

How do we collectively learn from the global pandemics' impact on work?

Through a series of round table discussions we are looking to define the positive and negative outcomes of the pandemic and how we can use them to generate a revitalised approach to our design and delivery.

challenges - short and long term

“The challenge was not delivering organisational goals, it was how are our people doing?”

We asked Colleen Tabala, Global Head of HR for ISDA what the biggest challenges have been, alongside discussing positive outcomes from the last 12 months;

ISDA have offices in New York, Washington, London, Brussels, Singapore, Tokyo and Hong Kong. Having such a close connection to colleagues in Asia it was very clear to the leadership team the virus wasn't going to stay local to China. They knew ISDA had to carry out stress tests, recreating a situation where all employees would need to work remotely. Hard to imagine back then!

More traditional managers were a little sceptical, assuming it to be a pseudo 'day off' but actually it was extremely fortuitous to test globally. The London stress test got pushed out two weeks and it was eventually carried out on March 12th – the offices closed to staff on 13th.

Once staff got into the mindset that this was not a drill, ISDA got to see what servers were taking the burden, who needed what equipment and in fact whether people actually needed a computer. Amazingly it became apparent that a lot of staff didn't have home IT equipment, having always worked either in an office or from a phone. Staff were given a check list to review and determine what they needed e.g. dual monitors, chairs, cameras, docking stations. Local variation played a part here e.g. the strong emphasis on ergonomics in UK. ISDA were very keen to ensure that no one was working from a poor setup at home and quickly took action to resolve this. As Colleen says if you look at what organisations are saving in travel costs this is very easily offset by getting your people set up well at home. This is surely just investment for the future as we transition to a hybrid working model.

The continual communication with the Asian offices in HK, Tokyo and Singapore offered invaluable daily updates.

The greatest challenge initially was to review how each region was coping and reacting. With different stages of the pandemic and differing government protocols, even state to state in US, it was complex. ISDA chose to take a global view agreeing that all staff should be treated consistently, and as such all offices were moved to remote working simultaneously.

Amazingly, productivity remained 'super high' as, to a large proportion of staff this was just an acceleration of a style of working that was happening anyway. What was clear very early on was how much harder managers would have to work to maintain cohesive delivery. Increased time spent in dialogue with teams was critical.

Globally people were dealing with very different issues – for many home working from very small domestic situations, for others home-schooling children. ISDA transitioned to a policy of *'work when it works for you'* which as a global organisation started to serve as a real positive to members. There was always someone available, whatever the time zone. If someone could do their best work 5am to 9am, then dropping off to home school and picking back up later on ISDA were very much accepting of this.

A large part of what ISDA delivers is education and advocacy. The Conferences and IT teams involved previously in delivering the programmes in person pivoted overnight to streaming events and seminars to the membership. This actually had the unforeseen impact of dramatically increasing delegate attendee numbers. Taking travel out of the equation enabled a far larger and broader audience to participate. No more clearing your diary to travel for a half day conference. Another huge positive to be gained under the circumstances.

challenges - short and long term

“You hire professionals treat them as such.

Most managers and team leaders give flexibility to the organisation checking emails in evenings and holidays as such ISDA as an organisation must offer this flexibility back otherwise it’s just a one way deal.”

Colleen praised the teams who have worked flat out to deliver this transition and maintain a very high level of continuity to the membership. ISDA by it’s own admission is a lean organisation so it took an enormous effort on the part of a small team to get this in place, not only for events but also for people working remotely.

“turns out sending everyone home was the easy part, getting them back to the office is going to be the real challenge”

When the Hong Kong government gave the go ahead to return to offices, ISDA were still reluctant to sanction this, wishing to stand by their global approach. However it became clear from a mental health standpoint staff working from small home living spaces was going to be a far greater issue than allowing a return to the office. Local variation in the approach was introduced. Hong Kong staff were allowed to return to work, if they chose to, under very strict guidelines - much to the delight of the staff.



positive outcomes

“1 month of quarantine for a day conference, travelling from London to New York and back just isn't feasible. Sadly for the time being we will continue to meet virtually.”

positive outcomes to build upon

There is a definite sense that we have all become 'more human' to one another. Being given a glimpse into each others domestic lives is seen as massively beneficial to building teams and boosting wellbeing.

Another unexpected positive has been the impact on geographically disparate teams. Historically when there were a few people dialling into a meeting with the majority together in one location there was always a sense of 'the real meeting' vs the virtual attendees. Clearly this was never intentional but inevitably if chat in the main meeting is face to face virtual attendees never quite felt as included. Having everyone on a virtual call has levelled this out and given everyone a strong sense of team inclusion in all meetings.

Others have mentioned that with the increase in video and decrease in voice calls there is a sense of far greater active participation by all attendees. People are aware of being visible and as such concentrate more.

To date ISDA has had a very adhoc approach to homeworking, certainly no one had ever worked 5 days a week out of the office. Now it's hard to imagine ever going back to everyone in the office all week. They also recognise that pre- Covid 19 if an employee wanted to work from home it was their choice and their responsibility to manage their time, activities and physical space. The responsibility is very firmly with ISDA now as the employer to ensure that they are supporting everyones needs, physically, mentally and technologically.

The positive change that mass vaccination will bring is seen as a hugely important part of the return to office planning. The global disparity however, on when and who will be a big challenge in future planning around office use.

Looking forward what does ISDA foresee the in-office/ remote work balance look like ?

An important aspect of the future workplace review is looking at the specifics of giving staff comfort the space is safe for their return. Say if a pod or meeting room has been utilised for a morning, does this need to be quarantined for the day or until the next clean or even longer?

ISDA know there are alot of factors to be considered: local government restrictions, company protocols, personal standards alongside the aspiration to be seen to be fair and even handed globally with all staff. That's a lot of variables to work through!

ISDA's long term plan puts physical and mental wellbeing at the forefront of the next phase. This means ensuring managers have the skills to support and are aware of how to empower their teams. This especially applies for junior members of staff where opportunity needs to be offered to 'shine' and therefore grow their careers. Colleen talked about her niece who is envisioning life after graduating college and desperately wants people to return to workplaces. She wants to be given the opportunity to not only develop her career but to also socialise and enjoy the fun aspects of work taken for granted pre-Covid.

ISDA knows they need to seek a happy medium. Colleen and her team understand this has to be people led, at least for the time being and future workplace standards will require global staff consultation if they are going to be workable.

future office design

With hindsight do you think you would've done anything differently in the London office?

“No which is great, perhaps we might have delayed a year!”

ISDA are aware of some of the impacts from flex working through previous flexible work policies, like 'ghost town offices' on Fridays. It's accepted as one of the trade-offs if that pattern enables people to be productive. Colleen cited working professionals who for the first time in decades are now having dinner with their families on a regular basis due to the lack of commute. People won't give that up easily. Colleen is also mindful that the initial picture maybe false with a heady rush to get back and see everyone after all this time away. This will not necessarily give a true picture of everyone's aspirations for hybrid working long term.

Would ISDA consider the use of hub workspace for staff out of the home but not in the main office?

This is something that might work better for larger organisations, ISDA is probably too small. The principle of meeting colleagues in a mid point, preferably driving and not using public transport is an interesting one. This of course only really works if you are local to the person you really need to meet. Colleen felt hub spaces may be of greater use as an alternative to the 'Groundhog day' feeling of home-working. This approach also may be of benefit for cities like New York which in the short term still have few amenities actually open. Whilst staff may travel to the office it will be a challenge to get food or even a drink in some locations and many of the services that relied on the busy city population sadly have closed permanently.

We are all realising there is a great deal of positive psychology associated with dressing for work and moving to work away from a domestic setting so whether this is by travelling to a centralised location or a nearby hub there is huge value in utilising other spaces for part of the working week.

A key aspect of the new working model will be detailed planning of the working day, week and month. Staff will learn to make personal judgements on when to travel for in-person meetings and when it isn't necessary.

What will the office offer?

Colleen believes ***“shaw studios were visionary”*** having delivered a future proofed space.

The work shaw studios did with ISDA analysing the mix of spaces required in the new London office has been hugely beneficial to the post pandemic needs.

London has a broad mix of enclosed individual offices, open plan and TC/VC pods and a great deal of time went into analysing the space standards associated with each area. Previously ISDA had dual occupancy offices for the majority of staff, through the workplace strategy phase we reduced to a slightly smaller individual office footprint perfect for current needs.

Each office and desk is now bookable and enabled with the technology to hold high quality voice/video calls. ISDA often manage and chair virtual seminars for 200-300 people. As quite a few people had come out from enclosed offices into open plan the footprint for each desk and the spacing between was deliberately generous. This too will enable teams to return to the office maintaining social distancing.

There is also a generous provision of TC/VC booths that with a post covid capacity for 4 people will equally work well as additional enclosed offices. The day 1 occupancy headcount maintaining a 2 m separation is barely reduced and will certainly support even the previous standard of 70 -80% occupation on any given day.

conferencing - in-person/virtual

“It’s one thing for an organisation to ask for it’s own staff to be under one roof, it’s somewhat different when you are bringing together groups of people from different organisations.”

Conferencing

This aspect of the London office functionality will sadly be an unknown for a longer time. Even when we get back to in person education it will definitely be a hybrid approach.

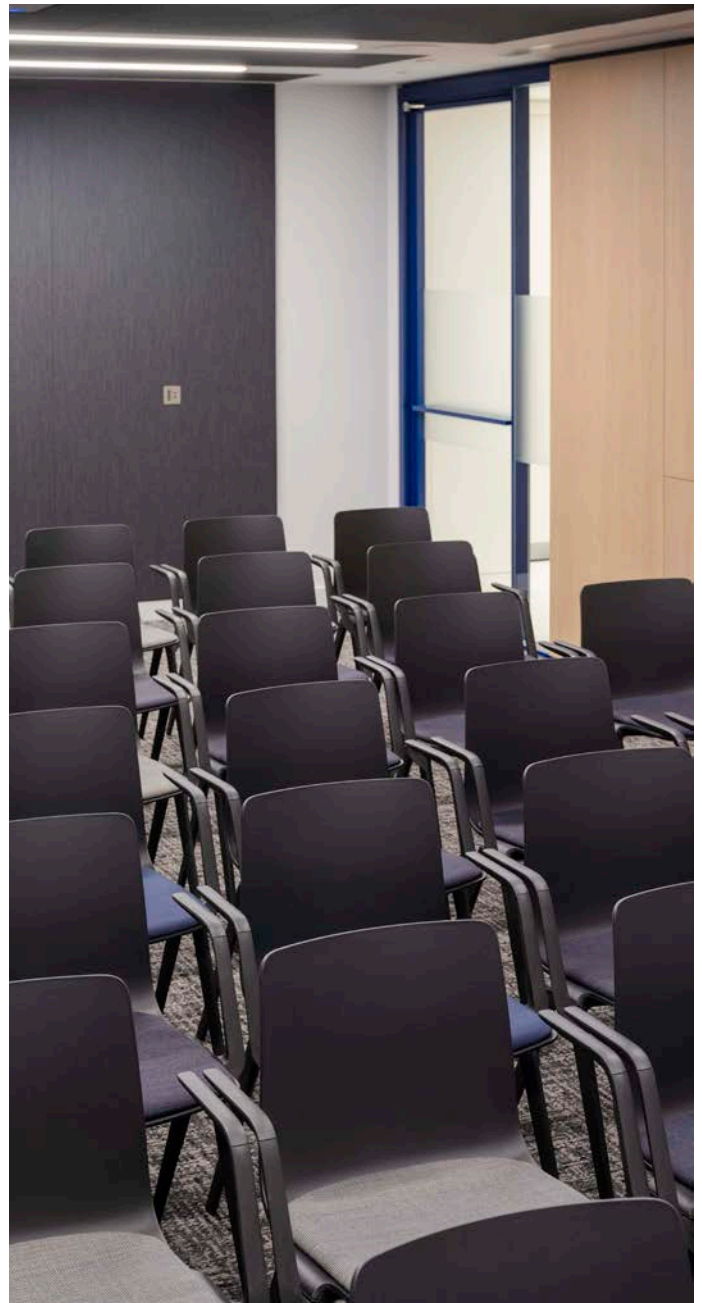
Approving in person meetings will be hard for organisations to sanction any time soon. In the original brief the technology that was put in place was deemed secondary and supplementary to in-person attendance. It has in fact come into it’s own as a primary usage for live streaming from the conference area. Going forward when in-person conferencing returns there can be a healthy mix of the two, certainly as international travel could be severely curtailed for some time to come.

Early on there was some concern that ISDA had compromised on a reduced scale for the London conferencing space, but it looks like shaw studios were somewhat visionary here too. The reduced space may only ever serve a smaller local group, working in tandem with virtual events live streaming to other locations and individuals.

Sustainability

The very nature of ISDA is to support the global membership. Whilst some international travel will remain virtual, Colleen felt that when international travel can be safe again ISDA staff will want to travel. The value associated with face- to-face meetings and networking events is simply too high for the organisation to not travel to meet people in person.

Certain cultures deem the social aspect of meeting over a meal or a coffee far too embedded in their approach to business. Colleen felt that they will return to an expectation of real meetings as soon as they can.



Wellbeing

“The lockdown restrictions that were introduced, whilst necessary to control the virus, have had widespread and negative economic consequences, uprooted everyday life, enforced social isolation, and exacerbated health inequalities. The potential consequences for mental health are considerable.”

British Medical Association - mental health crisis report Jan 2021

Wellbeing

Well before the pandemic ISDA took the mental health of it's staff very seriously. One aspect of ISDA's mental health programme includes membership to [Headspace](http://www.headspace.com) – www.headspace.com.

They promoted and participated in a global meditation session for the entire organisation.

Colleen and her team are strong advocates of team activities including fitness and running clubs, cooking club, book club, ISDA's got talent. A lot is done to encourage everyone to look after their physical wellbeing in the knowledge this is a crucial part of mental health. ISDA have also encouraged all to learn a new skill through these socially restrictive periods – this in no way needed to be related to work.

Even with all this in place there is still real concern from managers about staff, particularly in areas such as London where there has been prolonged lockdowns and there are tight ongoing restrictions.

What we are all agreed on is we haven't really seen the true impact on staff wellbeing as a result of the pandemic. ISDA as an organisation expect to give considerable thought as to how they offer the right support to get everyone back to their most productive and engaged selves.

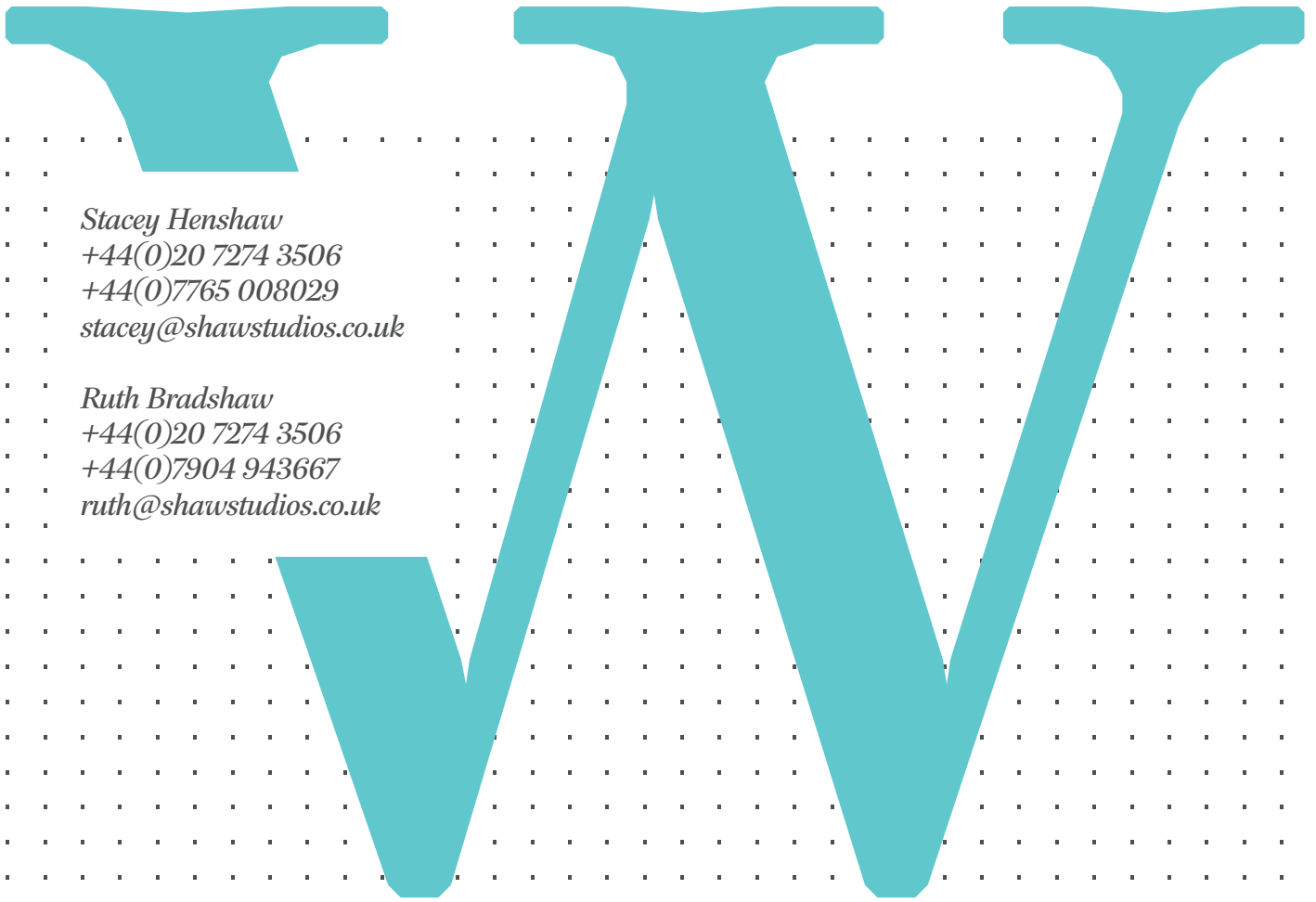




In collaboration with:



www.isda.org



Stacey Henshaw
+44(0)20 7274 3506
+44(0)7765 008029
stacey@shawstudios.co.uk

Ruth Bradshaw
+44(0)20 7274 3506
+44(0)7904 943667
ruth@shawstudios.co.uk