

Understanding candidate motivations in the face of COVID-19

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How to inspire people to change their jobs in the current climate

The ravages of Covid-19 continue to impact on confidence, long term planning and, apparently, hiring intentions. A glance at the economic headlines prompts potentially unmitigated gloom. Recently, the EY Item Club suggested that it might take until 2024 for the UK economy to return to its size prior to lockdown and that this year will see a decline of 11.5%, with unemployment rising to 9%.

However, if we take a closer look, then the recruitment market, if not in rude health, is showing at least some signs of life. And of candidate activity.

Mid July saw an increase in the volume of online jobs ads – just 52% of the average for 2019, but up significantly on its low of 40% from May. According to the ONS, the number of vacancies in the UK was 333,000 – an all-time low. However, the ONS takes its usual readings in quarters. Between May and June, the most recent figures, there was a 5% increase.

There was more optimism from the Purchasing Managers' Index, which jumped to 56.6 in June. According to the Association of Professional Staffing Companies, professional vacancies in London increased by 14% on a month-on-month basis in June.

So, to what degree are candidates too cautious to enter the job market and if they do so, what are they looking for from employers? Using the comprehensive jobs database of Zoek, NH237 Consulting surveyed employed job seekers to understand their experiences, their feelings towards their current employer and their views on potentially changing jobs.

Key points emerging

- 57% of workers feel their employers have communicated regularly and clearly – but 17% have heard next to nothing;
- Just 33% have been presented with an idea about what the next 6 months might look like from their employer;
- A third of people fear that Covid-19 will effect the jobs market for years to come;
- Just 39% feel they are less likely to want to change employers now compared to pre-Covid;
- Just 4% feel they would consider joining an employer with a poor Covid track record;
- 55% are already sharing stories – good and bad – about how their employers have behaved;
- Candidates are looking for things in a new employer they might have looked for pre-lockdown: progress, great culture and recognition;
- 44% will be doing their own research on your employer reputation or brand;
- There is an assumption that no one is hiring in the current market;
- People are still wary about leaving the house, using public transport and entering the workplace;
- People want to know about working from home options, but also mental health provision and workplace social distancing;
- 93% would choose an employer with challenges but which supported its people over an organisation doing well but which did the opposite;

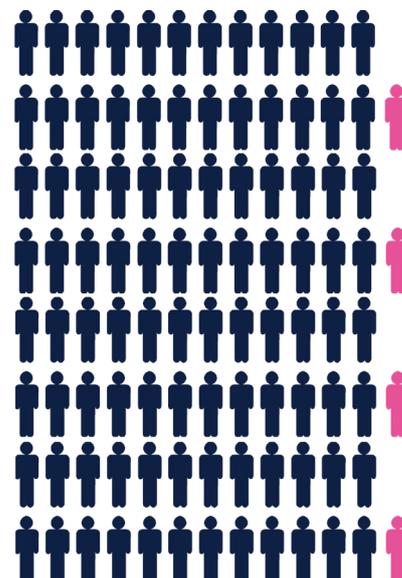
Who we surveyed

Using those candidates registered on the Zoek jobs database, we received survey responses from 1,134 individuals currently in work. Of those, 39% were female, 59% male and the rest non-binary or declined to say.

The ages of our respondents ranged from 18 through to 65, with 29% falling into the 45-54 age bracket, and a further 20% in the decade prior to that. 77% of those responding to our survey were white. 63% were working full time, another 20% were part time workers and 17% had been furloughed.

Salaries currently being earned by our respondents ranged from below £10k to over £100k, with particular concentrations in the £17-30k bracket. They were working in a wide range of industry sectors, with the automotive; IT; healthcare and retail sectors particularly prominent.

Only 4%
would consider working for employers with a poor COVID-19 track record.



How have employers kept in touch with their people?

With 83% of people either working from home or furloughed, then the reality of the last four months becomes very clear. Most of us have spent far too long at home, physically separate from the workplace and the workforce.

There have clearly been many stories of poor employer behaviour. However, our survey suggests that the majority of employers have been doing the right thing in terms of the support they have provided their people.

Just 14% of our respondents felt let down and neglected by their employer during lockdown, with another 21% taking a neutral position. Some two thirds of the survey felt their employers have had their backs.

Key takeout – The majority of organisations did the right thing during the pandemic.



65% of people feel like they have been supported by their employer throughout the coronavirus pandemic.

My employer has been very supportive during the Covid-19 period...



Communicating with your people during tough times

Perhaps the most obvious challenge that any employer has faced relates to communication. This is something that many organisations get wrong even when their workforce is within easy reach and closer to hand, either delivering the wrong message or using the wrong platforms and channels.

During lockdown, we have seen a massive uptake in the use of video conferencing platforms. We have had to get used to a whole new set of protocols, in terms of appropriate dress codes, the contents of our bookshelves and what our family and/or partner might be doing during an important call.

The results feel broadly positive, perhaps surprisingly so, suggesting that organisations have worked harder at a task which perhaps they've taken for granted in the past.

Although the following table suggests that many organisations could have improved in terms of the regularity of their communications or its clarity, comfortably more than half of our audience were impressed with how their employer had kept in contact.

We can only imagine the levels of engagement at those organisations in the latter two categories, that kept communication to an absolute minimum.

However, answering a parallel question on organisational strength, 16% of our survey felt they had no idea of their employer's current financial position.

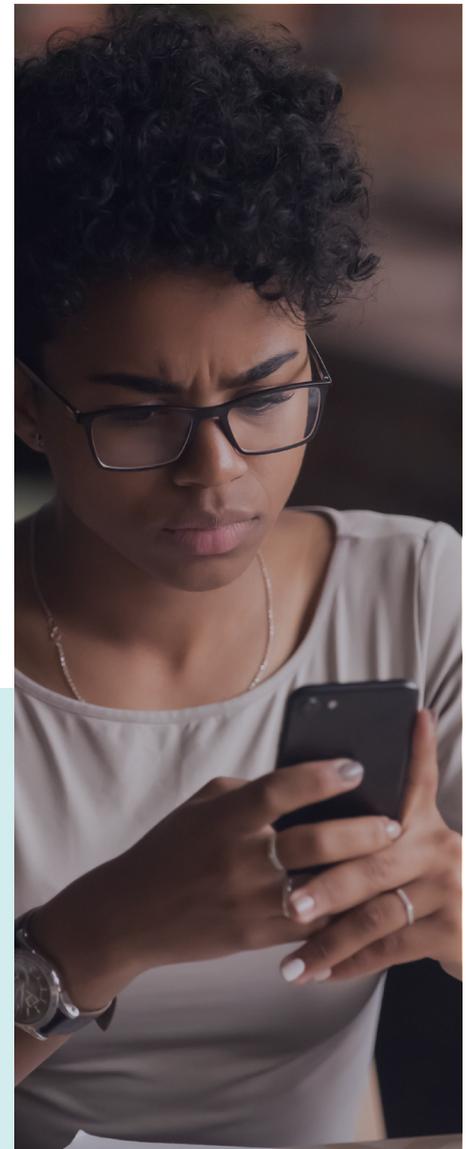
The majority of employers have been unable to present their people with a clear plan of what the next six months looks like.

Clearly this is challenging, but it does feel like the relative clarity and reassurance that people seek simply isn't there. Just 33% of respondents felt their employer had given them an idea what the short/medium term future looked like.

This is likely to have a de-motivational effect on people, if they are unaware of what their objectives are, unaware of what is now expected of them and unaware of how they can contribute to the overall enterprise goals.

Key takeout - Many organisations have clearly worked hard to stay in touch with and stay supportive of their people, that alone will not be enough to ensure those people will stay, should alternative career options present themselves.

Key fact - Just 33% of employees feel their organisation has provided an outline of the immediate future.



My employer communicated with me...

Not at all



Hardly at all



Clearly but not regularly



Regularly but not clearly



Regularly and clearly



What candidates feel about the recruitment market

We asked a number of questions of our audience around their confidence levels and the extent to which Covid-19 has impacted the employment marketplace. Although there was no hiding from the carnage that Covid-19 has created, this does not mean that people currently working have entirely taken a step back from considering themselves candidates.

There are general concerns that the effects of largely closing down the economy since March will influence the employment market for years to come. Our respondents, whilst being perhaps more personally positive about what is unfolding, are not optimistic that overall recruitment options will pick up any time soon.



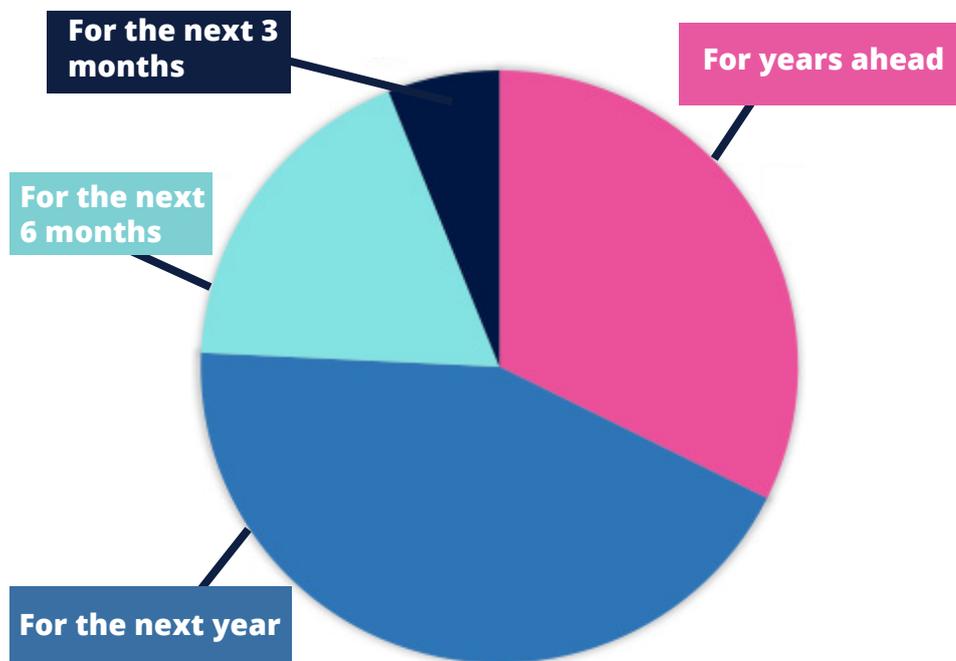
For a third of our respondents, there is a view that the negative impact of Covid-19 on our jobs market will be with us for several years. And a further 43% feel that we have at least another 12 months of pain to go through.

This is likely to have an impact on their behaviour as consumers perhaps more than candidates.

If we compare the responses of those within the 45-54 age bracket with those aged between 26 and 34, then the former are around 6 percentage points more likely to feel that Covid's impact on the labour market will continue for years.

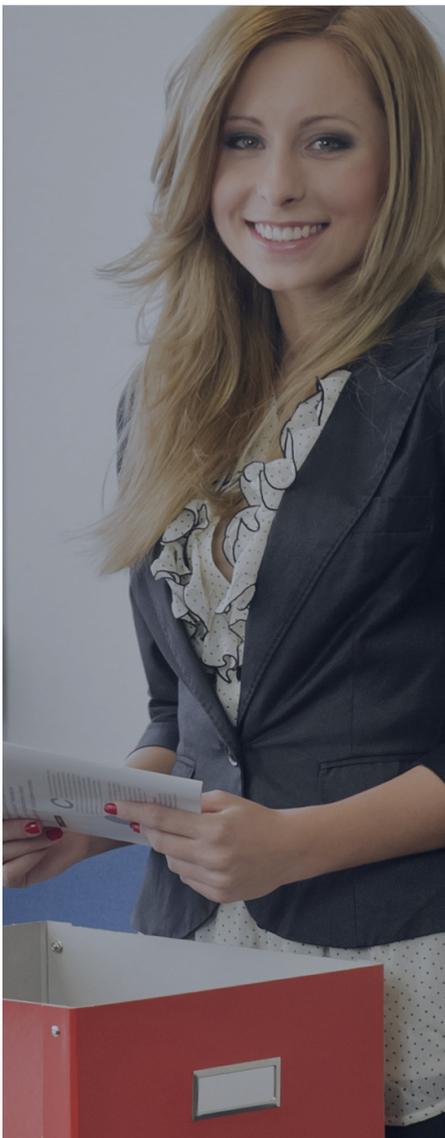
We then asked our respondents the extent to which they agreed with a statement suggesting how concerned they were about how bad unemployment might get over the next six months. Fully **82%** of our survey either broadly or completely agreed with this view.

How long do you think the Covid-19 crisis will continue to affect the jobs market?



Key takeout – people feel more positive about their own employment options and choices than those facing the general population.

Key fact – 32% feel that the jobs market will be impacted by Covid-19 for years to come.



What candidates feel about changing jobs

The chart below tells us candidates current state of mind. We have heard broadly positive feedback in terms of the behaviour and conduct of most employers.

However, just under a quarter of people are now more inclined to move when they are able, as a result of this conduct, and nearly a half feel it makes little or no difference to them remaining or leaving. The recruitment market does not feel quite so redundant after all.

Understandably, there is some negative sentiment around the jobs market, however, this does not mean that those currently in jobs are hunkering down and ruling out the possibility of changing employers.

The way my employer has behaved towards its people during Covid-19...



Means I am more inclined to stay where I am - 34%

Has made no difference in whether I intend to stay or not - 44%

Means I am more inclined to move when I can - 23%

We asked people whether they were less likely now to consider changing jobs than was the case immediately before Covid-19.

The results, whilst overall suggesting a degree of caution, demonstrated a wide range of reactions. Over 30% of our survey felt the same way about the possibility of changing jobs as they did prior to Covid-19.

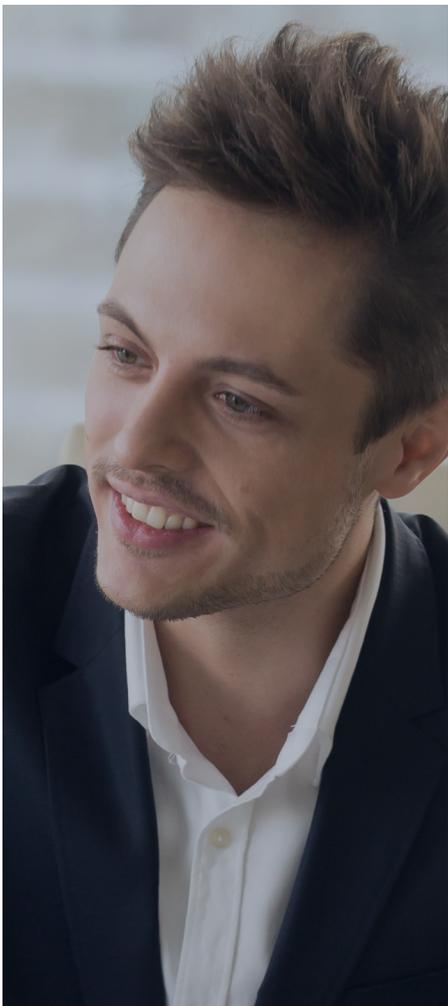
39%

of job seekers on Zoek agree that they are less likely to change jobs right now.

"It will be a major challenge for organisations who have behaved badly during COVID-19 to suddenly reach out and try to attract quality, new employees."

Key takeout - Even though people have been generally impressed by the support they have received from their employer, this does not mean they are going to stay indefinitely.

Key fact - Just 39% are less likely to consider changing jobs today compared to pre-Covid-19.



What do people want from a new employer?

If the recruitment market is at the very least ajar, if perhaps not fully open, what are candidates looking for?

Firstly, it will be a major challenge for those organisations whose attitude towards their people hasn't been stellar, to suddenly now reach out and try to attract new hires. As our initial questioning suggests, the majority of organisations have supported and communicated with their people. Those that have not, therefore, will tend to stand out.

If an organisation has a poor employer reputation as a result of Covid-19, I would be very reluctant to consider joining...

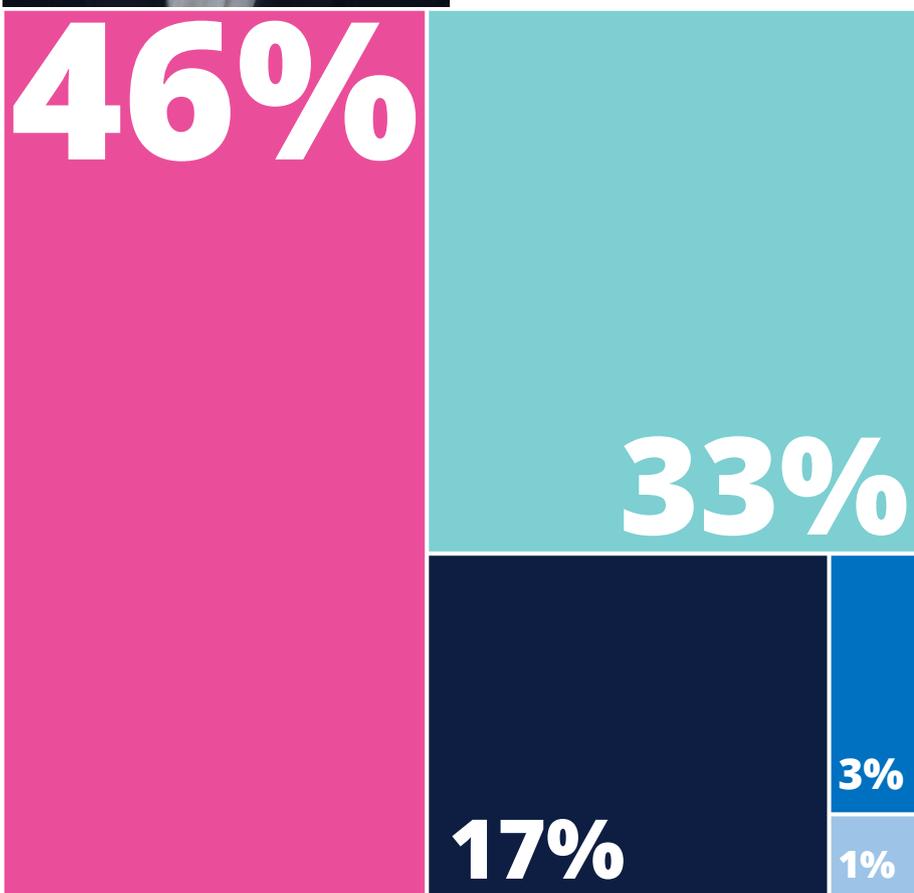
This feels unambiguous. There are organisations out there whose employer brand and reputation is damaged now and into the medium term.

They undoubtedly will continue to be able to hire – particularly given lengthening unemployment lines – but their ability to recruit those people in jobs and/or with a choice between different employers, will be compromised.

This doesn't mean such organisations should not begin to try to mend bridges with their workforce, but this is likely to be a gradual process.

But if an individual is confident enough to start the recruitment process with a potential new employer, what are they looking for?

Interestingly, their wishlist does not feel quite so influenced by the pressures of Covid-19 as we might have expected.



- Completely agree**
- Broadly agree**
- Neither agree nor disagree**
- Broadly disagree**
- Completely disagree**

Interestingly, what people desire are all aspects of professional life that the virus has effectively put on hold. In lockdown, people will not be doing much in terms of progression, the culture they are exposed to will be that of their own home and any recognition will be handed down from a distance.

People's desires and ambitions in terms of a career change feel very similar to what we might have expected pre-Covid-19. They want to be able to progress, do so within a positive working environment and be recognised for such progress.

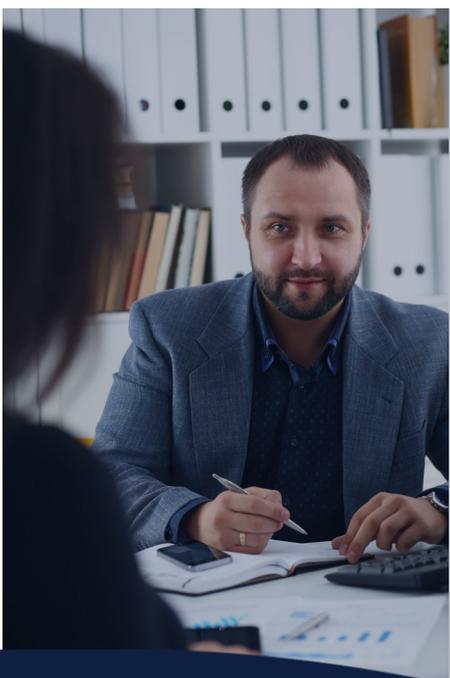
**You are attending an interview for a new job.
What are the three most important questions you ask?**



In framing attraction messages as we edge out of lockdown, we should not forget some of the fundamentals of human and professional ambition and necessity.

We also need to be aware – as we come to think about both recruitment and retention – of what Covid-19 has taken away from many people professionally.

If those are the sorts of question an individual might ask at interview, what else do they need reassurance around prior to that stage?



What do you need to know about a potential new employer?

They have a positive reputation as an employer



They are doing well financially



That the roles are of interest



They are ethical and responsible



They treated their people well during COVID-19



Although the one option – of the most popular chosen – relating directly to Covid-19 attracted just 25% of respondents, it is highly likely that an organisation’s reputation as an employer or its employer brand, will be influenced by its lockdown activities.

We can see, however, that if organisations are seeking to attract people out of their current jobs, they cannot afford to avoid the fundamentals.

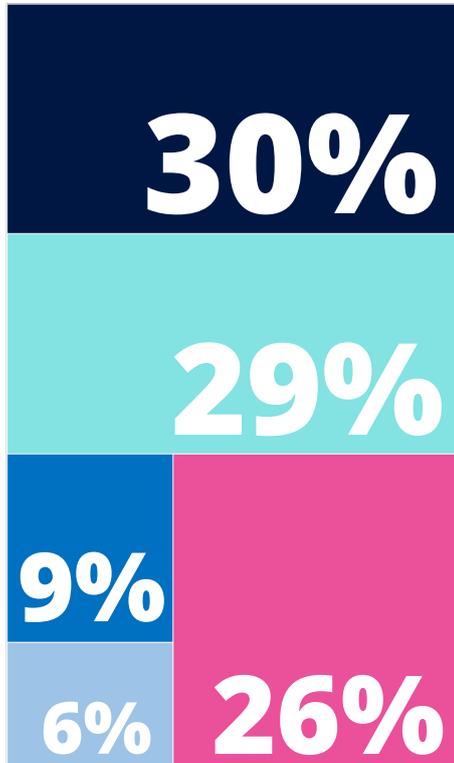
They need to understand how their employer brand and reputation is currently being processed by key employment communities. (And if there are concerns, they need to respond accordingly). Clearly, the roles they are offering need to be positioned both honestly and interestingly.

Key takeout – lockdown and the virus have put a break on what people want from their careers – progress, positive culture and recognition. Jobs and employers that emphasise these aspects suggest a return to a working normality.

Key fact – Just 4% would discount an employer’s poor reputation as a result of Covid-19 and consider joining them.

There are no secrets out there

My friends and colleagues share stories about how good or bad their employer has been during Covid-19...



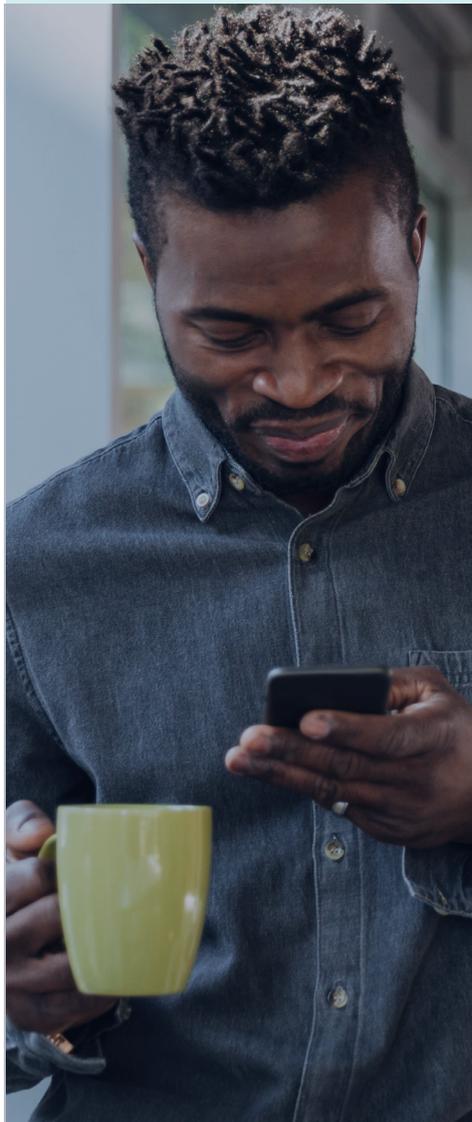
- Completely agree**
- Broadly agree**
- Neither agree nor disagree**
- Broadly disagree**
- Completely disagree**

Although we've all been isolating and distancing to a certain degree, none of us live in a bubble. We share stories, whether face to face, online and/or via social media. Many of those stories relate to our employers – the good, the bad and the ugly ways they have behaved during these unique times. Those stories are already out there, influencing an organisation's employer brand.

Employers need to be very aware of the current mindset of their people and the nature of the stories they are likely to be exchanging. Such employers will not be able to prevent such stories being told – and the potential employer brand damage they may well create – but they are able to influence the tone and content of such stories.

Key takeout – Employees and candidates alike will be sharing stories about how their current and prospective employers behaved during lockdown – there will be few places to hide.

Key fact – 15% of employees are unaware of friends and colleagues sharing stories about employer conduct during lockdown.

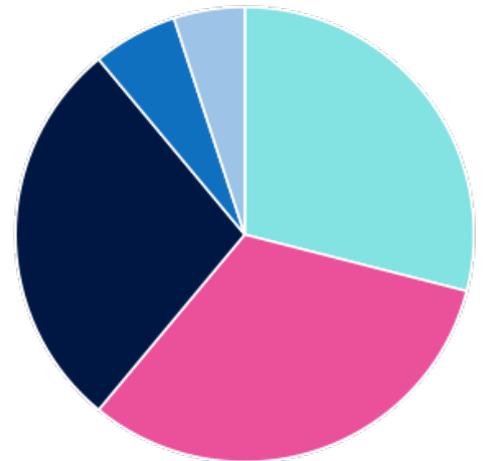


Is anyone out there?

Interestingly, although people do have a quiet eye on what other jobs might be out there, recruiting organisations have to make it clear they are hiring and why great people should consider taking a potential risk.

For many candidates, there is likely to be an assumption that organisations are not actively recruiting. That because many organisations are not recruiting, no one is. Employers, therefore, need to reach out with a strong, positive message to such audiences.

Unless an organisation reaches out with a confident, positive employment message, I am going to stay put right now...



- Completely agree**
- Broadly agree**
- Neither agree nor disagree**
- Broadly disagree**
- Completely disagree**

People have been living within a personal and professional climate of doubt and uncertainty. More of the same is not, therefore, what they want from a new employer.

Encouraging an individual to make a career move has to be backed with a value proposition that is very clear and very confident.

It is also highly likely that such candidate audiences will not be actively searching out recruitment messages with as much enthusiasm as pre-Covid-19. Would-be employers need to make use of the recruitment channels that deliver such messages with real clarity to such audiences.

Key takeout - If candidates are to make a professional move in the current climate, a hiring organisation has to be clear, confident and reassuring about what it is offering and where it is going.

Key fact - 61% of employees need to see a strong, positive statement from an organisation before considering a move.

The psychological effect of Covid-19

We should not underestimate the emotional and mental pressure that people have been under over the last few months. A simple return to the workplace is not so simple.

Many now fear setting foot outside their door, taking public transport and sharing workplaces with colleagues. 48% of our respondents agreed that they felt some degree of wariness, with another 20% taking a more neutral position.

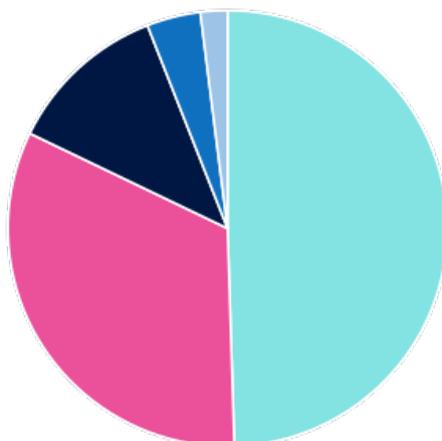
Building up reassurance and confidence in both a workforce and a candidate base is a major undertaking in which hiring organisations need to play their part.

For the majority of our respondents, a return to something approaching normality, as regards the recruitment and employment landscape, is an important step.

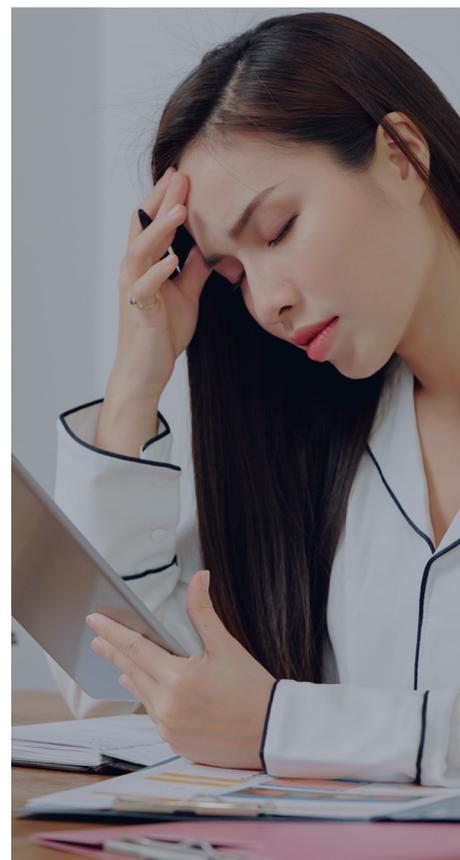
The relationship they have had with their current employer is likely to have been strained and stretched over the last four months. Nothing will be normal.

Therefore, psychologically, returning to a working mentality as well as beginning to think about a new career move feels like a step towards reclaiming normality.

Getting back to some sort of working normality will be great for everyone's state of mind...



- Completely agree**
- Broadly agree**
- Neither agree nor disagree**
- Broadly disagree**
- Completely disagree**



Key fact - 83% of people feel that a return to a working normality will make a positive difference to their state of mind.

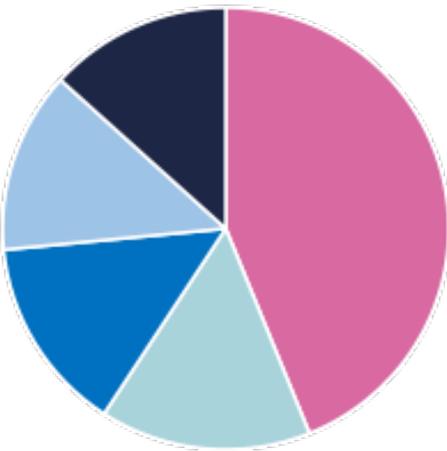
Key takeout - We shouldn't forget how important work, the workplace and working colleagues are to our psychological outlook. In whatever form a return takes, people are looking for an end to the strange, alien existence of the last few months.

Creating a safe, post Covid workplace

Part of this reassurance rests on what steps an organisation is taking, or plans to take, to protect its workforce. Organisations wishing to hire in the current environment need to make it clear, either at interview stage or prior to that on their careers site, what they are doing to protect their people. If they truly value them as an asset, then how are they demonstrating this?

People have been hand-sanitising, avoiding loved ones, mask-wearing and social-distancing at home – what is the equivalent experience and protection in the workplaces they are returning to?

You are doing some research on a potential new employer. What are the most important Covid-19 related areas you need to know about?



- They have implemented rigorous hygiene protocols
- That they are aware of what their people went through
- Implementation of social distancing on their premises
- They are taking mental health seriously
- The WFH options they offer

It is no surprise the most obvious question that people want an answer for, as regards a potential new employer, relates to working from home. So many more jobs can and have been done from home than we previously thought possible.

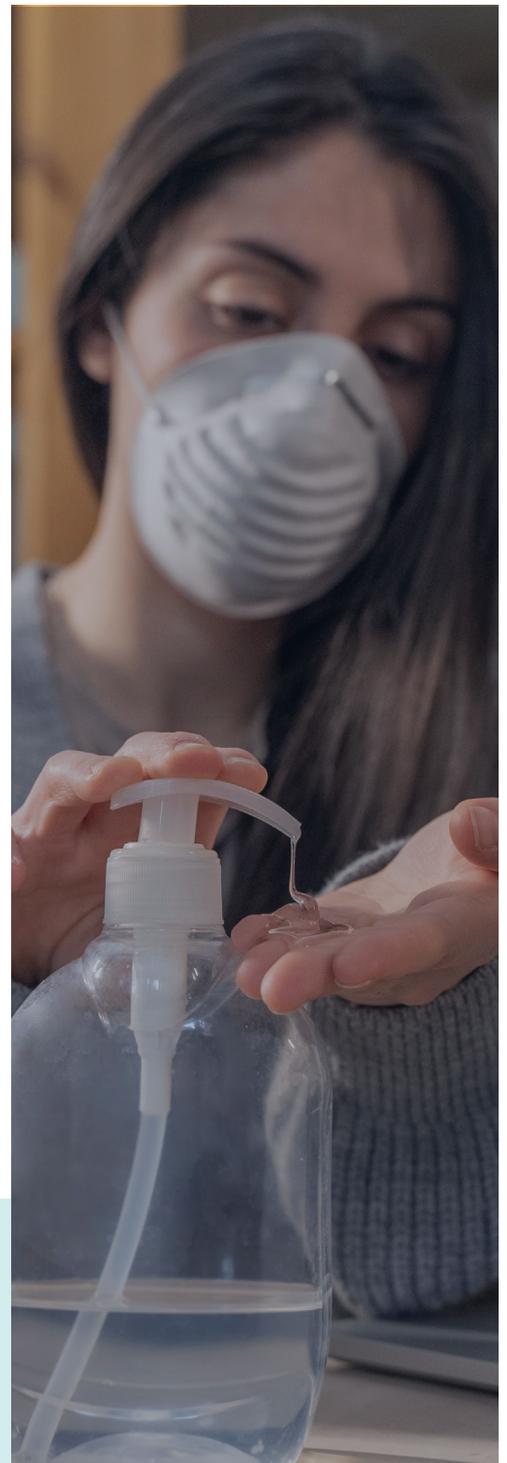
The more questions around mental health provision, workplace social distancing, awareness and consideration and hygiene to which a hiring organisation can provide credible answers, the greater the sense of reassurance and recognition they will convey.



of respondents admitted working from home options were the most important thing to know about.

Key takeout – Working from home has been transformed from a concept to an absolute working reality for millions of us – it is not, however, the only Covid-19 related issue that people are concerned about.

Key fact – Overall, more people want to know about an employer's hygiene, employee distancing, recognition and mental health provision than working from home.



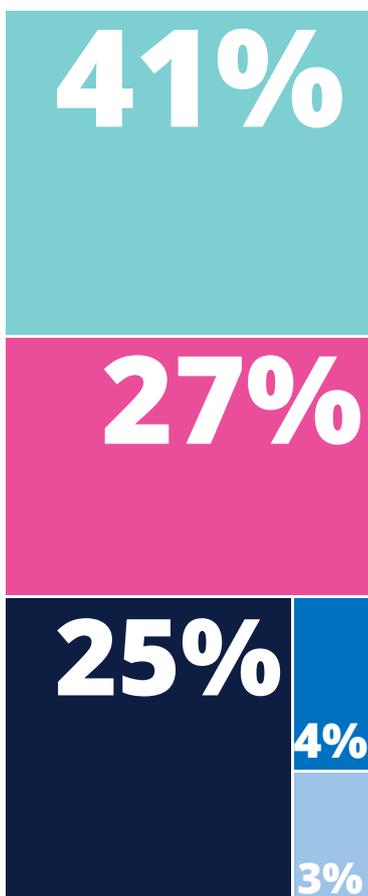
Giving your people a voice around how they go through Covid-19

But perhaps the greatest sense of reassurance a job hunter is looking for relates to how an employer's people felt they were treated during lockdown.

One of the key pieces of due diligence a candidate is likely to undertake is around employee stories on a careers site or social media. Are such stories up to date? Do they reference how an organisation kept its people in the loop? How it communicated any necessary furloughing? How it outlined what the next six months might look like?

Or do the people stories they come across feel archaically pre-coronavirus? As if the virus and all of its aftermath never happened?

If I'm on an organisation's careers site, I'm going to take a real interest in the stories their people tell about how they were supported during COVID-19...



- Completely agree
- Broadly agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Broadly disagree
- Completely disagree

When something as significant and all-encompassing as Covid-19 strikes, then it is impossible and ill-advised to ignore it. It will affect every workplace in the world. Those organisations who choose not to reference it feel disrespectful of what has happened to customers, stakeholders and employees.

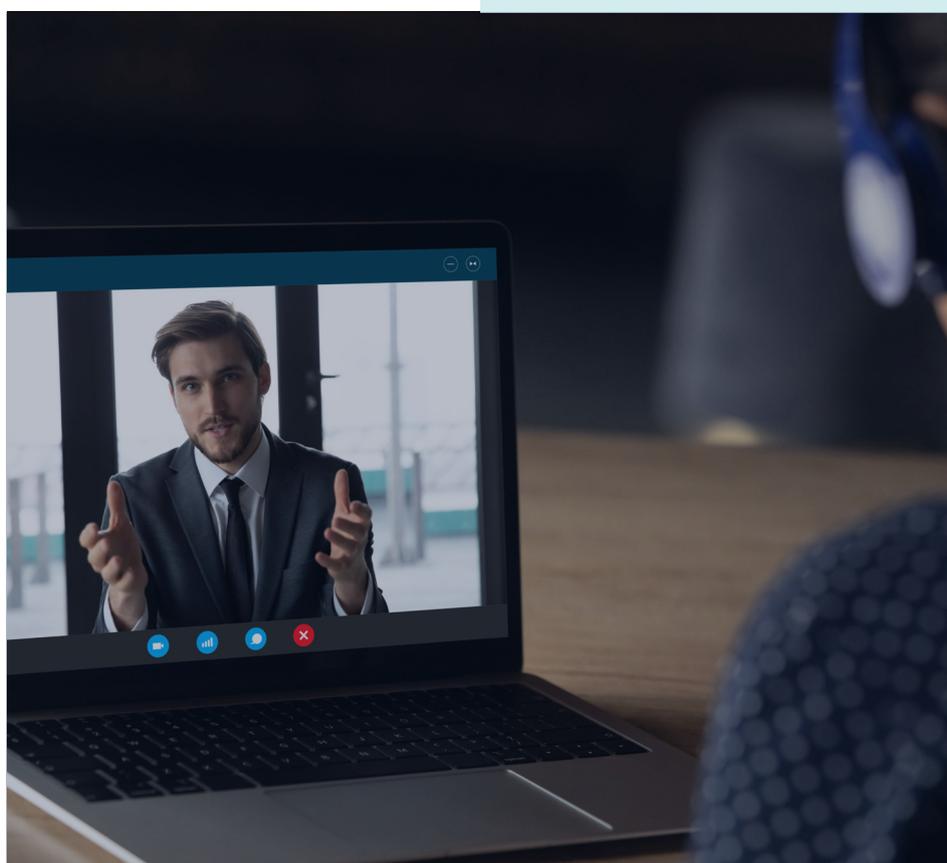
Many organisations are already featuring employee stories touching on the support, backing and resources they have provided their people. Those people, in return, are having their stories posted on careers websites. Would-be candidates want to understand whether this new prospective employer has worked harder, done more to get its people through this hardest and strangest of times than where they currently work.

And they may draw their own conclusions around those organisations not promoting such stories and narrative.



Key fact - Just 7% of candidates would take no interest in Covid-related stories on your careers site.

Key takeout - Not recognising what your people have been through and how you have helped them as an organisation feels short-sighted and tone deaf - it's also a key pulse check for would-be candidates.

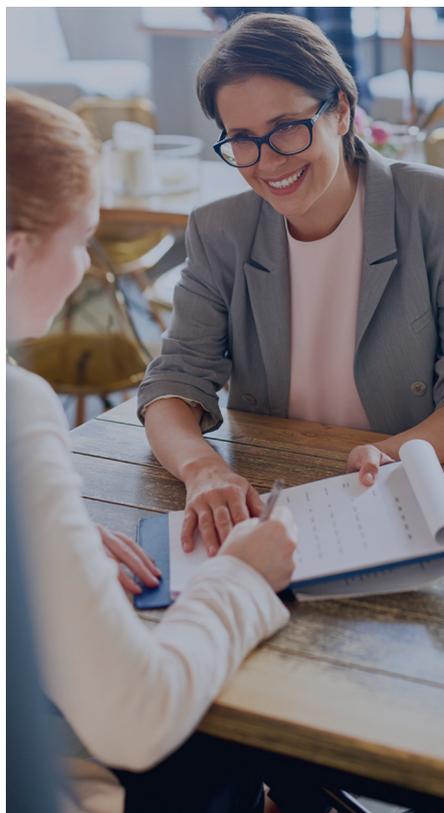


Your behaviour as an employer is your Employer Brand for the foreseeable future

If we are to gauge the true depth of candidate feeling around a recruiting organisation's response to the Covid-19 crisis, then the following graph speaks volumes. There appears little room for organisations to hide.

The advice to employers wishing to hire feels clear. How you communicated with and engaged with your people during lockdown is critical. It will be a key feature of how you are judged as an organisation and an employer. If you did this well, then don't be shy about it, plenty of people, plenty of audiences, will want to know how great you were.

If you didn't shine, you have two choices. Ignore it and see how that plays out. Or realise and acknowledge that things could have gone better, double your efforts around engagement, communication, support and empathy and see what sort of a difference this makes to your workforce – today's and tomorrow's.



"How companies responded and acted during Covid-19 will form a huge base from which potential employees will make their judgements from."

93%

You are looking at two potential new employers. Which do you go for?

7%

went for an organisation that is secure but treated its people poorly during Covid-19

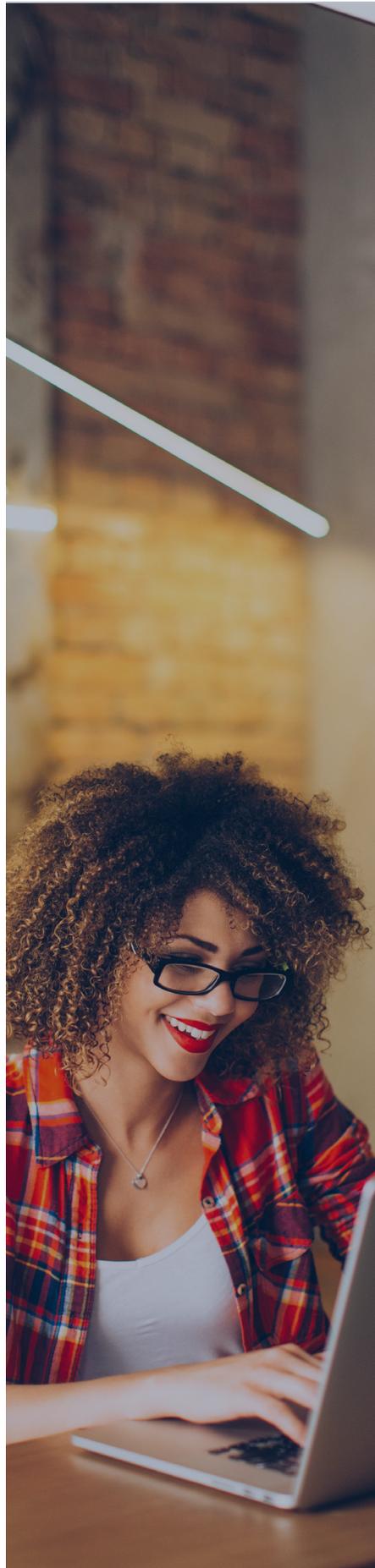
went for an organisation with challenges but was great to its people during Covid-19



Key takeout - if your people are telling you how well you treated them during Covid-19, don't be quiet about this, it will be a key feature of your employer brand, reputation, EVP and people messaging moving forward.

Employer actions

- The majority of employers have communicated well with their people during the last four months. For those organisations, keep up this momentum. For those that didn't, your people are likely to be feeling neglected, out of sight and out of mind, whether they are working from home or have been furloughed. Don't expect them to hang around as and when things start to improve, unless you start to improve;
- Communications with employees have generally been positive, but again people want honesty and clarity. Given them an idea – and plenty haven't – about what the next 6 months looks like. Give them an idea of what they are working towards;
- The recruitment market is still open as far as potential job changers are concerned. They are wary and fearful but just 39% have ruled out looking for a new employer. Great candidates are out there;
- If your organisation hasn't been great about the way it has supported and communicated with its people, then this won't be a secret. Your people will be talking about this and sharing horror stories. You need to listen to them, establish the extent of the issue and get ahead of the problem;
- If you do identify a problem through such listening, then it's going to be influencing your Employer Brand and your ability to hire. That won't go away. Your Employer Brand is damaged – understand how, how much and what you need to do to fix it?



- You will still be able to hire but potentially from audiences that have little in the way of choice, rather than those currently in work;
- When you are going out to hire, Covid-19 has changed much, but people are still looking for many of the employee attributes they have always sought – progression, culture, recognition;
- Everything about people's lives have been put on hold – their careers are no different – they want to hear from organisations that can accelerate their professional journey;
- But, at the same time, you need to be clear about what you are doing in terms of Covid-19. What are your policies now around working from home and the technology and communications to support this?
- What are you doing about mental health provision and workplace social distancing? Because of the daily bombardment of negative headlines, many of the candidates will assume the recruitment market is closed. If you're going out with a message to attract, make sure such a message is clear, confident and reassuring;
- And make sure it leads on to a careers site which is populated with stories of how your people were supported during lockdown;
- Everything has changed. And changed quickly. If your Employee Value Proposition and your messaging remain the same, what does that say about you, and particularly in the minds eye of potential candidates?



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Zoek is the fastest-growing global job search site/app that uses intelligent job matching technology to find and connect job seekers to hirers, and vice versa.

“Our mission is to revolutionise the global job board market through innovative technology, delivering value to hirers and a superlative experience to candidates searching for a new job.”

Zoek offers a variety of flexible models to post job adverts, as well as popular multi-poster integrations to expand your recruitment process and track all applicants through our hirer portal.

If you're looking to add some fresh talent to your business, register for a hirer account on **www.zoek.uk/hirer** and start posting your jobs! For more information contact us using the details above.



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Neil has worked in the field of Employer Branding for the past 25 years, initially heading up the team responsible for the creation of EVPs, Employer Branding and people insights at the agency TMP, then establishing his own business focusing on this field.

He has delivered EVP, Employer Branding and talent intelligence solutions for the likes of Unilever, Santander, Graphcore, Coty, Telefonica, the University of Sheffield as well as Manchester Met. He has delivered university lectures on the subject and trains organisations around EVP creation and delivery.

He is a firm believer in the inside-out nature of the EVP – that what an organisation presents to the outside world in terms of candidate attraction has to be born out of the internal employee experience and prevailing culture. His work has seen him operating in the US, Asia as well as throughout Europe, working with multinational organisations as well as domestic ones, across a wide number of fields.