends on, amongst other things, your stage in life, your social contacts, your health or lack of good health, your occupation and whether you have been involved on the frontline and never worked from home, or whether you have been confined to your house for the period.

We all have our own perspective borne out of our own experience. We can all agree it has been and continues to be a very uncertain time. The world has not

stopped turning. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in never seen before shutdowns and significant disruption.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is also resulting in further continued disruption to supply chains, subsequently leading to a rising cost of living and a significant ramping up of uncertainty. The crises do not seem to end with the pandemic and the war. The other crisis garnering increasing focus and that poses real threats to lives and livelihoods is climate change.

Time has moved on and with it the Covid-19 pandemic and the response to it. It is not that long ago that the Government appealed to our sense of citizenship and the dominant theme of “we are all in this together”.

## **STRONG COMMUNITY SPIRIT**

This approach worked very well in Ireland and is testament to our sense of community, which is particularly highlighted as it always has been, in the time of crisis, albeit with blips along the way, such as Christmas 2020.

However, there was always a regular pulse of information and guidance giving the population clear instructions on how to protect against the worst effects of the pandemic.

We find ourselves in an uncomfortable situation where the onus has shifted firmly to the individual to do their own risk assessments and take action that they feel is appropriate. The onus is on employers to make their own decisions on when employees should



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return to the workplace, and how to manage two workforces, to now include working from home.

In practical terms the implications are that you now either have the virus and should isolate, or you are well and should carry on as normal, which includes going to work. Advantages of getting vaccinated do not need to be emphasised.

It is perhaps easy to be lulled into a sense of complacency in such a situation. And yet since the start of the pandemic it is estimated that one in every 1,300 people alive in 2019 has succumbed to Covid-19. It is also easy to forget how quickly Covid-19 vaccines were developed and delivered, with just over 300 days from genetic sequencing to authorisation of a vaccine.

The omicron variant has spread very quickly because it can evade existing immunity and is also more transmissible, allowing it to out-compete other strains. There are likely to be more transmissible strains in the years ahead which displace omicron. Fortunately, the vaccines continue to protect against severe disease and death for the time being.

**DEFINING ENDEMICITY**

Discussions have moved on to whether the virus is becoming endemic. What does that even mean? Perhaps the best practical definition is that endemicity occurs when, as a society, we are happy to resume our normal lives even though the risk of disease continues.

This has implications for the unvaccinated who remain at high risk, and for those who continue to remain at home due to their very high-risk or vulnerable status. When can they resume normal life?

They have largely been left behind. There has been no new guidance dealing with this vulnerable group for a long time, and there may not be any time soon. This is a very vulnerable group in every way.

**GROWTH IN TELEMEDICINE**

Covid-19 also forced progress in several areas which will benefit us going forward.

In order to continue to deliver effective healthcare the pandemic resulted in an exponential growth of telemedicine.

This allowed many people to access health care while maintaining social isolation, and also crucially it allowed healthcare providers a safe and effective mechanism of delivering this care.

More recent surveys seem to show that most doctors expect to return to a primarily face-to-face delivery model over the next year, and the majority still recommend this over virtual care to patients. Is this a case of old habits dying hard, a reluctance to change or is it ultimately for the benefit of patients? Time will tell as telemedicine is here to stay for sure.

**WORKING FROM HOME**

Many employers have realised the benefits of allowing employees to work at home. One of the very positive effects of this is that it opens access to the workforce for people with disabilities. If this is embraced fully it will foster more inclusive practices amongst employers. Adoption of technology first approaches also enables access to accessible digital tools and supports previously difficult to access. These can now be included as accessibility tools for remote work. Employers have an opportunity to move toward an inclusive culture-this will attract the best talent available, including people with disabilities.

**PRESENTEEISM**

Working from home is not all good news. There are many concerns



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about the issue of presenteeism which is thought to be more costly than absenteeism. Presenteeism is more likely in organisations with high workload pressure, long hours and short staffing.

Those who work from home may be under additional pressure to continue to work while ill as there is a blurring of boundaries and self-perceived pressure on the worker to continue working as they fear they will not be believed.

Being out of sight of the manager may well be disadvantageous in this situation. Flexibility is important here as there is evidence to suggest that those who can self-schedule their working hours tend to have a lower risk of presenteeism.

### MENTAL HEALTH

Is it any wonder that recent research indicated that Gen Z'ers were experiencing problems with their mental health? They're more likely to report having been diagnosed with a mental-health issue, as well as more likely than other generations to report considering suicide.

And they are voting with their feet in terms of choosing workplaces where they want to work and in this regard those organisations with established mental health programmes are preferred over those that do not.

Companies that want to improve mental health at work, especially for younger and more diverse groups, need to consider their strategies. Mental health is not just a human resource, or health and safety issue; it is also a diversity and inclusion issue.

Mental health policies and out of the box solutions are not enough on their own. It is culture that reduces stigma and changing culture must begin in a top-down manner. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Changing culture must be aligned with training and the provision of appropriate supports to be effective.

Managers need an understanding of mental health conditions and a means of responding to employees who may be struggling. This applies regardless of where the worker is located, while the distance that results from home working may make the early recognition of mental health issues more challenging.

Many progressive organisations now realise the value of utilising the workplace as a setting to promote good mental health, but how does this reach remote workers?

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He is the Academic Director of the Diploma and Certificate in Safety, Health & Welfare at Work at UCC, and is also an examiner, trainer and past Dean of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine at RCPI.

As Founder and Chief Health Officer of Cognate Health Ltd, John provides high level strategic advice to organisations on all aspects of occupational health as well as providing expert independent occupational health assessments for complex occupational health problems.



### EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Flexibility is a key trait for employers and employees as we move through these uncertain times. Change is always happening and at an increasing pace.

There were two industrial revolutions in 200 years and then two more in 30 years. In the past two years we have experienced the external influences of a pandemic and a war, and increasingly

face the realisation that we must address climate change urgently.

The Covid-19 pandemic has proven that inflexibility and inability to adapt can be disastrous, but at the same time, it has also confirmed that we can make significant changes often in very short periods of time.

We all crave certainty, safety and security and whilst you cannot control uncertainty, it is important to remember that you have control over how you react to it.



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