

The Business of Fashion

BoF



Fashion Is Working From Home. How to Make It Work.

By Robin Mellery-Pratt and Sophie Soar

businessoffashion.com

White Paper

Eighty-five percent of fashion professionals are now working from home. **BoF Careers** examines how leaders and managers can optimise their teams, culture and processes to survive and thrive in the coronavirus context.

April 2020

Executive Summary



Source: Getty Images

At present, more than a fifth of the world's population is under lockdown measures in a bid to stem the continuing spread of the coronavirus. Tragically, at time of publication, the respiratory disease has an estimated death toll of between 130,000 and 140,000 and has infected millions of people worldwide.

Alongside the loss of life, the financial impact of this sudden disruption to modern life has resulted in a deep economic contraction not seen in generations, leading to widespread job losses and furloughs of millions of workers around the world.

What's more, the fashion workplace has migrated from city centre offices and studios to employees' homes, almost overnight. While the strictest lockdown measures in Europe and the US may be lifted in the coming weeks, it will be some time before offices re-open entirely, and there will be a new work-from-home culture that endures long after the pandemic is behind us. Fashion companies that want to survive and thrive in this new landscape must evolve and empower their workforce to adopt and execute new skills necessary to succeed.

For business leaders and entrepreneurs, this will require a significant shift in mindset and daily operations. In a 2019 BoF Careers survey, only 45 percent of fashion's workforce felt their employer was committed to offering flexible working arrangements. Six months later, 85 percent of respondents to the BoF Community Survey in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic reported they were working from home.

In this BoF Careers White Paper, we share data-driven insights from our community and expert interviews to better understand operational challenges and opportunities offered by working from home. This paper also seeks to understand how individuals and teams can remain productive while working remotely and how to implement learnings from the crisis when the industry emerges from enforced isolation and a new remote working culture endures in a post-coronavirus world.

01. How to Manage Remotely

Business leaders and managers must motivate teams to maintain an efficient level of output from employees. A deeper understanding of your workforce is essential, as well as off-project bonding opportunities.

“Before, we worked virtually because we wanted to. The important thing leaders and managers have to do is have a conversation. Recognise that this is not business as usual and don’t try to treat it that way.”

— Mark Mortensen

Without having eyes on direct reports and given the delayed feedback loop of asynchronous online communication, managing a team remotely and maintaining levels of productivity can be very challenging — especially for those managing global teams.

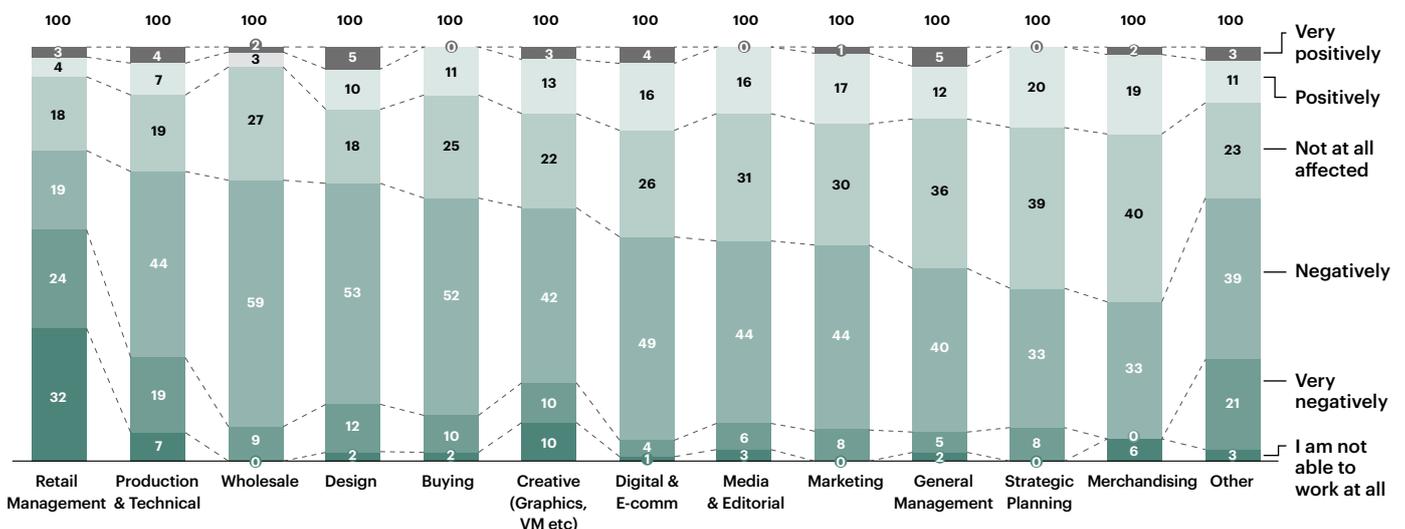
BoF’s Community Survey found that 60 percent of respondents experienced a negative impact on their personal productivity since the outbreak of the virus. In order for fashion businesses to maintain their performance standards, managers must proactively mitigate the challenges inherent in working from home.

They should begin by being mindful of the difference between working remotely and working remotely as a result of Covid-19, says Mark Mortensen, associate professor of organisational behaviour at INSEAD.

Exhibit 1: Fashion employees working across job functions have reported a negative impact on personal productivity during the crisis, with some unable to work at all.

Employee responses to “How has your personal productivity in your job been affected since the outbreak of Covid-19?”

Percent (%)



Source: BoF Community Survey: The Impact of Covid-19, March 2020

“Before, we worked virtually because we wanted to. The important thing leaders and managers have to do is have a conversation. Recognise that this is not business as usual and don’t try to treat it that way,” he explains.

Mortensen highlights two main stumbling blocks in virtual working: a lack of shared understanding and a lack of shared identity. Both create risks of miscommunication and misunderstanding: a lack of awareness of an individual employee’s new work/life conditions – for example, if they have children or don’t have a dedicated working space at home – limits the necessary understanding about why their email responses are delayed or their digital tone of voice has changed. They may simply be experiencing greater distractions due to their individual circumstances at home – something all managers must seek to understand.

While camaraderie can be built around the objectives and key results teams share in doing their work, creating a genuine sense of shared identity requires off-project bonding. This helps to increase engagement and empathy amongst co-workers. However, individuals have different thresholds of comfort with virtual social interaction.

“You have to replace the social elements of an office that come for free. It is the grease that makes the machine work. I would encourage managers to pull more than push,” suggests Mortensen. Create opportunities that employees can opt into that enable off-project bonding, such as organising a trivia night or a working parents’ WhatsApp group, rather than forcing employee bonding online.

Managers must also shift from a micromanaging mindset to a micro-monitoring one, relinquishing the desire to control every creation stage of a project or product by placing greater trust in their teams. “The best way you build trust is predictability. If someone has routinely produced work that is solid, now is the time to make tough calls and trust what they are saying,” says Mortensen.



Mark Mortensen
Associate Professor of
Organisational Behaviour,
INSEAD

Mortensen consults on team dynamics, global collaboration, power and social networks, and organisational change. His work has featured in the likes of Harvard Business Review, The Economist and The Boston Globe.

“Time zones are a classic issue we’ve wrestled with for years. How do we manage this as effectively as possible? First, when you have meetings, schedule them regularly so people can plan for them and expect them. Second, you have to think about how to share the load.

When you are working with people who are in different geographies, that can mean one of you will have to do a video conference

at an uncomfortable hour. Headquarters always gets the nice comfortable times and the field sites get the times no one wants, which is great if you want to create a strong power imbalance.

You’ve got to rotate the pain. That’s how you build trust within the team and help people to work together to generate a better outcome.

But make sure you have a conversation first. It’s not just about balancing what’s mechanically happening but about balancing the experience, which means you have to first find out what is better or worse for you and your employees.”

Image source: Courtesy

02. How to Communicate With Your Employees

Employers need to adopt the right tone of voice, method of communication and level of transparency to reassure and inform their workforce. Companies should look to implement bottom-up as well as top-down feedback loops and communication channels.

The speed at which businesses have had to adjust to remote working requires clear and frequent communication in order to keep employees engaged. What's more, many employers are confronted with sharing bad news with employees, be that around financial losses, job cuts or, in some cases, health-related tragedies.

"During any crisis, it is critical first and foremost to communicate support for employees. In the case of Covid-19, both company actions and communications should be centred around the health and safety of their staff," says Kate Bullinger, president of organisation consultancy firm United Minds.

"Leaders need to demonstrate empathy, provide reassurance, give support and, above all, be transparent. Companies should be honest about what they are seeing in the business and the industry and demonstrate the ways in which they are planning for the future. Ideally, this will include steps to minimise impact to their teams," she continues.

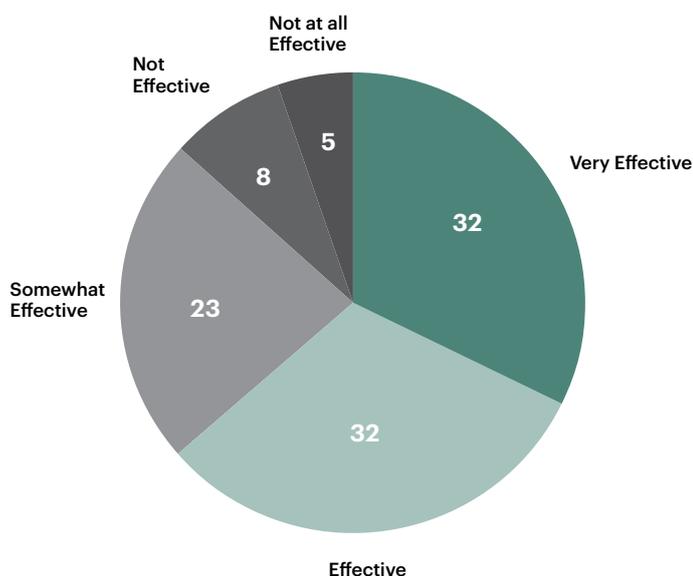
It is also important to distinguish communication channels as formal or informal, clearly signposting to employees what is essential reading or more community building. "Via email, we have daily communication in line with government directives, so everyone has the information they need if they are not feeling well," Julietta Dexter, founder and chief executive of The Communications Store, shared in a recent BoF Live event. "Then, we've adopted channels like Slack to communicate every morning and evening a message of hope, good wishes or even humour."

Holding larger scale meetings can also offer a sense of community, even if not everyone is an active participant. "Some people are shy or too scared to talk in larger meetings, so I used to hold smaller meetings of two or three people at a time," says *Vogue Italia* Editor-in-Chief Emanuele Farneti. "Now, we feel the need for larger meetings of around 40 people — not everyone joins in an active way, but I think they appreciate being closer."

Exhibit 2: Fashion employees are mainly satisfied with the effectiveness of their company's internal communications.

Employee responses to "How effective do you feel your company has been with internal communications in response to the Covid-19 crisis?"

Percent (%)



Source: BoF Community Survey: The Impact of Covid-19, March 2020

How and what leaders communicate at present offers essential guidance for their more junior members of staff, meaning clear and consolidated narratives are critical.

“Where possible, your CEO should be the central voice, both in the good times and the bad times. It’s important that leaders take ownership of a crisis situation and seek to instil confidence and show empathy,” says Bullinger. “This is where transparency is critical – be proactive and forthcoming about the circumstances and demonstrate the steps you are taking to move forward.”

Indeed, while you must have clear top-down communications, providing an opportunity for employees to share feedback and constructive criticism can also release tensions generated by fear and uncertainty.

“Companies that have already established employee feedback mechanisms will have an advantage as it will be easier for them

to identify and manage potential issues before they become a problem,” adds Bullinger. “Listening will be just as, if not more, important than reacting since it will help you address concerns internally before they become external, potentially get ahead of misinformation, or quickly respond to feedback before it boils over.”



Kate Bullinger
President, United Minds

Bullinger partners with clients to design strategies that maximise their leadership effectiveness and organisational performance through the in-house consultancy at Weber Shandwick. Prior to United Minds, she set up the global Employee Engagement and Change Management at Weber Shandwick.

“In times of crisis, you will be measured by how you treat your people, your customers and the community at large. You might make some communication missteps, but if you start with the right actions, communicating those will have less risk. It’s important to lead with purpose and

to demonstrate how your decisions and actions are applications of your core values.

While crisis planning might seem like an oxymoron, having established processes in place and cultivating a culture of preparedness will help you react quickly and appropriately. Listening will be just as, if not more, important than reacting, since it will help you address concerns internally before they become external.”

Image source: Courtesy

03. How to Use Remote Working Tools

Businesses must enable digital collaboration with clear parameters on how to use different tools, eliminate jargon around deadlines and harness virtual brainstorming.

Now that the initial scramble to provide employees with internet access and technology to assimilate office-like connectivity through virtual tools is well in progress, there is an immediate need to equip workers with the skills to use digital platforms effectively to nurture impactful online collaboration and communication.

The first essential step for effective digital collaboration is “choosing the right channel” from the various options available, says Erica Dhawan, founder and chief executive of consultancy group Cotential. She highlights three considerations for choosing the right method of contact.

The first is the length of your message — “if it’s a brief two-liner, a quick instant message makes sense, but when it requires more context, use email or video call.”

Second, you must assess the complexity of the information, whether “it’s a simple yes or no,” in which instant messenger should suffice, “or if it requires visual presentations, PDFs or screen sharing.” In these cases, it is better to use email or an online meeting format like Zoom, which has a chat function to allow for real-time feedback.

Third, you need to consider familiarity. “In any communication with another person, we’re answering two questions: who has more or less power, so how formal are we? And how close are we in terms of the intimacy of our relationship?” Indeed, not only does the power dynamic affect which channel to use for communication, but it also requires a careful consideration of tone and being conscious that suggestions can be wrongfully translated into direct requests if coming down the hierarchy chain.

Miscommunication can also arise around deadlines for both small and large-scale projects. “With the inundation of more meetings and emails, we’ve lost the meaning of deadlines. We say things like, ‘noonish,’ ‘by the end of the week,’ or ‘I need to get this ASAP.’ But it’s vague and we don’t have that back and forth to check in,” says Dhawan, who advises soliciting input from others first through sharing polls before a meeting or having

“In any communication with another person, we’re answering two questions: who has more or less power, so how formal are we? And how close are we in terms of the intimacy of our relationship?”

— Erica Dhawan

79%
of BoF Community Survey respondents report an increase in video conferencing

2x
Increase in number of daily Slack users

100%
Increase in Zoom share price since January 31

Source: BoF Community Survey: The Impact of Covid-19, March 2020; The State of Fashion 2020: Coronavirus Update

a quick discussion to collate opinions. Clear meeting recaps and asking people to confirm they have an understanding of next steps is also key.

While remote collaboration raises new challenges, it can also offer an opportunity for more voices to be heard when harnessed appropriately. “People are used to having their first generation of ideas in meetings, but the fashion industry has to get skilled on the power of virtual brainstorming,” says Dhawan.

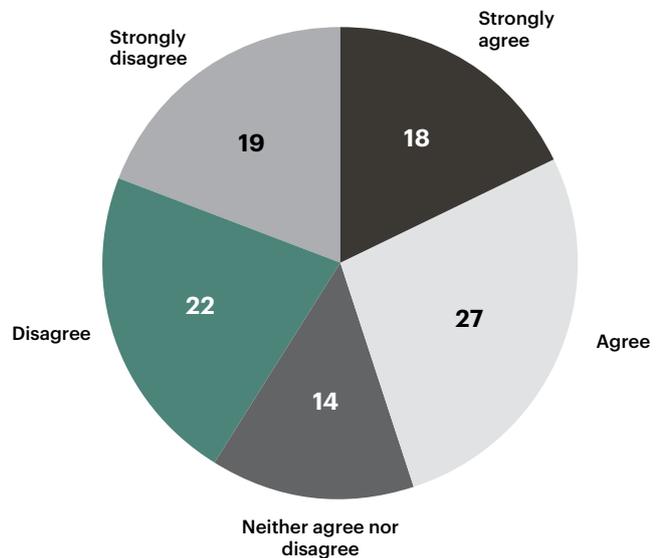
“You can use the chat functionality on video meetings to gather input, especially between introverts and extroverts, women versus men – personalities across the board. People have individual work time first to generate ideas, then when they come together, we are not [so] reliant on unconscious biases that allow certain people to be the loudest on a video call or the fastest to respond to emails,” she adds.

Finally, ensuring employees have a chance to recharge and process information following digital meetings is fundamental to long-term success. “It [has] obviously taken us a few weeks to get the ducks in order. I have had days when I do back-to-back meetings and after the first two weeks, I realised it’s not sustainable. Even those few minutes when you walk from one meeting room to the next gives you a sense of taking yourself away rather than closing one browser window and opening the next,” says Ida Petersson, director of men’s and womenswear buying for Browns.

Exhibit 3: Pre-crisis, only 45 percent of fashion employees felt their employers supported flexible working arrangements.

Responses to “My employer is committed to meeting employee needs by offering flexible working.”

Percent (%)



Source: BoF Fashion Employee Survey, October 2019



Erica Dhawan
 Founder and Chief Executive,
 Cotential

Dhawan’s firm advises the likes of Estée Lauder, Walmart and FedEx. She is also a keynote speaker on the subject of digital collaboration. In 2015, she published her first book, Get Big Things Done: The Power of Connectional Intelligence.

“People are used to having their first generation of ideas in meetings, but working virtually is creating a context shift: there are now deep pockets of individual work and then collaboration. The best diversity of creative ideas comes from individuals doing solo work first.

I truly believe virtual brainstorming can be even more powerful than face-to-face

brainstorming because we are not at first reliant on the unconscious biases that allow certain people to be the greatest voice in making decisions. Virtual brainstorming can create psychological safety, so you can post anonymous comments and questions digitally if you don’t want to sound like the naysayer. Then, we can go deeper in substance in different ways.

Nothing substitutes the power of a face-to-face conversation but what I know is that the future of digital work is here and it’s here for the fashion industry.”

Image source: Courtesy

04. How to Reallocate Work Across Teams

Redistributing employees to support teams with greater relevance or increased strain during the crisis requires close attention to specific employee abilities and additional support from managers.

With remote working, some job functions have been severely hindered or rendered obsolete in lockdown. Fifty-one percent of respondents to the BoF Community Survey reported a reduction in workload since the emergence of Covid-19, with retail, creatives, general management, design and production the five fashion job functions reporting the highest reduction in workload, leaving employees feeling demotivated and underutilised.

Some companies have implemented immediate job cuts and furloughs. Indeed, more than a third of director, c-level and business owner respondents indicated their company has planned for layoffs of existing employees. Neiman Marcus, PVH, Macy's, Away, TJX, Kohl's, Capri Holdings and Sephora are just some examples of companies that have used such measures.

A further 93 percent of senior respondents indicated their company has placed a temporary or indefinite hold on hiring.

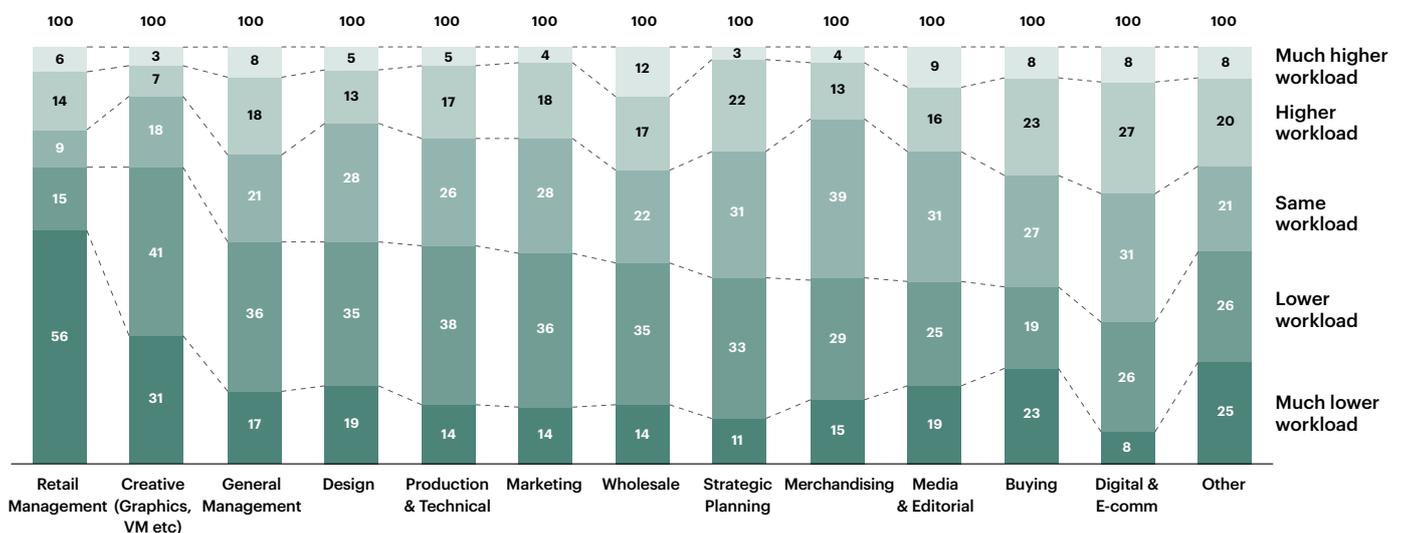
Others, like Valentino and Huda Beauty, have pledged to not make any Covid-19-related layoffs. In reality, this requires adjusting employees' existing roles for the new working reality or reallocating work from other teams who may be experiencing higher workloads. But this requires careful consideration and sensitivity.

“When assessing employee-task fit, it's critical to break down the task into the specific activities involved. Assessing fit based on a job title, or even a standard job description, is likely to lead to poor results,” says Chris Yeh, co-founder of Allied Talent and co-author of *The Alliance: Managing Talent in the*

Exhibit 4: Fashion employees working across job functions have reported a negative impact on workload during the crisis, with some unable to work at all.

Employee responses to “How has your department’s workload changed in recent weeks due to the emergence of Covid-19, if at all?”

Percent (%)



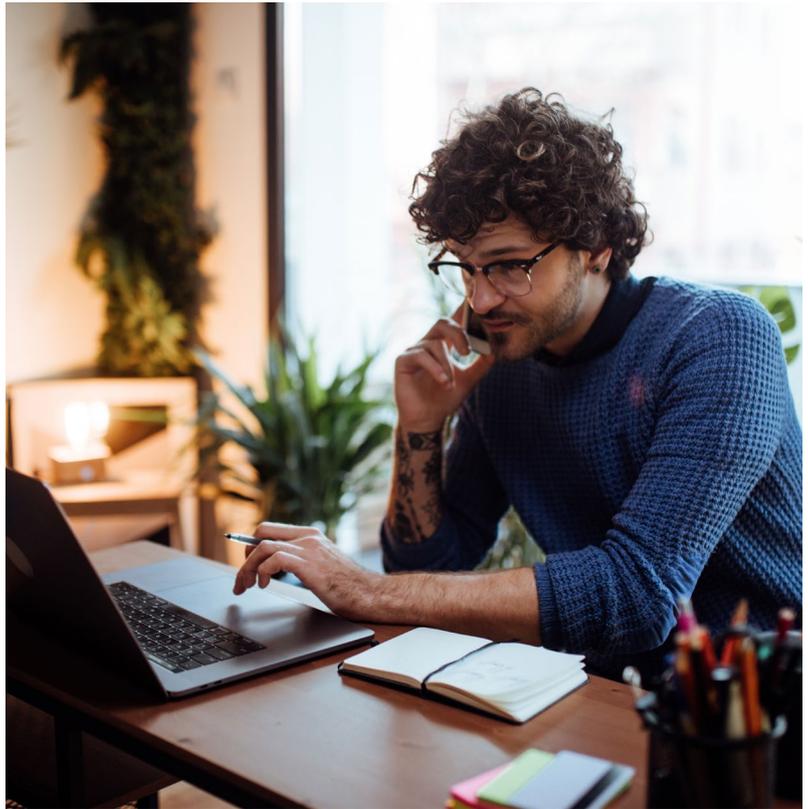
Source: BoF Community Survey: The Impact of Covid-19, March 2020

Networked Age. “Get down to a level of detail such as, ‘must be able to have unstructured 15-minute conversations with potential customers and add a 250-word report on their buying criteria to the CRM system within one hour of conversation completion.’”

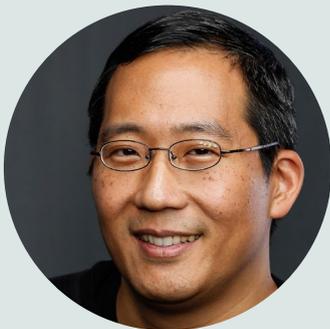
However, employers should act with caution when refocusing workforces. Companies must be careful not to overload work groups with newly reallocated staff and inadvertently cannibalise productivity.

Yeh notes how most managers will not want to give up their best employees if the wider business wishes to redistribute them to other sectors. “So, it is important to establish a fair and consistent process for enabling lateral mobility for the greater good of the organisation, and to clearly share and celebrate the successes from any such deployment so that the people involved will feel that their sacrifices were worthwhile,” he adds.

As a result, businesses should reward managers who develop the talent that can move to other parts of the organisation. “Without these rewards and recognition, there is no incentive for managers to allow their team members to participate in any mobility programme.”



Source: Getty Images



Chris Yeh
Co-Founder, Allied Talent

Alongside co-founding Allied Talent, Yeh co-authored The Alliance: Managing Talent in the Networked Age with LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman and entrepreneur Ben Casnocha.

“Most managers will not want to give up their best people, so it is important to establish a fair and consistent process for enabling lateral mobility for the greater good of the organisation, and to clearly share and celebrate the successes from any such deployment so that the people involved will feel that their sacrifices were worthwhile.

The single most important factor is to establish the norm that managers are not allowed to block internal mobility. For this norm to be accepted, the corollary is that managers need to be rewarded and recognised for developing the talent that moves to other parts of the organisation. Without these rewards and recognition, there is no incentive for managers to allow their team members to participate in any mobility programme.”

Image source: Courtesy

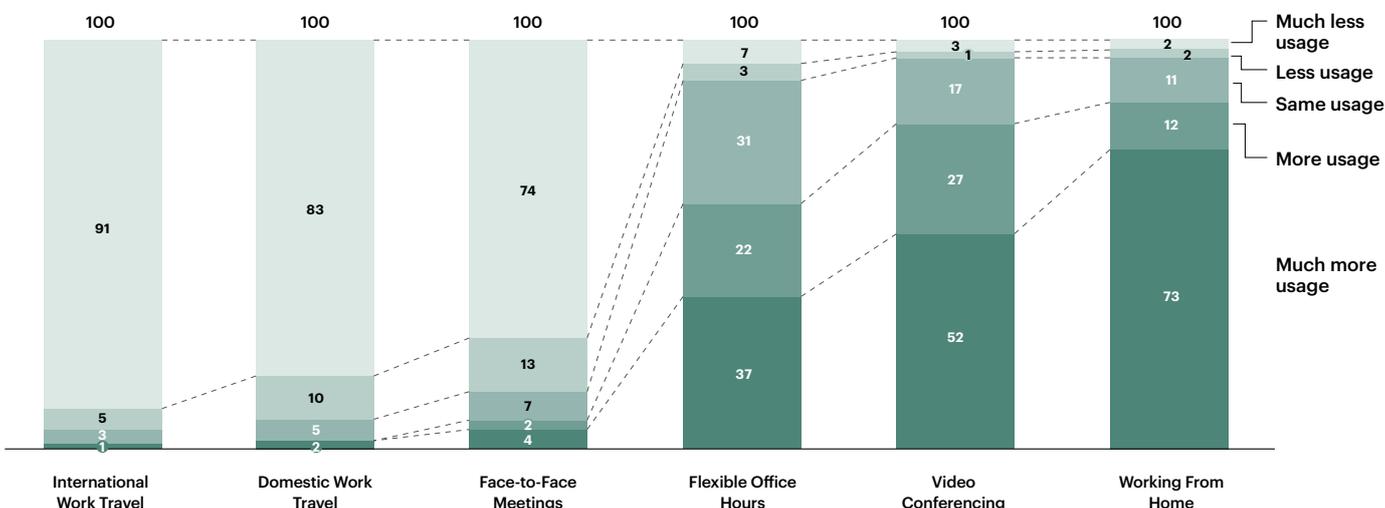
05. How to Take the Business of Fashion Virtual

Business leaders and managers should consider how digital technology can accelerate industry transformation towards more sustainable practices.

Exhibit 5: Business travel has come to a virtual standstill, creating a spike in the use of remote working and video conferencing.

Employee responses to “How has your use of working practices changed since the outbreak of Covid-19?”

Percent (%)



Source: BoF Community Survey: The Impact of Covid-19, March 2020

With ongoing lockdown restrictions, international and domestic travel have ground to a halt. Ninety-six percent of respondents to the BoF Community Survey reported less usage of international work travel, with 93 percent reporting less domestic travel. Consequently, businesses have had to improvise with alternative means of connecting with their community and clients, be that editors, buyers, designers, wholesalers, suppliers or creatives.

As China starts to return to work, with quarantine restrictions being lifted, the fashion community will be looking to Asia to see what next stages might follow — but the global industry already appears to recognise the importance of slowing the pace of work, assisted by virtual connectivity and digital platforms, with the likes of established and emerging designers from Giorgio Armani to Paria Farzaneh, or media editors like Dazed’s Jefferson Hack and *Vogue Italia*’s Farneti,

calling the industry to slow down — and get more creative, locally.

Since the crisis broke out, Shanghai, Russia and Lagos Fashion Weeks have all been executed online, managing to find an international audience for events where a physical presence was previously thought of as essential. There has also been increased engagement and usage across digital showrooms like NuOrder, Joor and Ordre, virtual platforms for buyers, during women’s shows in Paris and Milan, propelling arguments towards the industry’s receptiveness to adaptability.

“[Some buyers] feel they couldn’t possibly make a wholesale decision without touching and feeling [a collection]. I think this is rapidly being seen as the fallacy that it is — they can see movement and drape in a video, they can see fit effectively. With 360 technology, you can view every aspect and zoom in on every detail,” says Simon Lock, founder

and chief executive of Ordre. “Nothing will replace the physical experience of attending the Gucci showroom. Can you recreate that immersive experience online? Well no, it’s a different experience. But the industry needs to get balance – to travel less, be more effective in what we do and more considered in what we buy.”

Others see value in ongoing physical events and tradeshow, albeit with more emphasis on virtual transactions. “I would be upset if it was just virtual showrooms going forward. One of the biggest concerns for us is the movement of the garments, the feel and texture [...] How does that garment fit on the model? I think the cultural exchange you have in emerging markets is [also] really important,” says Browns’ Petersson. “But [travelling] has quite an impact on how long a person can be a buyer, like if you want to start a family. My big hope is that there can be alignment between the brands, even between men’s and women’s, and then maybe we don’t [need to] travel 10 months a year.”

“Obviously, no one was prepared for this so the virtual showrooms we had in March were more ad hoc than anything else but it was good in the sense that people got to see what worked and

didn’t work. Some amazing tech could revolutionise in some sense how we buy and Shanghai Fashion Week set a really good precedent,” adds Petersson.

Indeed, the discovery of what is really doable at a distance or from home, be it makeshift fashion shoots, the presentation of collections online or the successful collation of a print publication, can ultimately diminish the notion of “essential travel” tied to job specs, resulting in more sustainable practices and greater opportunity to tap local talent.

“If we don’t come out of this by April, the major brands and conglomerates aren’t going to create major advertising campaigns. So, we may see smaller scale creative. They may employ 3D animators, illustrators or collage artists,” adds Gabriele Hackworthy. “It’s an opportunity for big brands to get away from the predictable, glossy fashion photograph that we’re all used to seeing.”

“I don’t believe that we need to reach for utopia,” says Orsola de Castro, co-founder of Fashion Revolution. “It’s a question of finding balance. And I believe we have enough to be able to start a roadmap of what this change really looks like.”



Orsola de Castro
Co-Founder and Creative
Director, Fashion Revolution

Formerly working in fashion design, de Castro set up not-for-profit advocacy group Fashion Revolution with co-founder Carry Somers on the back of the Rana Plaza tragedy in 2013. The organisation has representatives in more than 90 countries.

“One big realisation from [the] coronavirus is that our system and society places profit way above people and I don’t think this has ever looked as outrageous as now. What the pandemic has shown us is that we can stop, because up until two months ago, people didn’t think we could.

It’s imperative that we look at ways to diminish essential travel. I am not for the

cancellation of fashion weeks because they are important to give others the same opportunity that we’ve had. But I’m looking forward to the industry being stripped back and it being about the clothes again and about the skills of the people who make those clothes. Then, I think we could have some really sustainable and wonderful fashion weeks. It’s a question of finding balance.”

Image source: Courtesy

BoF Careers | The Global Marketplace for Fashion Talent

Connecting the world's leading fashion companies with the world's top talent.

The **BoF Careers** White Paper is the latest offering in a long line of coverage, solutions and analysis created for our **BoF Careers** community, designed to give constructive guidance and industry-specific advice on HR issues during this unprecedented time of disruption.

We continue to offer support to business leaders and HR professionals across the fashion industry. Should you still be hiring for temporary roles or project-based workers, or you wish to grow your brand's presence, we're here to help.

Get in touch with the **BoF Careers** team directly on careers@businessoffashion.com or by visiting businessoffashion.com/careers for more information.

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