

Case study: Working through Coronavirus



“Together we kept sight of the goals – we made sure everyone was safe, treated well and supported – all within the parameters of practical considerations and commercial decisions.”

Whatever your profession, you'll have a set of resources and tools that serve you well, particularly when you face a challenge or find yourself in uncharted territory. In HR this is no different and I find that my 'go to support system' is a combination of communications and empathy. Nothing could test my theory more than working through the Covid-19 pandemic with my client Smart-Space.

Smart-Space is a Midlands-based business that supplies instant buildings across the UK and has a directly employed team of approximately 40 people. I have been working with the Managing Director, Antony Hunt, and his team, for almost a year now on a range of HR measures, some routine and others more complex. Some of the team are office based and some are based on client sites, erecting buildings.

As soon as we heard the Covid-19 rumblings, and ever since, we have worked together more tightly and with a dedication to the two key areas that the pandemic has thrown into sharper focus: 1) staff well-being, health and safety and 2) managing the team for maximum engagement and business efficiencies.

It is probably true to say that the pandemic has presented us all with issues, problems and considerations that we've not encountered before. My reflexes are quite reliable and so I pulled out those big guns – communications and empathy. I find that if you talk to everyone and take time to understand how they are reacting individually to a new, uncomfortable set of circumstances then you are already on the right track. It also helps that the team at Smart Space is very people focused.

Working with Smart-Space we approached everything pragmatically and with a degree of caution. Right from the outset we decided that transparency was key. The key points of all of our discussions were relayed to the staff through regular communications updates, even when we didn't know the answers.

As the pandemic gathered pace and lockdown was announced, we increased our communication level and worked closely using email, phone and virtual conference facilities. We set up a team to navigate through the emerging situation: both in respect of business operations and management of the staff. Anyone who could work from home was supported as they established a home office and there was a lot of work undertaken in enabling access to all of the company's IT systems.

Researching and learning quickly, I was able to advise the team and work with them, usually on a daily basis, until we were confident we were doing everything we could to make this difficult period as safe as possible, whilst offering reassurances and keeping an eye on the future of Smart-Space. It was a juggle! There was, and still is, a lot to do. Operationally Smart-Space hasn't stopped work so the senior team there is keeping things going whilst managing the additional dimension of the pandemic.



We metaphorically opened the doors to everyone in the business. The closing words of every communication from the MD reminded everyone of his open-door policy and mobile phone number. Individual conversations were made a priority. Group meetings were essential to bring all of the parts of the business together so everyone understood their role and the manner in which it would be executed, given the guidelines and limitations in place. For some time we had group planning meetings at 8am every day.

Eventually it became necessary to furlough a few of the staff. Despite this being a difficult decision for the whole team, I was able to steer the management team towards and through this – compliantly and with a lot of the aforementioned empathy. We worked through the different perspectives of everyone involved. We recognised how people might feel undervalued at being furloughed (not the case but that's how they might feel) and that others might feel peeved that they were still at work (understandable). We navigated this smoothly and, despite it being an uncomfortable experience, it was the right decision and helped the business financially for just a few short weeks.

It is part of Smart-Space's culture to look out for each other but they really rose to meet this particular challenge head on. They totally embraced the need for individual conversations and made sure that everyone was well supported. For those who were furloughed, they were helped to continue to feel part of the team through regular updates and friendly chats. The company's inherent camaraderie made everything so much more natural and seamless.

Furloughing some of the team prompted us to set up a comprehensive training facility that allowed everyone (not just furloughed staff) to access courses: both refreshers and also to learn brand new things. This additional learning and development benefits Smart-Space into the future but also provided some structure and value for every member of staff. We were very mindful of those

people in the team who did not want to be furloughed and missed the discipline of their working day. It was really welcomed – by every level of the team and across very department.

Whilst we worked very hard to make sure the team was well looked after, safe, engaged and with some training provision, we also had to think about the day-to-day mechanics brought about by this universal crisis. There was a lot to digest and communicate. Everything was shaped around a changing backdrop of government guidelines and legislation.

Regrouping and making sure everything was on track for every person, every department and for the present and future guises of Smart-Space was essential.

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic I have recognised a further essential tool that we can all use in any eventuality and that is common sense. We can look at what is in front of us and deal with it with excellent communications, a keen sense of empathy and understanding - all made good with common sense.

We'll continue to monitor and regroup, responding to changes as they are announced, moving slowly forwards to the 'new normal' and whatever that brings. As the balance of HR work shifts from pandemic-related back to the more usual projects, we'll chalk this up to experience and be ready to apply lessons learned in any future challenges.

“Personally I'd have been totally lost without Debra taking the lead in the communications, her knowledge is vast and current. She is clear in her explanations and actions we need to follow. I admire her efficiency in turning around the well-written letters, emails and telephone calls. Nothing is too much trouble.”

Lee Brightmore, Finance Manager

