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“I think it would be a far greater tragedy if after Covid-19 we simply went back to the way things were.”

WRITTEN BY BARNABY BUDGEN





I have to admit I have become quite used to this working from home thing. I'm not the most extrovert person, I am happy to work alone and I like a good list to get me through the day – so no difference there.

My work is still getting done, it is now just punctuated with life: a coffee with my wife in the garden; a dog walk; a chat with my sons about homework, or a run. Previously these were reserved for the precious time at the end of a working day or my weekends. So when I stop and think about how C19 is affecting me, it is not all bad.

What is interesting is how our new behaviours and habits which we have all become used to, will influence the new norm in a world free of C19. Change on this scale is unheard of, so how can we ensure its legacy is ultimately positive?

There is a lot of content out there about the post C19 world, portraying solutions as if the virus still remains. This is why it is important first of all to distinguish that there are two phases to get us back to some form of normality and they must not be muddled.

Phase 1 is the eradication of C19 and Phase 2 is the forming of a new norm without C19. What I would hate to see is the negative behavioural traits of social distancing and the paranoia needed to eradicate C19, infiltrating into any new norm. Behaviours have changed but so have perceptions. What is important to us now? From a human perspective we have had time to stop, look around and think about what really matters.

Ecologically, who would have thought we could have had such a positive and noticeable impact on the environment in such a short time. Will people and Governments act to maintain this? Seeing is believing after all, and a positive to take from C-19 is that it is actually possible to make a difference.

Phase One: Managing the eradication of C19

We are all coming to terms with the fact that the current climate will last for a significant period of time but we must remember it is not forever. Fundamentally this phase is about managing infection through controlled distancing and limiting contamination:

- Predominantly people will continue to work from home;
- Companies are preparing for a controlled return to work;
- Increased allowances for cyclists and runners coming to work;
- Restricted numbers on rosters and much greater flexibility to reduce peaks;
- Flow through pinch points to access and exit buildings be controlled;
- Where possible one-way systems will be introduced;
- Office space will be adjusted to form clear

and widened routes that help maintain social distancing;

- Reconfiguring furniture and desking – Eg Benches of 8 are converted to benches of 4 with more space between;
- Spaces and policies that avoid congestion and discourage congregation;
- Enclosed 'sit down meetings' will be discouraged with people opting for open plan meetings, external meetings or virtual meetings;
- High screens and other retro fitted dividers to form protective barrier;
- Markings on the floor to indicate and remind staff of personal working spaces;
- Installation of anti-microbial desk mats;
- Increased and deeper cleaning regime / programme.

Firms in China that are starting to open up have found that a lot of staff are still refusing to come in to work as they are concerned about becoming infected with C19. The perception that the office is a high-risk area to them is probably justifiable at the moment. Will there be a longer-term subconscious perception that offices are places of contamination and therefore are to be avoided - after all avoiding offices has been one of the main strategies for reducing the spread of C19. What can we do to manage this perception?

Managing C19 is a means to getting back to the norm - it is not the norm itself.

Phase 2: The new norm

We have seen a different world and been inspired: calmer, quieter, cleaner, friendlier and more communal. Once C19 is eradicated and freedom is resumed, we will have new skills, ideas and priorities that will change the way we approach both work and life:

- Hygiene will remain important: product selection, anti-microbial surfaces will become prevalent.
- We should look to re-normalise social distancing when appropriate as it is unnatural and could have a negative long term social affect.
- If we can work from home why do we go to the office? The office needs to be a requirement that fulfils more than work and productivity. It will be the cultural and social hub where staff engage and collaborate. It will embody and showcase a company's values. Work may not be its primary function.
- The blend between home and office. Family and the acceptance of family by companies will be more important to staff. Knowing, accepting and actively engaging with staff and their 'families' – acknowledging the existence and importance of life outside the office and allowing more blurring.
- Everyone has had to become more tech enabled to remain connected: Teams, Zoom, Houseparty, Skype etc. We are now meeting, exercising, training, socialising through these channels: How will this affect design?
- Remote computer systems will allow agility with greater processing power and will remove the anchor of office based infrastructure.
- The biggest queue on my high street is for the bike shop. People are out and about – active. People will



not want to travel by public transport if it can be helped. Cycling, running and walking will become more popular. More showers, lockers etc will be required.

- Working patterns have altered. During the day people are blending work and other activities in a much more flexible way. Flexibility and agility are the norm – companies will have to trust their staff.
- Less business travel - we have said this before from an environmental perspective, but this time we have had to walk the talk – virtual meetings have become the norm and it works. Business travel should be discouraged and treated as non-essential.
- Home working is here to stay. People need to be properly set up, comfortable and productive. This will be a growth market with the demand for creative solutions and innovative thinking.
- Behavioural Change Management can provide support as we transition to the new normal. The concept is tangible to us all.

Someone recently said to me ‘you can’t worry about the stuff you can’t control’, and they were right. I am under no illusion that C19 brings with it uncertainties to jobs, our economy, health, etc. These uncertainties cast a long shadow, the feeling that stops us from sleeping properly at night or puts doubt in our voices when we say we are fine. But these uncertainties that we can’t control are short term.

Long after the economy has righted itself, I hope it will be the positives of the C19 lockdown that shape our future. The seismic social shift caused by the pandemic could well be the jolt that knocks us out of the rut and forces us do things differently. This was the moment we stopped, acknowledged the faults with the current status quo and saw the possible: a calmer, more caring and environmentally conscientious society. These should be the foundations for our future, these should be our norms.

I think it would be a far greater tragedy if after Covid-19 if we simply went back to the way things were. I personally feel invigorated and inspired to get behind a change so long overdue. Bring it on. We knew we needed it but now we know just how much we want it.



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If you want to know more, please get in touch.



Barnaby Bugden, Design Director
barnaby.budgen@mcm-uk.com
Mob: +44 7525 950340

71 Hopton Street, London,
SE1 9LR, UK
T +44 (0)20 7902 0900
www.mcm-uk.com
hello@mcm-uk.com

@mcm_uk
@mcm-uk
@designedbymcm

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