

■ OPINION

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Lockdown city will show its 'bouncebackability'

SO HERE we are deep in darkest lockdown. Businesses are seriously hurting. Some shops will reopen but the number of businesses in deep trouble is expanding almost daily. Might Debenhams, Oasis, Warehouse, even the whole of intu's shopping centre not survive? And what of government help and promises?

Businesses here in Milton Keynes are, as elsewhere it seems, frequently confused by the ever-changing bail-out schemes offered. There is a good deal of confusion on who can claim, how they can claim, whether to furlough staff or not, what breaks are available on normally time-sensitive payments to HM Revenue & Customs and how to get loans from banks under the government scheme without giving away your true assets; intellectual property, buildings, land, equipment, trucks and cars.

However these schemes might eventually settle down, one thing is almost certain: come the end of lock-

down, businesses worldwide, not just in Milton Keynes, will never be the same again. We will, I'm certain, see many once thriving businesses gone forever. Closed down. Kaput. Extinct. And that is a true tragedy. Personally, I still miss Maplin... and Bunnings.

We've all heard voices, some whispered, some strident, asking whether the effects of the 'cure' for the COVID-19 coronavirus are worse than the effects of the 'disease'. Others are claiming all sorts of other devious motives for what has been happening; some totally bizarre, some definitely worthy of consideration. I shall, however, ignore them all here but please do your own research.

I prefer, in these pages, to be more positive. I'm genuinely hopeful that of all Britain's business centres Milton Keynes, with its 'can-do' attitude and world-leading ability to start new businesses, will prove itself the No.1 home for sheer bloody-minded, bouncebackability.

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I frequently criticise Milton Keynes Council for its ability to blithely destroy those things we love about this extraordinary place. And I might easily write this month about how they are planning to reduce all the speeds on our much-loved grid road system and install new at-grade crossings to disrupt traffic flow, their consultation on this having now closed.

I might describe how they plan to remove parking spaces in the city centre as our population doubles and build new homes with zero parking spaces and therefore no car-charging points. But I shan't go into that here.

I might mention how despite their claims about making Milton Keynes the most sustainable city in the world, we currently have zero electric buses when we should have 19 and how opportunities to get more government funding for them have been entirely wasted. But you won't read that here. Oh no, I'm going to be far more positive in these difficult times.

Indeed, criticising the council is something I'm determined not to do right now, even though I'm tortured by the need to question why they've arbitrarily cancelled all green waste and food bins just as the entire population, pretty much, is stuck at home and other than watching Netflix and getting fat, is doing gardening. Instead, I'm happy to report their oh-so-convincing reason for this apparent act of cultural vandalism: "*Due to reduced staff numbers* [seriously, can't they find anyone right now who really, really, really needs a job, particularly as we are all still paying

council tax?] *and to protect the weekly collection of black and clear sacks we're stopping food and garden waste collections throughout Milton Keynes after regular collections on Friday 3 April until the situation improves.*"

I might ordinarily ask what exactly are people who live in flats supposed to do with their food waste? Don't those geniuses at the council think that they'll hide it in other waste sacks or just litter the streets with it or, for those with gardens, dump it there? Surely, both acts will significantly increase Milton Keynes' notorious rat problem?

But no, not a word from me on any of that. I'm socially distancing myself from it all.

I'm sticking to bouncebackability. That's my theme this month and it's one I truly believe in.

Good luck all. Cheerio.

■ OPINION

Learning curve may lead to greater capability

Emma Parry, who heads the changing world of work group at Cranfield School of Management, gives her thoughts on the future of work.

IN A TIME when we are all adjusting to a new way of working as a result of COVID-19, it is interesting to reflect on what this might mean for how we work in the longer term.

Over the past two weeks, many employers have been forced to both reconsider the global mobility of their workforce and to facilitate the large-scale adoption of home working. Prior to this, despite a common rhetoric around the decline of the physical office, evidence suggests relative low levels of home working - less than five per cent - with little signs of this growing considerably in the near future.

Will COVID-19 represent a shock to the system that changes our ways of working moving forward so that

higher numbers of individuals work at home? Certainly, many more individuals will have developed the capability to work at home in relation to using relevant technologies. Organisations have also been forced to invest in such technology and to modify formal processes in order to manage a remote workforce. Managers might also develop the skills in supporting and developing a workforce that is not located with them physically.

These changes undoubtedly mean that working at home might be easier moving forward. Some employees might also discover that they prefer working outside of an office environment.

Let us not forget, however, the evidence of the importance of social interaction for wellbeing and



Professor Emma Parry

mental health. The social environment that a physical workplace offers is an essential part of the employee experience for many. Therefore I would expect to

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see more people work at home - and for people to work at home more often - but perhaps not the landslide of a change that some others are predicting.

One aspect that might be more likely to change is international travel, particularly short business trips for meetings or events. This period of isolation coincides with continuing improvements in technology for collaboration and communication and faster internet connections across much of the

world. Coupled with increasing concerns about the impact of air travel on the environment, this might represent a tipping point that will lead to more significant and longer-term change.

It remains to be seen how the COVID-19 pandemic affects our ways of working in the long term. It is clear that we are all on a steep learning curve that might lead to increased capabilities and efficiencies in the future. It would be naive not to expect some long-term change as a result of this but the extent of this is yet to be seen.

I would recommend that organisations weigh up the benefits of different approaches outside the current situation and develop their people strategies accordingly.

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