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Rising Stars Lockdown Report

North West female business leaders speak of the pressures and challenges of lockdown - and fears of the long-term impact on gender equality in the workplace

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The challenges of lockdown for working women have been described in a new study on the impact of the last 100 days of coronavirus restrictions by a group of senior female business leaders.

The study was produced by the North West Business Leadership Team (NWBLT), an organisation which brings together leaders of national and international businesses with substantial commitments and interests in the North West of England.

For the last two years a group of female executives worked together to promote gender diversity and leadership across the Team. Each lead NWBLT member identified a female Rising Star with the potential of rising to the top of their business. They have been meeting virtually throughout lockdown, this report contains their frank and honest testimonies about 'living at work'.

Fresh from the easing of lockdown restrictions in England on July 4th, many in the group say they fear the impact of the pandemic on working women and on gender equality in businesses across the UK.

It mirrors national surveys on the crisis, including the Institute for Fiscal Studies report of May 2020 which found women have been disproportionately affected by the economic fallout of lockdown - with the worst hit sectors those that also employ the highest number of women.

Working mothers were 47 per cent more likely to have quit or lost their job than fathers, and 13 per cent more likely to have been furloughed since the start of lockdown. The survey also found working women still shoulder the bulk of the domestic load - combining paid work with other activities (mostly childcare) for 47 per cent of their time, compared to 30 per cent of the time for working fathers.

In open and revealing accounts of their lockdown experience, the working mothers in the Rising Stars group have revealed the impact of working full time from home while also effectively taking on full time childcare, home schooling and domestic tasks.

But the professionals have also highlighted some of the positives that can be gained from the unprecedented situation with home working and greater flexibility potentially a boost in the long term for women to advance their careers.

The Rising Stars members responded to a survey on the issues of lockdown. The key points are highlighted below:-

- Companies should consider Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which reflect each individual's situation and output, rather than hours worked.
- All those with children on the Group described the situation as "unsustainable" if schools do not return to "normality" in September.
- The group agreed that there needs to be greater understanding for the issues all workers have faced during the pandemic.
- For single mothers there has been the added pressure of working full time from home while taking on the entire burden of home schooling and domestic tasks without the support of a partner.
- Managing the furlough and potential redundancy process fairly is a key priority.
- The move to more home working and flexibility during lockdown was overwhelmingly seen as a positive for gender equality in the workplace if it is maintained moving forward – once childcare and schooling returns to pre-Covid levels. Now that companies have HAD to make it happen, many are seeing that it can work well.

INTERVIEWS

The interviews below were carried out by Dianne Bourne, Freelance Journalist (Ex Manchester Evening News) and mother of two.

Jane Healey Brown, director at Arup in Manchester, has been working from home since lockdown while home-schooling her two children. She said: “On a personal level I’d say it’s the most challenging situation for personal resilience I’ve ever had to encounter, primarily because of home schooling. If that were not part of the equation, the ability to work from home, the ability to engage with people would be much better, it would be much more manageable, but it’s the combination of the two that adds the extra level of pressure to the resilience challenge.”

Amanda Newman is senior manager at Accenture in Manchester and also runs the Career Mum website and Facebook group to support working

parents. Since lockdown she has seen a huge surge of comments from mums and dads struggling to cope with juggling work and childcare. Amanda has been working from home with her husband while home-schooling her four children throughout lockdown. She said: “My workplace has been brilliant, really understanding, any concerns I’ve expressed to any leadership they’ve told me to do what I need to do. However, it’s the pressure we put on ourselves and the fact that our peers and colleagues might have different circumstances and might not be impacted as much. I know my attention is split as it is for many and the juggle is tough. Prior to lockdown we had a part time nanny, grandparents, a cleaner, we had a lot

of support. But with isolation all of that support had to go and you do it all yourself. The work doesn’t go away and I’ve found there’s always jobs to do.

“What worries me is we’ve fought hard for the gender balance and organisations like the NWBLT and the rising stars group really support and empower women and really want to make a difference to executive and non-exec roles in the north west, but we could be in a position here when women go “this is just too hard, I need to step out” and then end up taking an unplanned career break. My ask is that people consider one day at a time and don’t make any emotional decisions based on current circumstances.”



Jane Healey Brown



Amanda Newman



Georgina Bryce



Urrffa Rafiq

Helen Rose, Integrated Business Planning Leader at Encirc, is a mum to two girls aged 4 and 6, and lives in Chester with her husband who also works at the company. They have been combining work from home with working in the office while co-parenting their children through lockdown. She said: “I have on many occasions thought if the schools aren’t opening until September this isn’t sustainable, this isn’t worth it, it would be better if I wasn’t working at all. For a long time I couldn’t see the light at the end of the tunnel.

“I speak to a lot of other parents (mums and dads) about the inability to return to the office when peers are.

“There has to be something put in place to allow parents to go back to work. Presenteeism might be unfair, but it does exist. So how can we ensure we don’t create an unconscious bias against those who simply can’t be in the office?

“We can’t get parents – men and women – working properly until children are back at school and we absolutely have to do something for the sake of mental wellbeing of children, there’s nobody telling me that their child is excelling or thriving in this environment.”

Georgina Bryce, is a director at professional services firm, PwC in Manchester and lives with her 4-year-old and 6-year-old. She said: “In general I’ve had to jump around quite a lot - jumping from doing home schooling first thing in the morning before I start my day, then into work at 9am when calls start. I’ll have a half hour call then check the kids are alright, see if they need anything, jump back onto work, take a call while making lunch; it does feel quite difficult to sit down and do blocks of work when you’re not on a call or dealing with the kids. It has been very challenging.

“The quiet time is the evening, I get them to bed relatively early, that’s the one time I feel I can catch up on work, but it doesn’t help with work life balance because it feels like you’re full on every day.

“My kids have just started back at school, and it has been a game changer - being able to work effectively and efficiently during the day and not have to worry about home schooling.

Georgina Bryce believes lessons learned from remote working – and the huge rise in video conferencing – could be a game changer in future in reducing the needs for travel. She said: “I think people will work from home more

now because they know they can, the systems work, the infrastructure works. I think it will be a lot more accepted of senior people. Where people would have jumped on a plane for client meetings in Italy or France in the past; I don’t think that will be the default anymore. I think a lot of that can be done with video conferencing.”

Urrffa Rafiq, from Cheadle Hulme, is a director at professional services firm Isio in Manchester and is a single mum. She has been working from home throughout lockdown while home-schooling her 10-year-old daughter. She said: “I’m hopeful that lockdown gives us an opportunity to review the real value of our work and how we measure performance. On a side by side comparison, a woman doing 40 hours per week might not be viewed as positively as someone logging on at 7am and doing a 15 hour day. It’s not just about giving extra credit to someone who has ‘really put a shift in’. This risks alienating high performance people, many of whom are women, who have to shoehorn in additional roles as head chef, housekeeper and maid. These unpaid jobs have grown in size in lockdown and many of us now have home teacher to add to our work load.



Fiona Wright

“So how can we ensure that people are being measured appropriately, not just on the hours they are doing? From my perspective, I want to see a focus on what really counts. For example, hitting profitability targets is more important than spending hours producing weighty power point documents.

“Externally, there are a lot of firms making a lot of noise about offering flexible working and accommodating working mothers but I want to know that these words translate into making sure women are measured fairly and equally to their male counterparts now and in future.”

Stephanie Trubshaw, customer director at energy firm ENWL also believes it will open doors to more women applying for jobs knowing there is more flexibility.

Stephanie, as a key worker, has continued working at her offices across the north west throughout lockdown - but ENWL were able to get 50 per cent of their employees working from home. She said: “The best thing of all has been the shift to home working - our organisation already did lots of flexible working, shifts and part time working, but there was a reluctance or worry to go to more flexibility in terms of working from home. But now why should people work the same 8-5 shift and have to sit in the traffic across the

north west at the wrong times? Our whole executive team is fully on board that this has worked, they have seen the success of it so why would we return to the old? How can we get to the point where actually people can do the first couple of meetings on Skype in the morning then go into the office so there is flexibility with childcare? Why do people have to physically be visible all the time? You don't - you need to create a balance for everybody. That's the massive positive we've gone through in that period of learning. The challenges that people have faced has brought us to see that we have to be different, and the situation has allowed it.

“I think the fact that people are not being stuck to set hours will open the doors for more women to actually apply for roles. Giving people the ability to manage their own lives will create far more people wanting to work for us which is great for recruitment.”

Fiona Wright is change director – terminals and customer at Manchester Airport Group, dealing with the unprecedented disruption to the aviation industry and the uncertainty of the future felt across a workforce. “For those who are on furlough we wanted to make sure

they knew that being away from the business during this unprecedented time was no reflection on them as individuals or their value to our organisation. The disruption the aviation industry has faced has been immense, like nothing we have ever seen before and we furloughed people in the fairest way we possibly could.

“The situation is challenging for both sides – it's challenging for the business and the people – it has to constantly involve conversations with individuals.”

Amanda Newman adds: “As leaders we've got a responsibility to be even more clear with communication. Working remotely and seeing the impact of that in my team, people are feeling more vulnerable, imposter syndrome might be creeping in, or if they're not included they start to question what was the intent. As leaders it's really important that we communicate more than ever. Be very clear in our communication. If someone does need coaching be brave and have that discussion. If you're deciding to reduce someone's workload or leave them out of a discussion because it might help them - tell them that.”



Sue Bagguley



Claire Rick

Sue Bagguley, head of business development for Siemens Digital Industries in UK and Ireland, said: “This is probably one of the only times we’ve ever been in where every single person has a unique situation. I genuinely don’t believe that blanket policies are going to be supportive to making people feel included or excluded. One of the worst things we could do would be to update all our HR policies and cascade those down I genuinely think this is about individuals and their managers taking a shared responsibility to make it work for the individual and for the business – if it works for the individual it works for the company. That in itself has the potential to have a positive influence for the future if it’s done right with sensitivity in mind because that is going to be the way we work.”

Claire Rick is head of public affairs at medical centre buildings company Assura in Warrington which has remained busy through lockdown – but with the entire workforce switching to home working.

“The demographic in our business is a lot of people have very young children and I’ve been acutely aware just how hard it has been and people are doing piecemeal bits of work here there and everywhere to get what they can do done, the commitment has been fantastic, seeing people still trying to get through an awful lot on top of everything else they are juggling.

“I know my experience of lockdown as a mum has been quite different and you might say I’m very lucky in many respects but we were in a position that my husband had finished his last work project last and then this happened so he put his next project on pause and he has made himself into our six-year-old’s teacher and has been taking very much the exclusive lead role on that.

“The great thing from my view is being able to see it from both sides - there are people in our business who are single parents, a lot of women with young children and working around schooling/childcare. The approach taken as a business has been do what you can, tell us if you’re struggling, we can see what everyone is having to deal with, everyone has found that enormously reassuring.”

Jane Healey Brown said: “The one thing I really feel about all this is that we may all be in the same storm but are all in very different boats - and even within households there are different boats that people are occupying.

“This is the part of our history that we will be asked about, our children will be asked about, just as people talk about the war, this is that moment of history and it’s how we then respond to that, and how we move things forward in the longer term.”

But for many of the working mums, what is getting them through the huge challenges and continuing to strive in their career is the lasting impact it will have on the next generation.

Helen Rose said: “ I don’t want my children thinking that women don’t belong in the workplace, my girls know mummy goes to work and for them to be proud of that - I don’t want them to be resenting that. Their experience of the workplace now is that mummy goes to work and when she goes to work we can’t do anything. We can’t have fun, we can’t go in the paddling pool. What I don’t want is my little girls resenting that I work.”

For those women who are feeling the pressure though and considering taking a career break, Amanda said to take the right steps now to make it easier to resume your career in future.

“Have those support networks, know who you’ve got to support and coach you when you’re struggling,” she said. “Also having the courage to talk about how it really is because knowing you’re not alone really feels empowering - that what you’re feeling is not unique and you just need to get through this one day and tomorrow will be better. What I’d hate is for women to pack it all up on a whim because this week has been difficult. Think of the long game.”