

# Time to rethink our lives and businesses

IT'S been a stressful and, in some cases, tragic few months. While we're not out of the woods yet, the prime minister has laid out a 'sketch of a roadmap' of how to unlock the UK from Covid-19.

As this strategy evolves, it's clear vet practices must adapt to a new normal and accommodate different ways of working for the future.

I see Covid-19 as a ctrl/alt/del reset – a rare opportunity to rethink our lives and businesses. Three clear themes are developing to support the objective of keeping R0, the basic reproductive rate of the virus, below 1.

First, fears about a persistent risk of infection. Social distancing is likely to continue for some time, restricting mass gatherings and travel to essential-only activities. The implications for companies are huge and we should see significant workplace innovation as a result.

We are likely to see an increased focus on personal health and hygiene. Consumers will be prepared to pay a premium for retailers and service providers who invest and structure their services around public health. Contact tracing will be a big part of this, so how are we going to handle 'hot' employees and customers?

Second, we can expect to live with mass unemployment for some time. The airline industry alone has unloaded tens of thousands of employees and predicted it will take years to recover to 2019 levels. How will businesses unfurlough the 7.5 million employees whose wages are being met by the public purse? Many of the unemployed will be highly skilled workers; the talent pool will be spectacular and it's likely that these people will cross sectors with ease.

Finally, there's working from home. It's a habit that will stick; business journals are quoting CEOs talking about reducing retail space, reviewing office estates and proposing complete restructures of their businesses. Remote working will not just affect employee behaviour, it will change consumer behaviour too, bringing with it a focus on home cooking, home delivery and a marked effect on the family budget.

What does all this mean for the veterinary sector? This is a paradigm shift moment; a unique, once in a generation opportunity to change veterinary working practice and consign archaic rotas, hours and their effect on our mental health and wellbeing to the bin.



We have a free pass to design a new system for the delivery of veterinary care – one where the foundations are public health and employee wellbeing. I propose you ask yourself some questions and put your best team on the job immediately.

Thinking about your employees, how will you

organise your staff to allow for staggered opening times? What if you cannot have them all working at the same time?

How will you manage colleagues who are well, but self isolating because the contact tracing app says to do so? Can you restructure your team for better shift patterns and flexible working that retains employees who are also parents? What would flexible working mean for your reputation as an employer and your staff retention?

In terms of prioritising public health and hygiene, how will you create a Covid-secure workplace? What does social distancing mean for consumers in your clinic? How will you deliver Covid-secure services on farms or yards?

And looking at the future of the 'brick and click' economy, how will you serve consumers who are no longer wedded to office hours? How can you capitalise on the new ways that consumers have accessed veterinary advice during lockdown? What have you found works or doesn't regarding teleconsulting?

You've survived lockdown, so congratulate yourself and your team. Now start working on the unlock phase. It doesn't matter how we used to do it, it's time for a paradigm shift and to find a new way of working.

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