

# 11 lessons in being | a progressive employer



Progressive  
employer  
booklet



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## Introduction



# Embracing change

It has been a year (and counting) like no other. Covid-19 has upended the world of work. We've switched on our video cameras and glimpsed inside each other's homes. We've met each other's flatmates, families and Zoom-bombing pets. We've asked "How are you?" and really meant it.

Many of us have found things to love about working from home: the flexibility; the ability to focus; no commute. But those things have come at a cost. We've been burnt out and Zoomed out; lonely and frustrated. We've missed the office banter, the joys of collaboration, the social interaction and the tea rounds.

At Channel 4, we've always made our people our priority. We care about their wellbeing – not just because it's the right thing to do but because happy employees are more engaged, more loyal, more productive and more innovative. They are a competitive advantage and a commercial superpower.

Innovation is part of what Channel 4 is asked to do by Parliament as part of our remit. This isn't just about our content and programmes, it's also about the way we operate as a business, and how we treat our people.

In the midst of a global crisis, we've ramped up our support for them even further. We've initiated company-wide meeting-free lunchtimes and Fridays to give people time away from their screens. We've introduced wellbeing days, virtual social events, extra training around mindfulness and resilience, and a new employee resource group for parents and carers.

Following on from our groundbreaking menopause policy, we've launched the world's first pregnancy loss policy – and we've made them both freely available to other companies so they too can tackle taboos in the workplace and provide employees with vital tools and support in tough times.

We're also seizing this opportunity to bring in an entirely new way of working: a 50/50 hybrid model that gives employees the option of splitting their time between the office and home. We want to give our employees more freedom and more control. To make their work lives more purposeful, intentional, agile and flexible.

This report pulls together some of the lessons and insights we've learned as an employer during the pandemic. It sets out what we've done and where we hope to go. We will not stand still or slip back to the way things were done before. We will embrace change, empower our people and do all we can to emerge from the crisis as a stronger – and I hope happier – company.

**Alex Mahon**  
Chief Executive  
Channel 4

# Your staff are your superpower: the commercial case

## Happy employees are...

The last 12 months have taken their toll. Employees are burnt out. Teams are fatigued and foggy. According to McKinsey, the number of people who rate their mental health as 'very poor' is more than three times higher than before the crisis.

Companies that reimagine the world of work, prioritise their people and show the greatest empathy will emerge stronger on the other side. Exceptional performance depends on engaged employees. Here's the research to prove it:



### More productive

The link between happiness and productivity is backed up by research from Oxford University's Saïd Business School. In its six-month study at telecoms firm BT, it asked 1,800 call centre workers to rate their mood each week by clicking on one of five emojis, ranging from ecstatic to downright miserable. The results? Happy workers were 13% more productive than their unhappy colleagues, making more calls per hour and converting more calls to sales.

### They're more creative

Shawn Achor, author of The Happiness Advantage and founder of GoodThink, has found that the brain works much better when a person is feeling positive. "Your brain at positive performs significantly better than at negative, neutral or stressed," he says in his TED talk, The Happy Secret to Better Work. "Your intelligence rises, your creativity rises and your energy levels rise. Dopamine, which floods into your system when you're positive, has two functions: not only does it make you happier, it also turns on all the learning centres in your brain."

### They're a source of competitive advantage

The best way to outrank your competitors? Engage your employees. Gallup's 2020 meta-analysis, covering 276 organisations, 54 industries, 96 countries and more than 2.7 million employees, found that business divisions scoring in the top half on employee engagement, more than double their odds of success compared with those in the bottom half. And those at the 99th percentile have nearly five times the success rate of those at the first percentile.

### Their health is your wealth

When your employees' wellbeing suffers, so does your organisation's bottom line. According to Westfield Health's Coping with Covid report, mental health days off increased by 10% in 2020, costing the economy a whopping £14 billion. "Across the country, business leaders are looking in the wrong direction – their heads are in the books, scrutinising the numbers, fixated on the bottom line. Keen financial management will, of course, be essential to recovery, but it cannot come at the cost of people," says Westfield Health CEO Dave Capper. "Without engaged, highly productive employees, recovery will be at best limited and at worst impossible."

## Channel 4's journey so far...

Innovation has always been at the heart of our content – we try to reflect this as an organisation as well. It's about supporting our people as much as we can to ensure they can do a great job.

When the pandemic hit last year, advertising slumped, production stalled, budgets were slashed and investments were delayed. Like so many other businesses, we had to make some really tough decisions. But even in the face of a global crisis, we put people above profit. It's our employees who make Channel 4 special; they bring the creativity, the originality, the inventiveness and the energy. So we put them first.

This stance meant we kept all employees on 100% pay, regardless of whether or not they were furloughed, and we conducted regular employee surveys to check on their mental health.

Our employees put in a Herculean effort to keep the nation informed, educated and entertained, working quickly and flexibly to devise new formats that resonated with young and diverse audiences. They continued to do what Channel 4 does best: to amuse, to surprise, to comfort, to stimulate and to provoke.

But by the third lockdown, they were exhausted. Employees told us they were fed up with working in an extended vacuum, wondering where their real lives went. They said they were sick of the back-to-back video calls. We listened – and took action.

We initiated a daily 90-minute lunch break between 12.30pm-2pm, so employees could step away from their screens and get outside for some fresh air and exercise.

We also launched company-wide meeting-free Fridays, giving everyone a full day away from the relentlessness of remote tinny screen meetings, and some headspace to think, breathe, return calls and catch up.

The recognition of others with a simple thank you feels even more pertinent in our current environment where we aren't bumping into each other in offices.

So we set up Thanks4 – a recognition scheme to celebrate the achievements of people across Channel 4 who contribute exceptional work which really helps us live our values and drive our Future4 strategy.

Mo Gilligan's  
All Star Happy Hour



And, instead of desk drops in the office, we posted Channel 4-branded postcards and merchandise directly to our employees' homes to keep them connected with the brand.

And we introduced a wellbeing day – an extra day of leave for all employees, on top of their usual annual leave entitlement, to help them recharge their batteries and reset.

We encouraged everyone to look out for each other, to offer help to those who were struggling. We urged employees to make use of our virtual tea rooms: to drop in and 'meet' others for a cuppa and chat about non-work stuff.

Our working theory is that happy people are brilliant people. As Britain slowly recovers from the pandemic, we will continue to support our employees to do their best work and to innovate and to deliver programmes that the nation loves to watch.

# how to make



# hybrid working work

11 lessons  
for leaders

## 11 lessons for leaders continued

### 1 Ask your staff

If you come up with a new way of working without bothering to consult your employees, you could lose them altogether. In a recent poll of 1,000 UK workers by Personio, one in four said they'd resign from their current job if they were forced to return to the office. To avoid feelings of resentment and unfairness, involve as many employees as possible in the design process. Swedish multinational Ericsson ran a series of virtual 'jams' with staff. Brit Insurance invited employees to take part in hackathons, then pitch their ideas to the CEO. At Channel 4, we set up a future working group with employees from across the company and we swapped our annual employee survey for a quarterly 'pulse' survey to track views every few months. Employees need to have their voices heard. Their perspectives and suggestions will make your original idea even better, guaranteed.



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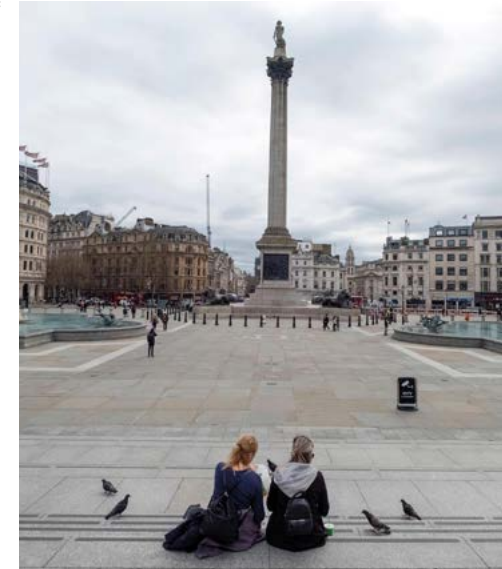
### 2

### Put the wow-factor into your workplace

To lure employees back to the office, you need to transform it into a must-go destination that's exciting and inspiring, specifically designed to support the kinds of social interactions that cannot happen remotely. You should include dynamic, varied spaces that evoke curiosity, encourage creativity and support collaboration. According to WSP's thoughts on the post-pandemic office report, "Successful offices of the future may have more in common with retail or entertainment venues that compete for every visit by offering a compelling, constantly evolving experience".

A Day in the Life of Coronavirus Britain

### 3



### Over-communicate

Change is hard. Employees are exhausted. If you want to get them fired up about new work arrangements, you need to communicate the short, medium and long-term benefits, and you need to communicate them often and across all channels – from town halls to text messages. Alight's 2021 Workforce Mindset Study shows that only 51% of workers think their company does a decent job of communicating with them. That means nearly half your employees currently feel ignored and left in the dark.

## 11 lessons for leaders continued

# 4

### Prioritise your purpose

Your company's purpose is its identity, its soul, its north star. "A clear purpose gives employees direction and a mission to get behind. During the pandemic, with employees questioning who they are, what they do and what they stand for, a company's purpose has become even more powerful," says Kirstin Furber, Director of People at Channel 4. McKinsey finds that those 'living their purpose' at work report productivity levels that are four times higher than those who are not. Research also tells us that purpose-driven companies witness higher market share gains and grow faster than their competitors.

We Are Lady Parts



# 5

### Lead by example

"For hybrid working to actually work, it needs to be role-modelled by those at the top," says Sinéad Rocks, Managing Director, Nations & Regions at Channel 4. "If leaders don't live it and breathe it, no one else will believe in it." If the CEO starts going into the office every day, everyone else will soon follow. It sets the cultural belief that the HQ or physical offices are the real centres of gravity, and that face time is what's really important.



The Great British Bake Off

### Energise your employees

Pandemic fatigue is very real. According to an Ipsos MORI survey, six in ten Brits say they're finding it harder to stay positive day-to-day compared with before the virus. Whether they're in the office or working from home, keep your employees energised and engaged by sharing success stories, setting up competitions, organising social events and bringing in outside speakers for shots of inspiration. Consider dividing long projects into sprints, cutting tumbleweed projects and introducing Zoom-free times and wellbeing days. Think like the LEGO Group and aim to: 'Energise everyone, every day'.

# 6

## 11 lessons for leaders continued

# 7

### Don't be a robot

Your employees have seen inside your home. They've seen the pictures on your walls, the kids tugging at your sleeves and the pets jumping on your lap. The pandemic has sparked different kinds of conversations and a different style of leadership, based on compassion, awareness, vulnerability and empathy. Kindness in the workplace should become permanent. In a survey of 1,500 global employees by Hall & Partners, three in five workers (58%) said the kind actions taken by their company during Covid-19 has made them want to stay longer than originally planned.



The pandemic has sparked different kinds of conversations and a different style of leadership, based on compassion, awareness, vulnerability and empathy.

Everybody's Talking About Jamie



# 8

### Trust your staff

One in five firms admitted to using secret software during the pandemic to spy on employees, according to research by the TUC. If you're putting a hybrid-working model in place, you need to stop being Big Brother. Encourage a spirit of entrepreneurialism. Give your people more control over how, when and where they work. And trust your employees to get on with the job. Leaders who habitually micromanage risk stifling growth and damaging confidence.

# 9

### ...but set clear expectations

You do need to put some frameworks in place – otherwise you risk total chaos. We put together a 50/50 manifesto to outline our hybrid-working model, our expectations and goals. We launched an extensive internal comms campaign so all employees are crystal clear (and excited) about this new way of working, and we amped up our training to help managers shape team schedules and lead a hybrid workforce.

## 11 lessons for leaders continued



Steph's Packed Lunch

# 10

## Beware the influence gap

Hybrid working can reinforce divisions between the office-based 'in-crowd' and the 'at-home crowd'. Employees who spend more time in the office may have a leg up over their peers who don't. In a Stanford study of 16,000 employees at a Chinese travel agency, those who were randomly assigned to work remotely were more productive – but less likely to get promoted – than their in-office counterparts. If more women, carers, people with health issues and introverts opt to work from home, this 'influence gap' can have a knock-on effect on inclusion and diversity.



Hybrid working can reinforce divisions between the office-based 'in-crowd' and the 'at-home crowd'.

# 11

## Keep experimenting

Don't expect to get things right from the get-go. Hybrid working involves trials and experiments. It involves regular assessments to make sure employees are happy and performing at their best. It involves pivots and unintended consequences. And it involves a commitment to change.

The Great Pottery Throw Down



## Groundbreaking policies

### Davina McCall: Sex, Myths and the Menopause

Davina McCall was 44 and thought she was losing it. At work, she hid her hot flushes, depression, mental fog and confusion, until she discovered she was starting perimenopause. In the Channel 4 documentary *Davina McCall: Sex, Myths and the Menopause*, the TV presenter speaks frankly about her symptoms, examines the science and fear around hormone replacement therapy, and investigates the impact of the menopause on women's lifestyles and livelihoods. "Forget Big Brother," says a review in *The Telegraph*. "McCall just turned into the nation's butt-kicking Big Sister."

## 4 WOMEN

**Channel 4's remit is to be bold and innovative, to challenge the norm and to inspire change. We're living that remit through our own groundbreaking policies.**

In 2019, for example, we became the country's first media company to introduce a menopause policy, confronting a subject that remains ridiculously off-limits in the workplace.

Launched by 4Women – Channel 4's in-house gender equality employees network – the policy offers vital tools and support, cool and quiet workspaces, and paid leave for employees who are suffering from menopausal symptoms. "We felt compelled to act after hearing that employees were suffering in silence," explains Naven Alim, Co-Chair of 4Women at Channel 4. "We wanted to spark a candid conversation about menopause at work and put dedicated support in place for these women."

In a 4Women survey, 78% of employees said they felt better about Channel 4 as a place to work since the policy launched, while 10% of female employees said they had used (or planned to use) the policy to support their menopausal symptoms.

Instead of keeping it to ourselves, we decided to publicly publish the policy (updated to reflect remote working conditions) on World Menopause Day 2020, so that other companies could take it and make it their own.

Continuing in our mission to shatter the shame and stigma around women's health, we also launched the world's first pregnancy loss policy earlier this year. "Pregnancy loss was an invisible issue at Channel 4 – until we asked people about it," says 4Women Co-Chair Jane English. "We invited employees to share their stories via a confidential survey, which revealed that pregnancy loss affects employees of all genders, and has a significant impact on work for 70% of people."

Based on a series of focus groups and advice from specialist charities including The Miscarriage Association, Sands and ARC, the policy includes: two weeks leave on full-pay; paid leave for medical appointments; flexible working; an array of resources including medical support and counselling; and a buddying scheme to support employees returning to work after a loss.

Once again, we've published the policy publicly to encourage other companies to follow suit and build more inclusive workplaces.

## Viewpoint: Sinéad Rocks

# The big office rethink



We've lived through the most extraordinary year. As our buildings closed down, hundreds of mini Channel 4 offices sprung up across the country, taking over kitchen tables and bedroom dressers. Some things worked well. Geographical barriers were broken down. The tedious twice-daily commutes were cut out. Employees took more control of their working patterns. But we missed the social aspects of office life, the ability to collaborate in person, and the hard-to-replicate buzz of being surrounded by other super-talented people.

So we started to rethink how work is done – and what role offices should play.

We set up a future working group to gauge opinions and solicit views right across Channel 4. We took inspiration from the likes of ex-Twitter VP Bruce Daisley and Creature CEO Dan Cullen-Shute. And we got expert advice from design consultancy MCM. Then we turned Majestic, our new national HQ in Leeds, into the office of the future – and a blueprint for all our other bases around the UK.

Gone are the endless banks of desks. Instead, we've created different 'zones'. There are soft-seating areas, work booths for small groups, funky meeting rooms, and bleachers overlooking the city square. This is where employees will come to socialise, celebrate and brainstorm. To have discussions and disputes. We know that we are at our most creative when we are together. The most amazing ideas come out of clashes, conversations and unexpected bump-ins.

Of course, some work is best done out of the office. If employees have a day where they are mostly writing emails, presentations or documents, or making a series of phone calls, they can work from home. We're giving people



more freedom to decide how and where they work, so they feel hyper productive at home and hyper collaborative in the office. We want them to embrace the best of both worlds.

It's in our DNA to experiment and we may not get this right. We don't know what the future holds or how attitudes will change, so we're not setting anything in stone just yet. But we do know that we won't just go back to 'business as usual'. As we emerge from the pandemic, we have the opportunity to build something exciting. Something progressive. Something unusual that sets us apart and works for everyone.

**Sinéad Rocks**  
Managing Director  
Nations & Regions  
Channel 4

## Viewpoint: Kirstin Furber



This is a new era for Channel 4. Soon, we'll be returning to our offices across the UK. We won't, though, be returning in quite the same way.

Drawing on all the lessons we learnt during lockdown, we've introduced the '50/50 manifesto' – a new model which will see our people working from a Channel 4 base two days one week and three the next (or more if they choose), splitting their time between their homes and their offices.

This isn't a policy. We're not into setting rigid rules and telling people what to do. Instead, we've put guard rails and goals in place. This is all about defining a future that is more flexible; where success is measured by work output rather than hours spent in an office. And it's based on trust and clear expectations.

For line managers, it means making sure everyone has absolute clarity on their objectives, figuring out how best to make everyone's time in the office more intentional, giving employees the choice where and how to work to enable them to do their best work, and giving regular feedback on performance.

For all employees, it means working out which location best suits the task at hand, coordinating diaries with colleagues and team leaders, and varying ways of working.

With this blended approach to working, we want to move to outcome based, agile working, boost productivity and innovation, and strengthen our culture. Ultimately, we want to make sure that our folk are happy and fizzing with energy and ideas, wherever they are.

We know this is a change and with our wellness being 'stretched' over the last 18 months, the importance of talking about our mental wellness and supporting each other is critical. We are all human and we work and react in different ways.

Even in the very worst of human experiences, we can find the best of human innovation, like the creation of useful inventions such as zippers, drones and teabags out of war times. Out of this crisis, we'll see entirely new ways of working. The traditional nine-to-five will be a thing of the past.

The last year has proved that if you empower brilliant people to get the job done in the way that works best for them, rather than the way the industry's always done it, the job still gets done – often better than it did before.

**Kirstin Furber**  
Director of People  
Channel 4

# The 50/50 manifesto





## Channel 4 – 11 lessons in being a progressive employer

**From *Hollyoaks* to *I Made This for You*, Channel 4 is known for tackling taboo subjects such as suicide and self-harm head-on. Behind the cameras, we're also raising awareness of mental health through our employee resource group 4Mind.**

Set up in 2016, 4Mind exists to normalise conversations around mental health at work, create safe spaces for employees, and make sure the company has the right support, policies and training in place.

In the midst of a pandemic, this has become even more crucial, with employees feeling anxious, suffering from Zoom fatigue and finding it hard to switch off.

Hollyoaks



# 74

## Mental health first-aiders across the company

"The pandemic has clearly been very difficult for many people but it has also presented opportunities for Channel 4 to encourage more open discussions around mental health and to make positive changes to the way we work in the long term," says Briony Robinson, 4Mind Chair at Channel 4.

Now with more than 230 members – almost a quarter of Channel 4 employees – 4Mind offers easy-to-access support through a wellbeing hub (with links to BUPA and a virtual GP), regular newsletters, a weekly drop-in for employees and a network of 74 mental health first-aiders across the company, with a further 32 in training.

Based on feedback from employee surveys, 4Mind has been running fortnightly mental health webinars on topics ranging from coping with uncertainty to loneliness, and has organised 'wellbeing days', where the whole organisation has a day off. The group has also launched extra training around resilience, emotional intelligence and mindfulness.

Employees are encouraged to talk openly about mental health, with Channel 4 bosses leading by example and sharing their own lived experiences. "Sharing stories is one of the most powerful ways to open up conversations about mental health," says Briony. "We want to ensure a constant drumbeat of communication and create an open culture where everyone knows it's OK to be vulnerable and ask for help."

# 4 PARENTS & CARERS



The School That Tried To End Racism



Going back to the office is going to be gradual – a work-in-progress in itself. We're keen to help people manage both their work and caring responsibilities, and support employees as we go back to the 'new normal'.

**Even before the pandemic, working parents and carers were shouldering a heavy load. Last year, the extra pressures of home-schooling, remote working and social distancing pushed many to breaking point, with studies showing a spike in stress, anxiety and depression.**

That's why Channel 4 launched a brand new employee network, 4Parents&Carers, during lockdown. "We wanted to provide an informal setting to discuss the challenges faced by working parents and carers, and create a supportive community during tough times," explains Alex Bird, 4Parents&Carers Co-Chair at Channel 4.

The group runs weekly virtual tea breaks, monthly meetings and regular events with authors and experts to provide advice on juggling work and home life. It also produces a monthly newsletter to share useful content, signpost support and activities, and raise awareness of key calendar dates, such as Dementia Action Week and National Children's Day.

Within 12 months, 4Parents&Carers has attracted 114 members (and counting), with employees commenting that "it's good to have a group that understands the trench humour of being a parent", "I'm really struggling and it's comforting to know you guys are there should things become too much" and "as a new parent... I feel secure in the knowledge that I am not alone."

Post-pandemic, the group will continue to play a vital role, acting as a 'voice' for parents and carers within Channel 4 and helping to shape and influence company policies. "Family situations and responsibilities have changed dramatically for so many people," adds Alex. "Going back to the office is going to be gradual – a work-in-progress in itself. We're keen to help people manage both their work and caring responsibilities, and support employees as we go back to the 'new normal'."



Keep Cooking and Carry On

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