

PROGRESS

LOCKDOWN 2.0: STAYING THE COURSE



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THE COMING WEEKS WILL BE CRITICAL FOR BUSINESS. **ROSIE MURRAY-WEST** ASKS THE EXPERTS HOW TO EMERGE UNSCATHED

PIVOT, refocus, open, close... Britain's business owners are facing an emotional and financial assault as they navigate a second lockdown without any certainty over when they will be able to operate normally again.

While further financial support – including furlough, now extended to March – was announced last week, businesses must work out how they can best operate through this lockdown, and for the rest of winter, how to keep motivated themselves and how to support their staff.

Sadie Hopson, workplace wellbeing consultant at weworkwell.co.uk, says that many are now approaching burnout. 'The announcement of a second lockdown has sent many people spiralling into more uncertainty and apprehension,' she explains. 'Chronic stress and anxiety typically have a huge impact on our energy levels and it is at this point that even the most resilient individuals may be starting to show the signs of emotional exhaustion.'

The next few weeks will be paramount for many company's financial survival as well as their staff and owners' mental health. Here, the experts talk about how to tackle lockdown two, lessons from lockdown one, and on how to keep going this winter.

Ditch the toxic productivity

Dr Rachael Kent is a lecturer in Digital Economy & Society Education at King's College London. She says her research into the effects of lockdown one revealed that business owners and their staff felt huge pressure to be extra productive during lockdown, with many people feeling they had to 'make the most' of extra time afforded to them – because they weren't commuting – to do more work and to be more productive in their hobbies, too.

'This is a real challenge, as actually people didn't have more time and it made them unhappy,' she says. 'Against the backdrop of stress caused by pandemic anxiety and seasonal hibernation it will be tough for people to do anything. It's really important that business owners don't push staff to see lockdown as a time to do extra things.'

Instead, Dr Kent (@DrDigi_Health) suggests that business owners and their staff commit to being more intentional about their phone use ('don't pick it up just to scroll through it') and to set clear boundaries about work/non-work time.

Change your schedule (and your employees')

While lockdown one coincided with light evenings, the next few weeks will see most of us clocking off in the dark. Sadie, at



PHOTO: REX

weworkwell.co.uk, suggests ensuring that everyone gets a break in the daytime so that they can get out while it is light.

'Employers must consider the very different challenges associated with being locked down in the winter, encouraging people to take breaks to leave the house during the day to get Vitamin D and fresh air, helping them overcome challenges by staying active and motivated and practically helping them cope with the changing seasons – perhaps by investing in a light box and supplements,' she says.

Reflect on lockdown one

If you pivoted online during lockdown one, only to unpivot again, take a little time before you rush back, says Emma Mills-Sheffield, business productivity and performance coach at mindsetup.co.uk. 'To find the energy to "repivot",

don't react hastily. If you've done this already for the first lockdown then reflect on how you approached it. Does a new pivot align to your business strategy? If not, reserve your energy for what's important. If you pivot, then plan it methodically to get a sense of achievement as you make progress. This will naturally help with energy and motivation,' she says.

'To see the second lockdown as a new opportunity, be clear on what's been working, what hasn't and how you might seize opportunity faster this time around. Use the metrics from sales, business performance and employee engagement to see how you might adapt.'

Make time for Zoom chats (even if you're tired of them)

After the video call fatigue of lockdown one (who can face another

Zoom quiz?), it's easy to think that no one wants to chat online any more. But Dr Kent, from Kings College, says her study shows that this type of digital engagement is still good for business and mental health, despite more general digital fatigue.

'It is more tech, but it is also more normality,' she says. 'Seeing people's faces on Zoom is important. She says that colleague Zoom chats, when scheduled regularly but not to discuss work issues, will help create cohesion and engagement.'

Use the time wisely if you can't work normally

Not every business is able to operate in lockdown. If you are in events, hospitality or the arts, it can feel that every avenue is closed to you.

Katie Beardsworth runs Polyphony Arts (polyphonyarts.com), a classical

music management organisation that has changed its focus during the pandemic to helping musicians to build different career structures to deal with the 'new normal'.

She says that those whose usual workplaces closed can focus on building an internet presence, and by turning to their existing networks for support.

'Musicians, in particular, often operate in a silo and don't think about the value of their networks,' she says, advising them to explore using crowdfunding sites such as Patreon in order to build a revenue stream. 'It's also good to ensure you have an accountability buddy to get through this time.'

'Think about something in your career you could focus on now and get help with it. Choose a specific goal and take steps towards it.'

'We doubled in size in lockdown, staying personal is key'

PRIVATE tutor Jemma Smith (above) runs The Education Hotel. She was working with GCSE students when lockdown hit, and once exams were cancelled, her work dried up virtually overnight.

However, disrupted education meant demand for online tutoring, and by working with new tutors and families, Jemma has doubled her business and reached the finals of the Great British Entrepreneur Awards.

This lockdown, she says she is putting in to practice what she learned from the last one.

'Stay personal,' she says. 'Everyone who joins the Education Hotel is called by me personally. In times like lockdown a quick phone call or ten minutes on Skype can go a long way.'

'As soon as the lockdown was announced, our

team started calling our clients and finding out how we can help.' She is also giving resources away to try to engage customers who are at home.

'We have been working to produce a members' area of our website where our clients can go and download free resources written by our tutors.'

'It costs us time to write and to set up this page but it means that we are able to offer more value,' she explains.

Jemma is also concentrating on a new subscription box offer aimed at supporting revision – schoolboxes.com – after deciding that diversifying will also help her to survive lockdown two.

'It will help my tutors and myself to have another stream of income,' she explains.

■ educationhotel.co.uk



Remember there are positives

Many experts believe that there will be positive outcomes from the new ways of working we are experiencing now. Dr Kent, at King's College London, says that many younger staff have commented favourably on the flatter hierarchical structures created by remote working. 'They find it quite liberating,' she explains.

Katie, at Polyphony Arts, adds that she believes the graduates of the pandemic may be kinder and more collegiate because they have had to work together to get through this.

'Peers have become really important at this time. If it makes for a more supportive environment that is a good thing.'

'We prepared for 2.0 with work from home Wednesdays'

RUBY RAUT (right) who runs period pants business Wuka, restored significant normality to her business over the summer, as well as taking on new staff and growing her customer base.

The company kept working during lockdown one, but with more staff based at home. 'Just the week before lockdown we had launched in Sainsbury's in 214 stores so it was crazy busy and as an essential product we had to keep working,' she says.

'Quite a lot happened when things went temporarily back to normal and we now have six staff.' Despite enjoying having

everyone in the office, Ruby knew Wuka needed to go online again.

'A few weeks ago, we started #workfromhomewednesday, so that we'd get used to using tech such as Slack and Zoom more frequently,' she explains.

'This saved an hour for a workout which we lost during travelling. We organised live online yoga for our team, which we will probably bring back. There are drawbacks of not being in the same room, like not being able to discuss problems or share ideas instantly. But this lockdown will teach us new skills.'

■ wuka.co.uk



'Lockdown two has taught me that I need to future-proof more'

RUTH CHUBB (inset), who runs the Three Bears Cookery Club in Derbyshire, pivoted to running her children's classes online back in April. While online classes have been successful, Ruth had hoped to be back in primary schools in January, and now feels that this won't happen while primary school bubbles are in place. 'It means more uncertainty for the coming months,' she says.

'I do worry about the future of our business and how we are going to survive many more months of uncertainty, and with this worry I decided I needed to future-proof the

business further. I launched a kid's baking subscription box at the beginning of November. The subscription box is perfect for busy parents to bake with their kids in their own time, they receive everything they need, dry ingredients for one recipe, plus access to our pre-recorded videos so they can bake along with us.

'My advice to anyone else is to try things, think outside the box, fail fast and ultimately do what you need to do to survive. It is tough but you learn so much from doing – if it doesn't work, tweak it so it does.'

■ threebearscookeryclub.com

