



Caring for staff in the new world of work

Podcast transcript

Intro: Hi everyone and welcome to the next in our series of podcasts from RSA Insurance. I'm your host, Scott Fynn and today, we look at the current challenging environment and caring for staff in the new world of work. Joining me today are Alex Hardy, Sales and Distribution Director of RSA's UK commercial lines division; Tony Bough, Head of Health, Safety and Wellbeing at RSA; and Maren Burrowes, our UK Diversity and Inclusion Lead. I'll let them briefly introduce themselves. Over to you guys.

Alex: Hi, Scott. Thanks. Yeah, I'm Alex Hardy. I'm Sales Director here at RSA, working in the commercial division. And I'm responsible effectively for leading external relationships whether that be broker, partner or indeed, our most complex customer relationships. I've been with RSA relatively short period of time, little over 15 months, and what an interesting 15 months it's been. But I've actually been in the industry for circa 18 years, predominantly working for insurers both in the UK and also in Ireland.

Tony: Hi, I'm Tony Bough. I work in HR. I'm responsible for the health, safety and wellbeing of all our RSA employees. I have been with RSA for around eight years, and my background is a mixture of HR, health and safety and wellbeing roles, in a variety of sectors from manufacturing to construction, public sector and obviously at the moment, the financial services sector. I'm also a mental health first aid instructor so I do a lot with individual and employee wellbeing and mental health.

Maren: Hello, I'm Maren Burrowes, and I work within HR. I'm responsible for leading on diversity and inclusion within our UK business. I've been at RSA for just over five years and prior to working in D&I, I was working within talent management. My background is primarily in talent, but I've always had a flavour of D&I because I think to attract and retain the best talent, you have to embed D&I into everything that you do.

Scott: Thanks all. So Alex, to you first. COVID-19 has rocked the whole industry. What's your take on the effect to the business insurance market and the workforce?

Alex: So COVID-19 is a real challenge for every type of business, and we're trying to figure out the best ways to navigate through the crisis. We might be forced to think about bottom line and how to adjust to the new normal – whatever that may mean – with minimal disruption or how we can encourage future growth across our organisation. But what about your workforce? What about your people? They will be just as worried as you are, but about different things perhaps. They are the people which your day-to-day success depends so their feelings, engagement with your company are just as important, if not more important, and can't be overlooked. Execs, managers, team leaders, we all have a responsibility to respond to those concerns and bring as much positivity as possible but in times like these, what are the key pastoral care in business? We all have a part to play. You have a responsibility to respond to people's concerns and breed as much positivity as

pandemic? We'll explore some of the fundamentals around caring for people in challenging times, and the actions that we can all take so that we can put them first.

Scott: Thanks, Alex. Tony, you've been heavily involved in our safety and wellbeing of RSA staff. What steps have you been communicating to your RSA colleagues and how can this transfer to our audience listening today?

Tony: I'd say it's reassurance. It's how we keep employees reassured, which was far from an easy task anyway. Now, obviously, that's even more difficult. So, for the past four months – it feels like forever – most people, they've not been working or they've been kept at home, and it seems like the same day. As much as time seems to be passing extremely fast, also it feels like one never ending day. And within that one never ending day, we seem to check the news lots, probably too often, and one of the big pieces of advice I give to all of our employees is try and limit how much you do look at the news. Then the 14th of June rolled around and all of a sudden, nine million people in the UK have been furloughed under the government's coronavirus job retention scheme, which is a quarter of the country's entire workforce, and a lot of people have worries that they might not have a job to come back to.

It also seems like every day has brought even more high-profile business, new stories of cutbacks or redundancies or companies going into administration, and we can be bombarded once again with all these news, largely negative news, and it's been effectively doom and gloom for a long period of time, it gets people down, and then it hits home when people have friends and family members who have lost their jobs. All in all, your workforce does have a right to be worried about these things, especially as we've had no experience of this. Certainly, in the course of our lifetimes, none of us have ever experienced anything like this. So, reassurance, once again, becomes a major part in how your business can recover, and obviously, a major part in what you want to do to keep an engaged and happy and productive workforce.

Of course, removing all uncertainty, it's not a realistic prospect. Things aren't always going to be absolutely rosy, and you can't just tell your workforce that everything's going to be fine. They're not stupid. They know that that's not necessarily going to be the case. And it's especially the case if your company's particularly struggling as a result of lockdowns or any kind of restrictions on movement or anything else that the coronavirus has thrown at us. But on the one hand, any good PR consultant will tell you that speculation always fills a vacuum of information. And as we all know, that's how malicious and often unhelpful rumours start. All you can do is be honest, authentic, and transparent with your workforce.

I like to call it a positive HAT if you want a mnemonic to remember, or an acronym as such. It's practical to giving them a full picture of the situation. If it is practical, obviously you can make sure to highlight what people need to know. And whatever those comprehensive steps are or whatever that plan is, communicate that to your workforce, that positive HAT of honesty, authenticity and transparency. If you're in a position where some people have to be let go then of course, it is regrettable. Once again, that positive HAT; that honesty, that authenticity and transparency is going to keep your workforce engaged. And ultimately, reassurance will make them feel much more secure and relaxed in their work, and hopefully, help with any worries or concerns that they may have hanging over them. And that is how we will get an engaged workforce, that's how they will engage with change and play an active part in the recovery of your business.

Scott: Thank you, Tony. Really interesting. So, turning to isolation and mental wellbeing now.

Maren, I suspect providing reassurance and guidance has been even harder to manage due to the isolation we're all feeling at the moment. What effects have you seen on health and mental wellbeing?

Maren: So, I think connected to that reassurance is another important issue and that's making sure that employees are happy and comfortable with the new ways of working that we've all been adjusting to over the last few months. As mentioned a moment ago, people are really facing really challenging times, a lot of doom and gloom since the pandemic took hold, and then we consider that people are being forced to stay at home whilst taking care of kids who are not going to school, you know, it's no surprise that the effects on mental health being caused by the virus are considerable, if through added stress, greater anxiety and longer spells of isolation being on your own at home.

The other day, I read some statistics from the Mental Health Foundation and they said that 10% of adults prior to the pandemic felt lonely and by early April, this had jumped to 24% as I think the effects of the lockdown and social distancing had taken hold. And I think the other thing as well is that the rate within young adults, so those under 25, has nearly tripled in that time. So, they were feeling lonely, 44% of them were feeling lonely. So, let's just let that sink in for a moment and think about your workforce. If you think about five junior members of your team, two of them are very likely feeling lonely during lockdown. And that's why I think considering people's isolation during these months has become so important, you know, for the foreseeable future as the workforce does continue to work from home, if they're unable to. Or if you're allowed back into the office and social distancing measures is obviously up high, it isn't going to be easy for people, you know, especially those that are already suffering mentally, as we've said.

Scott: And Alex, virtual team building, a new tool that has now had to be included in the box. Has this been a positive, if not unexpected early move, and what is your take on moving forwards?

Alex: If we think about some of the more positive steps that we can take to build a strong post pandemic workforce, I think the place to start would be some of the teams and departments that we have in our organisations. How groups of people work together and how teams work together is a critical part of operations, it can help with efficiency and productivity in any business. Collaboration and the exchange of ideas help teams become more than the sum of their parts and drive businesses on to success, but to do it, they need to understand each other and have a degree of clarity so that they can build strong working relationships. Doing that over the last few months is definitely being trickier with everyone working remotely, and it will continue for a while, but it's not impossible.

There are plenty of team building exercises you can use, whether conducted virtually or physical but in socially distant form. Think of all the enterprising people who've run virtual quiz nights over the last three months. Think of Joe Wicks running his PE classes every day. At some point in the future, the lockdown will come to an end, but that doesn't mean that these sorts of activities have to come to a complete end too. If anything, the lockdown has uncovered potential initiatives like these to bring people together in a brand new way. Virtual or socially distanced team building on the face of it sounds a bit corny and a bit forced, but bear in mind that most of your teams will have had relatively little communication with their colleagues over the last few months and would be champing at the bit to catch up with them. So, they're likely to be far more receptive to these types of ideas than they might otherwise have been in more normal circumstances. They'll also appreciate

managers and team leaders taking a proactive role in supporting those under and around them, which should generate a real feel good factor.

Scott: Thanks, Alex. So, in closing, caring for staff in the new world of work is very important as we start to come out of this episode. Maren, what's your view on enabling new ways of working?

Maren: So finally, I'd like to mention the opportunities for empowering your workforce by giving them greater flexibility in their working arrangements. Of course, during lockdown, everyone has been working from home because they'd been forced to, and many of them are doing it for the first time. As we've mentioned, this has been a really difficult time for some employees if their home arrangements are not conducive for home working. But for some, they have loved it. I mean, let's face it; there are lots of upsides to it. You don't have to face the commute. You know, no more stress caused by traffic jams or having your face jammed up someone's armpit on a packed train. So, if you can give your employees the opportunity to vary their working hours, then you'll allow them to achieve better work-life balance. And even if you can't give them the opportunity to vary their working hours, giving them the flexibility of where they do their work is hugely empowering.

So, I think that this applies across all jobs where you're working from a laptop or a computer. Employees will feel more positive about you as employer, they'll recommend you in the broader market, you will attract a much diverse and broader range of talent to your organisation. And I think therefore that offering flexible ways of working should be a priority for all organisations as we move in to this next stage of the pandemic, ensuring that we're taking the positive learnings during this period and continuing to reap the benefits that flexible ways of working offers employers and employees.

Outro: Thank you, and thanks to all our guests today: Alex, Tony, and Maren. We hope you've enjoyed listen to our podcast today on caring for staff in the new world of work. If you would like to get more expert insights on how your business can prosper post pandemic, you'll find more podcasts, blogs, and other helpful resources at our [Knowledge Hub](https://rsabroker.com/knowledge-hub) on rsabroker.com