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Risk management & Covid-19: reinventing work

How have the workplace, organizations and management been transformed by the Covid-19 crisis? How can we manage things differently? Emmanuelle Léon, Professor of Management at ESCP Business School shares her views from the Icsi webinar held on March 4, 2021.

What are the major workplace transformations highlighted by the Covid-19 crisis?

Although we are in a phase of accelerating transformation, this is not new. Over time, we have moved from an **industrial world** to a **post-industrial** world. The place of reference is no longer the factory, but the R&D center. The reference employee is no longer the worker who watches the clock, but the skilled professional or manager.

In this post-industrial era, we are no longer obliged to all be in the same place at the same time. New **time-spaces** have developed and changed the way we work. We now have part-time remote working, satellite offices, coworking spaces, nomadic work, and virtual teams.

Before the crisis, around 7% of French employees regularly worked from home, which was far below the estimated capacity of 25%. This percentage is set to rise sharply in the coming months, and is probably the **biggest transition that we are currently experiencing.**

What are the impacts of such a rapid transition to remote working?

In our frame of reference, inherited from the industrial world, work is primarily **time spent in a place**. The role of the manager is to **monitor this time**: we like to know employees' working hours, their availability, record performance indicators, etc.

We will have to **move beyond this present = work assumption**. It should be noted that this relationship to time and space extends beyond the French context, and exists in many cultures. For example, a 2010–2012 study conducted in the United States showed that:

- when we see people at work, we feel that they are more reliable
- when we see them working overtime, we feel that they are committed.

Are there other dimensions of work that need to be re-examined?

Time is the first. Do we really all need to work synchronously, or can we operate asynchronously? How available are employees? It is clear that remote workers are increasing their availability. There is a *I am not physically there so I'll make myself over-available to show my commitment* effect. At some point, this will have an impact on health.

Second, we may need to rethink how we approach **activities** and tasks. For example, do we need to have a meeting every time we start work?

We also need to rethink employee integration, corporate culture, transparency, skills development, well-being and performance. It's a whole package.

How have managers adapted to this accelerated transformation? What will management look like in the future?

I have observed **3 attitudes** that are fairly representative of a sudden shift to remote management.

1: The manager who is in denial

This manager acts as if it is impossible to change anything. He or she reproduces what happened before: the constant stream of meetings that were held at the office are shifted on-line, and the meeting becomes the workplace, in some sense. But remote meetings are more tiring and not conducive to the informal, impromptu discussions that promote creativity and collaboration within a team. And it's difficult to bump into someone from another team in a virtual meeting!

Secondly, the multi-tasking myth remains. Estimates suggest that every time you stop one task and start another, each will take 20–30% longer. This adds to fatigue. And as remote working increases the porosity between home and work life, multi-tasking can become both professional and personal.

Finally, this manager sees face-to-face working as a lost paradise. But the human relations of tomorrow raise many questions: spending time in the office isn't very attractive if employees have to remain socially distanced and, ultimately, are unable to resume spending time together.

2: The anxious manager

This manager is distressed by being separated from their team. This can lead to 3 risks:

- **Pathological reporting:** this consists of setting up additional indicators to compensate for the distance. This is a well-rooted trend that is difficult to overcome, but we should be aware that we may have reached the limits of the system.
- **Dehumanized communication:** when working remotely, we can quickly forget about those little moments that we would have had if we were in the office, like a thank you in the hallway. Now, they have to be planned in order to work. And, on the other hand, it becomes more difficult to talk about professional or personal problems.

- **Out of sight, out of mind:** the well-being, productivity and performance of remote workers will vary significantly depending on the perception of the extent to which the company is committed to remote working.

3: Doing things differently

This manager has chosen to reinvent his or her practices. There are a few key principles:
- Move beyond the present = working assumption
- Do not confuse management by objectives with management by results: it is important to look at how results were obtained
- Plan time for informal chats; this practice should not be abandoned when it is time to return to the office
- Make the implicit explicit and avoid improvisation
- Define norms for team behavior: how we work, with what tools, how we write to each other, when do we talk to each other?
- Balance private and professional life
- Think about both the physical and digital space: it will be necessary to bring out the best of both worlds.

Finally, the implementation of a hybrid system, which is the subject of much discussion within companies, will only be useful if the organization, management and teams are all involved. Behavioral norms, both within the company and teams, need to be clarified in a context where the culture is no longer understood in the same way. And if the hybrid approach becomes the norm, it will probably be time to rethink the length of shifts (because it is not easy to build trust when working remotely), and the size of teams, or which teams can be on site at the same time, in order to ensure that everyone working in the same building is treated fairly. Remote work is often just an indicator of existing problems that need attention. Taking the time to do this will avoid transposing everything that didn't work before to remote working!