Back to the Future…. Back to the Office

Exactly a year ago we shared some thoughts on working from home(WFH), how it had changed the office dynamic and what the future might look like.

It is hard to believe that a year has passed but the calendar confirms this is the case and I wanted to revisit the topic to see what, if anything, had changed.

Many of us are still working from home, nearly 18 months after the Government ordered us to on that fateful evening in March 2020. There have been breaks from lock down and opportunities to return to the office but it is clear that there are a plethora of different views and ways in which this is, or is going to be, implemented.

It seems that a lot of firms are encouraging staff to return to the office more regularly from next month with several appearing to adopt a very flexible approach. I have felt for a long time that lifting restrictions will be far quicker than peoples ability or willingness to return to some degree of the "old normal" and this is clearly the case with the face covering debate continuing and public transport in many areas far from capacity. I think this latter point may well be the real key point, even if you are keen to get back to the office you might well be very reluctant to return to your old commute and so we go round again.

A number of companies seem to be adopting the "2/3 days in and 2/3 days out" approach which to me seems really sensible. If people can return to the office and feel safe they'll feel better in the mid to long term and that may encourage less time at home and more time back in the office with colleagues. Maybe as we reach what might be herd immunity, the real turning point has come and a return to the office is not only more likely, but I believe this time, it will be widespread and generally welcomed.

These have been, quite frankly, pretty half-baked. Maybe as we reach what might be herd immunity, the real turning point has come and a return to the office is not only more likely, but I believe this time, it will be widespread and generally welcomed.

So confident am I that office working is the best and favoured way forward that if I won the Euromillions tomorrow I would invest in commercial office premises, modernise them for the new way of working, and sit tight for two years. I am pretty certain it would make for a very lucrative investment.

The end of 2020 saw a partial return to the office which here at PLG was embraced and welcomed. I cannot fault the way the team worked really effectively from home, putting the hours into the projects they were involved with, when they might ordinarily have been on the commute. But, last summer, despite being given the option to continue working from home, all the PLG team chose to return to the office. There were a plethora of reasons – companionship, ease of communicating on projects, training, office banter in the kitchen. And these all made sound sense, both commercially and for everyone's well-being.

The start of 2021 saw the next lockdown and I think we all found this one the toughest. Dark cold days, a hideously high infection rate and a year into the pandemic, the novelty of working from home was wearing very thin indeed. I had concerns for my staff who were isolated at home and how this would affect their morale, let alone their mental health. But a phenomenally successful vaccination programme has brought us to Freedom Day and I am more certain than ever that we will all be relishing the prospect of being back in an office environment in the not too distant future.

The PLG team is a relatively small and friendly bunch who really work on projects as a team, so I know why they want to be back together in the office. But what about larger concerns – several major commercial firms and financial institutions are talking about closing offices altogether, or just having a hub whilst everyone else works from home. Others are moving over to hybrid working; some are looking at working on a 2:2:1 basis – 2 days at home, 2 in the office and one flexible. I am more sceptical than ever that these will ever really effectively work on a long term basis.

I am the first to accept that Covid has left us with a crisis of confidence which it may take time to get over. For those returning to large open plan offices packed with hot desks, a little more time may be needed to get over that initial reticence, but I remain confident that as we emerge from the pandemic and experience being together, talking together and working together, the benefits will quickly dispel any lingering concerns. Being together in an office environment is not only fun, it is the best way to work. It is good for communication, for learning, for producing the best results and it is good for us as people too.

I am a firm believer that the best way for junior members of the team to learn is from the more senior members of the team -almost like osmosis. And this is something which has been virtually impossible for the last 18 months of home working. Sometimes just overhearing the manner in which a telephone conversation is conducted will create an impression for a junior team member and give them something to emulate. There is no better way for this to happen than to be in the office together. I feel that many professions have lost nearly 18 months of training their more junior team players and in the next few years, if not months, this loss will be keenly felt.

I am also the first to embrace a smarter "new way" of working, using technology to its best advantage, and I would like to see commercial premises designed to reflect the use of technology for more virtual meetings where necessary. This is not only a good use of time but it cuts down on unnecessary travel which can only be beneficial for the environment. But the use of technology for virtual external meetings should not be confused with the benefits of having the team in the office on a daily basis.

I believe that in a few years' time we will look back on the pandemic of 2020/2021 and recognise it as an interesting experiment in relation to work practices. It brought forward the use of technology by years and there will be a new and smarter way of working which utilises all that technology can offer. But we will also revert to office working, simply because it is the most effective for all concerned: it offers a working space physically separate from people's home lives, a community with a common purpose and the best forum to work as a team for the betterment of not only the staff, but also both clients and the business.