

The New Everyday: Episode 4

Eileen Burbidge

Our ways of working have changed forever, whether it's having the freedom to choose where you work or having the flexibility to balance your work alongside your family.

For so many of us, there's no going back to our pre-pandemic ways.

How do we take the best of this flexible approach into the future?

Welcome to *The New Everyday* with me, Eileen Burbidge, a podcast from Virgin Media Business.

Today's topic is a new everyday culture where we're looking at the effects of flexible and hybrid working on our workplaces.

Joining me today are three long-time advocates of flexible working.

My first guest is Anna Whitehouse. She's a journalist, author and founder of Mother Pukka, a portal for news, events and reviews for people who happen to be parents.

She's also the founder of Flex Appeal, a campaign to fight for flexible working for everyone.

And she's also a broadcaster on Heart Radio. Thank you for joining me, Anna.

Anna Whitehouse

Thank you. What a welcome.

Eileen Burbidge

We've also got with us today, Bruce Daisley.

He's a best-selling author and a technology leader from the UK.

He spent eight years as the EMEA vice-president for Twitter and also hosts the UK's number one business podcast, *Eat, Sleep, Work, Repeat*, which focuses on making work and the workplace better. Hey there, Bruce.

Bruce Daisley

I mean, it was once the new UK's number one podcast. I wouldn't, I wouldn't say that far now. Like, it's one of those things, Taylor Swift's number one this week...

Eileen Burbidge

You take that. Bank, that forever.

Bruce Daisley

I'm banking it. I don't want someone scouring the charts going, 'What sort of fraud is that guy?'

Anna Whitehouse

Bruce, you speak your truth.

Eileen Burbidge

I'm looking forward to you giving me tips as we go through this Bruce.

And then finally, last but not least, we've got Holly Branson.

Holly is Virgin's Chief Purpose and Vision Officer. She's the chair of Virgin Unite, which is the Virgin Group's Foundation.

In 2018, she published her first book, the international bestseller *WEconomy*, about finding purpose so you can make a profit without compromising people or the planet. Hi there, Holly.

Holly Branson

Hi. Nice to see you. It's so nice to be here.

Eileen Burbidge

Thank you so much. All of you.

It's great to have every single one of you. I'm really looking forward to a fantastic conversation.

Just to set the stage a bit. As we'll all recall, though, it seems like ancient history to me, before the pandemic I think we all might have hypothesised that remote working would be able to empower people and it would maybe open many doors for within the workforce.

Having said that, now we've got proof.

Recent research from Virgin Media O2 Business in partnership with the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR), revealed that 45% of people who are currently not working would be more inclined to take a job if they could work remotely.

This adds up to 4 million people across the UK, including carers, people with disabilities and parents.

All of a sudden, the shift to increased remote working opens up more possibilities for more people to join the workforce.

I want to know what each of you think. When the pandemic struck, when you were sitting here in early 2020, what did you expect in terms of change? Or did you expect the level of change we've now witnessed in hindsight?

Anna Whitehouse

Yeah, I think what I found quite interesting was literally two weeks before the pandemic hit, I had companies saying, I love the idea of this flexible working malarky, but it just won't work for us.

And there was a lot of that.

It was interesting how many of those companies that were quite resistant, but within two weeks had to make it reality.

Otherwise, if they didn't Zoom in and log on, they'd have had to shut down.

I found it quite interesting when cold hard cash was at stake, what was indeed possible seemingly overnight in a 24-hour period.

I found it very interesting, those same companies then within about three weeks started patting themselves on the back for suddenly being family-friendly and people-first, we've nailed this flexible working revolution.

When actually it's always been about evolution. I think what we've seen in the pandemic is a fast track of that evolution.

Yes, to answer your question, there was an element of satisfaction from my side, having knocked on the doors of so many companies who were saying it won't work for us and then seemingly overnight, it had to work for them.

Otherwise it would have impacted their bottom line.

Eileen Burbidge

Yeah, for sure. Does your tongue bleed from biting it? Not saying 'I told you so.'

Anna Whitehouse

Sure, no one wants to be that person.

Eileen Burbidge

Ah, but it had to be tempting.

What about you, Holly? Did you anticipate the level of change that we've seen?

Holly Branson

Do you know what, I'm so happy, like Anna, that this happened.

We've been doing this for a long time at Virgin. We've always been about fully flexible working. We knew it worked and we've been banging the drum trying to get other people to do the same, but we've had resistance as well.

I think the change has been so necessary. It's been absolutely wonderful to see that so many businesses have been forced to do it.

What I don't want to see is that when it all goes back to normal, they've got great excuses to say, 'Now everyone's got to come back to the office'.

Because we know it works. Employees are engaged and everyone is having a much better all rounded life by living this way.

So I've been so happy with the massive change. We've got to make sure it doesn't go back to the old-fashioned ways.

Anna Whitehouse

Well, Holly and I have been sliding into each other's DMs for the past five years for every moment that there's been a move forward. I think we really engaged with each other more when the pandemic hit, that moment of like finally the flood gates opening.

Eileen Burbidge

Such validation. Right.

What about you, Bruce? Would you have expected as much as we've seen? I mean, as Anna was saying there was a real forcing function. What did you think?

Bruce Daisley

I think the funny thing is we all expect the equilibrium to be restored, don't we?

So it was actually, there was an article in the New York times in May 2020 that said Manhattan will never be the same again, which was just this wake up.

I was like, hang on a second. Wow. Well maybe it won't.

It was that recognition that something fundamental had changed.

Interestingly, over the course of the last 12 months, I've been running this regular newsletter on these things. As a consequence of that, someone in Australia got in touch with me.

Australia has had a very strange Coronavirus because they started off almost baiting us, having these images of them partying and going out to sporting events and seemingly in a never-ending disco.

All of a sudden, they had Coronavirus. They've had more days of lockdown than the rest of the world put together.

But in the midst of it, they did return to the office in March this year.

Someone got in touch with me through my newsletter, to say, look, I've done this analysis. She wanted to remain a secret because of the sector she worked in, but I've done this analysis that suggests that the more male-dominated a company is, the more likely they are to mandate a return to the office.

It's a really fascinating bit of evidence because what you effectively get in Australia, every organisation needs to publish their gender balance at every level of their hierarchy.

What you found was it was a straight-line correlation.

In fact, the only company that breached the correlation was one organisation Aurecon that is run by a woman.

So, broadly the more male a company, the more likely they were to mandate a return to the office. And, I had one organisation contact me last week saying, look, we want everyone back five days a week in the office. Can you come and talk to them? I said, 'I'm not your guy, unfortunately.'

Anna Whitehouse

Wow. They really didn't read the room.

Bruce Daisley

I said, 'Honestly, I just don't think there's anything that I could say that would be consistent with anything I've said before.'

Holly Branson

You should have taken it up and actually contradicted everything that they were trying to get across to them.

Bruce Daisley

Just do a big reveal on stage.

So, firstly, I find it fascinating, but I don't think the battle's fully one. I don't think the battle is a fully complete here.

Eileen Burbidge

Yeah. It's like you said, I think we're going to wait for this equilibrium. Right?

We have to see where things level out when there's just no more forcing function. When people aren't mandated to stay away from say city centres or from their offices.

Then we'll have to see culturally, which is what we're here to talk about today. Whether or not leadership organisations, whether they're led by men or women recognised that there's a new way of working.

Anna Whitehouse

Well, I think the interesting thing within the pandemic was that gender pay gap reporting was halted at a point where we needed that transparency more than ever.

I think the sad reality is we can't really see the damage that has been done to perhaps gender equality as Bruce was explaining earlier, because the information quite simply doesn't exist, it's come back and we can see obviously the gender pay gap has increased, sadly and frustratingly.

But, yeah, I think there's going to be a lot of companies using the excuse of, 'Oh, we know it's hard for everyone.'

I get a lot of flak from businesses who go, 'Look, we've got so much going on at the moment. We're in a vice-like grip by the economy. I've got so many things on my list of things to do.'

I think the frustration that Holly and I have spoken about, over and over, is that I think companies, as Bruce said, male dominated companies are very much forcing people back to the office right now, without actually thinking about: It's nothing to do with where people are sitting. It's simply about who you're including at the table.

Are you wanting to open up the doors to more talent out there and that's going to impact the bottom line.

One of the biggest research projects by the Peterson Institute across 92 countries, said that if you have 30% or more women at C-suite level, your profits increase massively.

It's nothing to do with water cooler chats. It's all to do with again, the bottom line.

I think that's the conversation that we're trying to steer towards.

Eileen Burbidge

Let me pick up on something that you were saying there in terms of, having different, or more, people around the table or different types of people around the table.

So, you've been advocating remote working and flexible working for obviously so long, even before the pandemic. Have you seen now that it's invited or welcomed or enabled more people to get into work as a consequence?

Anna Whitehouse

I don't think we can really measure that as yet, unless Bruce has magical stats or Holly has any magical stats.

I think we're still very much in the embers of the pandemic and actually very much within it.

I think the only thing we do know is that, looking historically at SARS and Ebola, was the gender equality widened at a terrifying pace, which is what is happening right now.

I think coming back to the point of this podcast, culturally, we need businesses to step up, not force everyone back to the office at this point, where they are starting to see that yes, you can include this diverse, range of talent.

I find it hugely ironic the amount of DNI officers, diversity and inclusion officers, talking about this without actually implementing flexible working and supporting those who do want to continue working from home.

I think, there's been a lot of amazing cartoons in the Spectator of these kind of CEOs, lauding over their employees, sitting at their designated slab of MDF under a strip light and going back to the office.

But it's like, are you actually looking at the bottom line here? Are you actually looking about what's good for your company and who is actually sitting at your table, whether it's a kitchen table or a slab of MDF?

Eileen Burbidge

I mean, thinking just on the point about data and actually being able to quantify some of these impacts, Holly, the research that was referenced earlier that the CEBR and Virgin Media O2 Business gathered, is that employees are more engaged than they were pre-pandemic.

That businesses are more productive now, too, as a consequence.

Do you think that there's been this connection or correlation between happier, more engaged employees and productivity generally across business because of remote working?

Holly Branson

Yeah, I mean, absolutely. And we've always believed at Virgin.

I mean, it's a bit of a no brainer really, isn't it?

When you say it like that you kind of can't believe that people didn't believe it before we actually had the hard facts.

In any business I think your people just have to come first, if you want your business to thrive.

I really think that a great company will empower people to live their best lives, not only in the office, but also outside of work as well.

Employees are just people, human beings, and they have lives outside of the office as well as inside the office.

You've got to make sure you think about that.

Like they've got caring responsibilities, which Anna is always talking about, hobbies, personal goals.

They're going to have struggles.

Like, people are going to have things going on at home that we don't know about when they come into the office or whether they're trying to do their work from home.

I think just the best way of helping anybody to thrive is to show your people that you trust them.

And how better to trust people than allowing them to have that fully flexible working, that you're know they're going to get the best work done from anywhere that they want to work.

I never really understood that clocking in clocking out mentality, which does predominantly work better for men because they have less responsibilities at home.

And you just need to do everything that you can to make your people feel happy, productive, fulfilled, and limiting atmospheres like that is just not going to do that.

And that's the future now. It's just making sure you have trust in your people and people can get their work done from wherever they want it to do. They're going to be much more happy and much more productive.

Eileen Burbidge

Yeah. Let's hope that carries on. Speaking of that and with employees and then paying people and Bruce, you've already alluded to hearing from people from all over the world.

You mentioned Australia earlier, from the weekly newsletter, you've talked about the voice of the employee and the role of those voices and changing working practices.

So, do you think there's now a cultural shift towards listening to the voice of employees, people, as Holly was referring to and actually taking that feedback on board?

Bruce Daisley

Yeah. I mean, look, this, there's an interesting debate that I think is happening here going forward.

One of the things that we know, we talked about engagement there. One thing that we know that is that one of the biggest factors that influences people's engagement with their job, is actually, and I'm fully agreed with Holly that, giving people more autonomy, giving them more ability to get things done is really critical.

One of the biggest factors that influences their engagement with their job is whether they've got a friend at work.

I think, there is potentially a bit of a split in the road here where effectively we can end up with, I think, a couple of different versions of work that could be effective.

One is that our jobs become a bit more gig-y. They become a bit more 'piece rate'-y.

I'll give you what I mean by that.

I've been dealing with a few organisations that run call centres.

Now it's always been believed that call centres are the closest approximation office work to factories. We pile 'em high and stack them cheap, that people are more productive by cramming them together.

What they've discovered, in organisations that run call centres have found that actually productivity has gone up by running them remotely effectively, because people can get their job done without having to be sick because they've got some childcare responsibility or whatever.

Interestingly call centres seem to have worked better.

One of the things that they've learned from that is that when you phone a call centre and the call centre says it's really busy at the moment, now that all the kit is in people's homes, they can start thinking, oh, actually, could we incentivise people to come online and work for us on a Sunday night? Maybe we pay more money a bit like Uber surge and it's changing the business model.

That's what I mean by it's a bit geeky in the sense it's a bit like the gig economy, but in the basis of, full-time employment.

To some extent we may well end up in a situation where there's a lot more of our work that is incentivised on short term units of productivity.

On the flip side, other organisations might say, okay, well, we still value people feeling a sense of affinity having a friend at work.

That doesn't seem to be a huge substitute for recognising that there is a network effect that needs to have moments of coming together there

There was a really interesting experiment that was done by Best Buy about a decade ago.

It was called the results only work environment. It was done by two women who ended up leaving the firm and it was about total autonomy. It was sort of borderline anarchy.

Anyone can do their job anywhere they wanted. At any time they wanted. One guy bought a VW campervan and followed his favourite band around America.

Another person surfed all day and did her job at night.

And so it was total autonomy. What you find with that is that people end up with their job becomes quite gig-y.

There's no sense of cohesion.

Now, look, that is a perfectly acceptable model, but I think what we might find going forward is that there's this bifurcation.

Some firms say, look, we do want a sense of being a congregation. We do want the sense that you're part of something here.

Most of the organisations that are remote-first hesitate from calling themselves remote only because they say we do want a sense of team cohesion.

For me, it's really interesting, because what's really clear is there's not one single model. And gig-y style cultures could be suitable for some organisations.

They could say, actually we end up with really motivated, really inspired people, working fully autonomously.

Others say, we do want a sense of a congregation. I've seen some companies talk about, one company in particular, talk about a Wednesday plus one as their culture because they wanted one moment where everyone was together.

That is something we can learn from organised religion. If you want to look at institutions that have got longevity in them, organised religion seems to be a pretty good place to start. An organised religion tends to build itself on the idea of coming together at occasional times. So, you know, interesting models for me.

Eileen Burbidge

Yeah. You talk about getting that cohesion and bringing people together and also having that affinity to either another individual or a team with work.

How do we think that technology is able to enable that? Is that a hindrance in that people are getting more and more isolated, especially as we grow up, we work remotely, or is it going to help people in teams?

Anna Whitehouse

I think, exactly what Bruce was saying. I think these two extremes are where the conversation sits at the moment.

It's back five days a week, strapped to your desk, or it's everyone just, working remotely here or there and everywhere and missing water cooler moments.

I think those two extremes are not the reality.

As Bruce said, you sit somewhere in between. So, obviously I'm not going to talk about the specifics of tech, like Slack, Zoom, all of that.

Obviously those things facilitate that. I think, yeah, what we're seeing is...I get asked what would your flexible working utopia be?

And it's well, Holly and Bruce agree with, I think that employees, humans, ebb and flow between home and HQ with tech fuelling that, looking at what people are doing, not where they're sitting.

But ultimately, I wish the conversation moved from flexible, working, remote, working from home to recruitment.

Are you recruiting the right people?

Invest in your recruitment process, then trust them to do the job.

Why do you not trust your employees is more of a concern.

Why are you so paranoid that people aren't doing what they're meant to do?
How are you not even measuring that?

So I think there is that halfway house.

I think obviously all the big tech firms are doing the hybrid 3/2 model at the moment.

But yeah, these extremes don't exist.

We sit somewhere in the middle.

Why would we not, at a point where our working world is being bulldozed by a pandemic, bricks, lying everywhere, why would we not be picking up the pieces? And in the words of the current government 'build back better', or maybe just build back differently. I think that's where I sit.

Eileen Burbidge

You think about though, empowering people, giving them the freedom or the flexibility to work from where they want and trusting them as we've all started talked about already, how though do you support employees?

You don't want to just give them the technology tools or Zoom, whatever it is and say, carry on, how do you support them?

How do they feel like they're getting development?

How do you take on board their feedback? What do you think works? And what do you think doesn't work?

What have you been doing Holly, at Virgin for so many years?

Holly Branson

I think it's really about how you communicate with your people.

I mean, it's harnessing the culture that you wanted in an in-person office, but being able to do that throughout wherever people are working.

I think a lot of people think about workplace culture and they think about doughnuts and pool tables and how are you going to socialize?

But it goes so much deeper than that.

I do think like a really happy healthy workplace is one where the employee feels like their employer cares and that company cares about them.

And they feel like they can have open and honest conversations about anything. The good things, and also the challenging things that they're facing.

I think they just have to know that the company is going to listen to them, when they are sharing.

Also they're going to take... the company is also going to take positive action.

I know at the beginning of the pandemic, I think it was really the great leaders that reached out to check in on their teams regularly and also individually.

Also didn't just ask about how their work was going, but they really, more importantly checked in about them as people and how they were and how their families were.

I think, obviously businesses had to make sure they knew what people had at home when it came to like office desk, chair, these sorts of things. If you were doing lots of meetings all the time.

What a lot of companies failed to do is really check in on their people.

What caring responsibilities did they have?

Were they in a shared house with loads of people?

Were they sitting, working from their bed, most of the day?

Did the office know if they were unwell?

How were they coping with the pandemic?

How are they coping with work demands?

And it's those conversations that can feel a bit like you're being intrusive.

I think that you've just got to always have those open, honest, transparent conversations to make sure that your people feel like they're being heard and valued.

And, and that's absolutely the right thing to do.

I think no matter where you are in your situations, in the office, it's much easier to have those conversations.

It is that water cooler moment, which people say, oh, it's not all about water cooler, but that thing where you're getting a lift with someone, you say, 'Oh, how are you, how was your weekend?' Or you're like, 'How your kids getting on at football?' or 'Last week you told me your mum was unwell. How's she doing?'

It's that personal relationship, thing.

Like Bruce was saying about making friends in the office, it's really important.

But I do believe that we've got technology now and it's possible to do over these sorts of mediums. But you've got to make a conscious effort to do it.

Anna Whitehouse

We are seeing each into each other's homes now almost, I can see you in the context of your family right now, Holly.

I think we've humanised the workforce far more by Zooming in, obviously there's a halfway house.

There's balance, but I have seen a lot more people on their out of offices. If we're talking about tech, just saying, 'I'm just doing bath and bedtime'.

Instead of 'I will be returning to the office.'

At this point, I think we're seeing humans we've broken down the barriers.

While we haven't got those water cooler moments, while we aren't may be exchanging conversations in lifts as much, we're seeing into each other's homes, we've humanised employees, they're people who happen to be working towards a common goal.

Holly Branson

I don't know about you, but at the beginning it did very much become: you turned on a meeting, you went to dive straight into the crux of the meeting and you didn't have the chit-chatty conversations.

I think everything's an evolution and we've all learnt.

Now you can have the conversations over these mediums, but you've just got to make that conscious effort to do it when you first log on.

Eileen Burbidge

Yeah. And, and you've both talked about mimicking the workplace and the water cooler.

We've talked about that as a metaphor.

Holly, you've talked about lifts. You've talked about chairs in the office.

I want to go to Bruce for a second. When we're talking about office space, literally and figuratively, how do you think, or how have you seen organisations adapting to the change in how they're using their office space or how the role of a physical office is changing?

Bruce Daisley

Yeah. We've only got a few pointers at this so far because most organisations are trapped in their leases that they either came to the end of a lease and, they're a very small group of firms doing that, but most firms are trapped into the offices they've got, in fact, there's still plenty of firms that haven't returned to them.

There's a really interesting bit of work done by Leesman. Leesman, like the Michelin guide for offices, they rank, which are the best workplaces.

Leesman expect that the way that offices will develop is, they use the phrase half the size, twice the experience.

I think these lessons from retail, when we go to retail, we either want a seamless customer experience that you can return what you bought online to the store, without anyone hesitating, you don't want to know the rules behind the scenes, or you want something that's really elegant and a sort of lush experience like the Apple store.

And, we've definitely seen those.

But things that fall in the middle, found it far more difficult to the old model, I think, of retail.

I'm still devastated that we lost the big Topshop. I can't believe it, every time I go past...

Anna Whitehouse

Me too. Of all the things over the last 18 months, that's the thing for me.

Bruce Daisley

The old model which was there, which was maybe if we try and pile in a bit more, a few more racks, pile it higher stack it cheaper... That model, unfortunately didn't work anymore.

I think we're going to see something similar with offices where... I'm always cautious saying tech firms have got the answers because, anyone who followed what tech firms have done over the last 18 months can see they haven't got any of the answers, but Dropbox say that their philosophy going forward is that the office is a studio that you come in to do something that you can't do at home.

I think there is a bit more. That to me is even a bit tactical. It's saying that this is specific work function. I do believe this, sense of an organisation being a congregation at times is really critical.

But, I think it gives you a reminder there that, okay, you're going to come into a workplace for a specific reason and back to Leesman again, Leesman articulate this. They called this 'the workplace why', when you're getting up in the morning or rather probably when you're heading home in the evening, it's really clear why you went in.

Increasingly if you went in just to do video calls, people are going to be carrying a frustration that I went in. I had nowhere to do video calls. I had George next to me shouting all day, like people are going to be frustrated with that.

Understanding what your reason is to be in the office, 'the workplace why', is a really interesting, critical, question that we probably have to answer.

Holly Branson

We're looking for a new office at the moment. So I'm writing down notes, Bruce.

Anna Whitehouse

You know, the office that I went into that I found really interesting on that note, Bruce was Lego.

They have three floors where nobody specifically sits, but they've got... the top floor is creative. The middle floor is social, and the bottom floor is library silence.

You can choose the why of your day.

I think that's really interesting is dividing it by human feeling and need as opposed to grouping people by department even.

Cause I don't think you necessarily always have to be sat next to your colleagues to communicate with them.

People just ebb and flow between the day.

Because I don't think you're in any one mindset throughout all your whole day. You go from creative perhaps to needing time on your own to wanting to have a sandwich with your mate at lunch.

Holly Branson

Yeah.

Eileen Burbidge

Like what Holly said. I mean the employees are people and so they shouldn't be necessarily organised by function.

Right. A lot of this strikes me that, the three of you are talking about is just listening to what works for people and employees.

Holly, how do you think employee consultations going to take a role in shaping the future of work and what do you think leaders should be doing in order to engage employees to get that feedback from them?

Holly Branson

Oh, well I think it's absolutely crucial that employees are involved in shaping the future of work.

I mean, it is a massive part of their lives.

We talked earlier about, being empowered and trusted. People are happier and more productive. Any sensible business should include their staff in these decisions.

I do, however, think that the burden of it all should actually be on the shoulders of the leadership teams.

I know Anna's been posting about this recently, but it's been in the news a lot recently fuelled by Catherine Mann from the Bank of England.

Her saying that working from home could harm your careers and leave you socially sidelined.

She went on to say that, as we adapt to ways of hybrid working, we're going to get this two-tiered track of work, the physical and the virtual with the virtual being the lesser.

I think so many people that have been reading that would have felt really disheartened because there has been this fullness of life recently with hybrid working, you get to do a lot more with your families.

You get to work for the hours that work for you. I think we cannot let that idea take hold.

Because either psychologically it's really mentally damaging or even in reality, because I think lots of businesses would trust, what she was saying and start thinking, oh gosh, should we be doing the right thing, doing hybrid working?

And so, I think the responsibility does lie on leaders who have to embrace hybrid working, and they have to make sure that they have the right communication channels with their teams. They've got to make sure that they have the right policies in place.

You can have hybrid, virtual, and in office.

They've got to make sure they've got the right training in place.

They've absolutely got to make sure that we have equal opportunities for everyone, whether you choose to work from the office or whether you choose to work from home.

It's all on leaders to be fair, equitable, and inclusive for everybody, no matter where they're working.

Anna Whitehouse

The onus shouldn't be on the employee, coming back to Catherine Mann's point quickly.

That was the issue I took with that. It was: women shouldn't work from home, it's going to damage their careers.

Well, how about companies talk about proximity bias and or accidental favouritism as I call it, just because that's a terrifying trend: if I can't see you I won't promote you almost.

I think it is on a company's shoulders to really be aware of how we're working, the impact of not being able to see everybody and those that you are maybe going down the pub with on a Friday, don't accidentally favour them in terms of promotion because the burden of childcare is unfortunately still strapped to female shoulders.

That doesn't mean that there aren't, there's not these hapless dads who don't want to step up to the challenge, but I think we do really need companies to be very aware of the shifting landscape as we move into a more hybrid model.

Eileen Burbidge

No, absolutely. I couldn't agree more with what Holly was saying where it's really incumbent on leaders to really definitely lead and step up for this.

Anna Whitehouse

You just crack on Holly and fix it. You just fix that bit with the leaders, and we'll do the employees.

Eileen Burbidge

Unfortunately we're nearly running out of time because I think we could all talk about this for days on end, but I wanted to actually quickly go to each one of the three of you and just ask, given how far we've come because of the pandemic in the last year and a half and how accelerated this trend is finally become, what is it that you're most excited to see coming next?

And maybe let's start with you, Bruce.

Bruce Daisley

The interesting thing is...I mentioned retail before, and I guess what we witnessed in retail was we witnessed a very slow car crash for a lot of organisations.

That when Gap went, when Topshop went, it was part of the inevitability and to some extent that's left the high street empty in some places.

I think these a big opportunity for any organisation to think, okay, so can we learn the lessons of that? And what can we do?

The big focus for me is on middle management.

If we can get good middle management, that this can be an inspiring moment for organisations to realign how they work.

Now middle management typically, have just been people who were good at the job they're managing and they've been promoted out of it, so it's a key skill.

For the clearest time ever, actually having managers who are capable of inspiring their teams, motivating their teams from afar, I think is going to be the differentiating skill.

For me, taking a glance at the high street thinking, well, look, the changes that are around us are inevitable. And if we accelerate, if we adapt our business in a way that embraces these changes, it can be a dynamic force for any organisation rather than just waiting for incremental change to take place year to year. So really fascinating for me.

Eileen Burbidge

Brilliant. Thank you.

Holly, what are you most excited about? What do you think is going to be coming?

Holly Branson

I'm just so excited about how more and more people are going to thrive in life because they have got businesses that are allowing them to have fully flexible working and they're going to thrive personally and professionally.

It's worked for us for so many years and I'm just so happy now that more and more people and businesses are realising that it can work for them too.

Eileen Burbidge

Finally, validation and vindication.

How about you, Anna? What are you excited about now for the next couple of years?

Anna Whitehouse

The focus for Flex Appeal is really towards the NHS now.

There's obviously a staffing crisis and I think we've proven across public and private sector that flexible working works.

Now it's to take it to those who were saving our lives over the last two years and beyond.

And I think working towards looking at an example, Birmingham Women's Hospital, where they do Ward-led rostering, different types of flexibility, instead of just speaking always about water cooler moments or Zooming in.

Actually, Ward-led rostering, where you have, a Matron who empowers her nurses to discuss amongst themselves how they want to work like, 'Sally, can you cover that? Cause I've got to go to the nativity.'

'Yes, I can'.

Inform the Matron instead of it being the other way round, for example.

I think it's really challenging each industry that has historically said it won't work for us, but it can, and it will.

We have the tech, we have the mindset, we have all the building blocks lying in front of us like rubble, that we can ourselves individually and together as a collective rebuild, in Boris Johnson's words, 'build back better' or build back differently, definitely.

Eileen Burbidge

At least something to look forward to. And so you mentioned Flex Appeal. How can people find out more about your work Anna?

Anna Whitehouse

We did a Flex Forever report with Robert McAlpine, which really details everything we've learned over the pandemic in terms of flexible working that is available for every HR department, every company, at motherpukka.co.uk, the flex tab, everything is there.

And please sign the Working Forward Pledge from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which is really challenging companies to sign up, to commit to change, instead of forcing everyone back to the office for those elusive water cooler moments. Brilliant.

Eileen Burbidge

Bruce, I didn't mention in the beginning, but you've written a book we've talked about your newsletter. You also do your podcast, which was number one for a while. How can people find out more about your work and keep up with your findings?

Bruce Daisley

My number one. My glory days are well behind me now.

Eileen Burbidge

Don't say that.

Bruce Daisley

If you're so inclined, feel free to LinkedIn to me or to search me. Yes. Thank you.

Eileen Burbidge

Brilliant. How about you, Holly?

How can we find out more about either the book that you've written, the work that you're doing at Virgin Unite or anything else that you're working on to continue to champion the voice of employees and workplace engagements and flexible working?

Holly Branson

I predominantly use my Instagram, which is [@Holly_Branson](#), or I do put my blogs up on [Virgin.com](#).

Eileen Burbidge

Oh, fantastic. All right. Super.

I want people to be able to check in with everything that all of you are doing.

It's been such a pleasure to speak to all three of you, I'm really grateful for all of your time.

Thank you so much for joining Anna. Thank you.

Anna Whitehouse

There's so much working flexibly. I now need to go to host a radio show.

Eileen Burbidge

Thank you so much. Thank you also to you, Holly.

It's really been great to see you and to listen to everything that you've been talking about and have been pushing for so hard at Virgin.

Holly Branson

Thank you so much. It's been lovely to be here.

Bruce and Anna are people I'm following their stuff all the time. It's been great to all be able to chat together.

Eileen Burbidge

I've loved listening to all of you. I don't think we needed a host today.

How about you, Bruce? Thank you so much for joining. It's been really fantastic to just hear everything that you've heard from around the world and a result of all the work in the research that you've already been driving. Thank you so much.

Bruce Daisley

Look, more than anything, make sure you stay safe out there.

Eileen Burbidge

Good words to end on. So thank you everybody. I really appreciate everybody tuning in as well.

For more information on the research that we've mentioned earlier today, and also to hear how technology is transforming, how we live and work for the better search Virgin Media Business CEBR.

If you haven't already, please do check out our previous episodes, looking at topics such as how digital change is helping to build better communities and build better inclusion.

Hit subscribe so you never miss an episode, but for now this is me, Eileen Burbidge.