



HARD TIMES  
MAKE  
COMPANIES  
STRONGER

How this pandemic made our people  
more resilient and agile

# 18 months ago,

the world changed, and our agency reached a tipping point that completely transformed the way we work. We were forced into a 'new normal' where colleagues were asked to work from home.

As a result, the COVID-19 crisis, and the challenging times that followed, affected one of the foundations of our agency: our company culture.

Yet, we have kept an open mind: we have seen this pandemic as an incredible opportunity to rethink our priorities and focus on our strongest asset: our people. By focusing on **mental health**, upweighting internal **communication**, making a step change in **flexibility** and building the **tech infrastructure** for remote working, we are weathering the crisis with learnings to boot for the future.



HOW  
ARE  
YOU,  
REALLY?

1000 CHURCH STREET  
**OVERALL  
MURALS**  
SINCE 2010

# Prioritising mental health

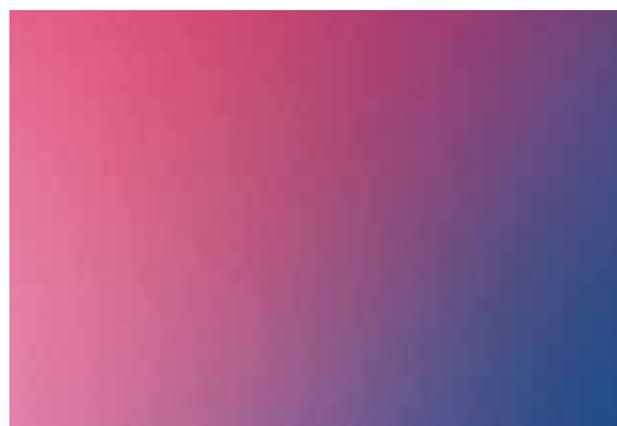
According to the OECD, the pandemic has led to “a sharp increase in **mental ill-health** issues.” Hopefully, many companies have acted to mitigate this challenge, which has become a fundamental concern for employees working from home with little to no real-life social interaction. This increase in **mental health** issues includes stress related to dealing with COVID-19 news reports, balancing responsibilities at work with obligations at home, losing social contact, losing motivation and satisfaction in life and falling into burnout or depression.

Like many companies, Ogilvy Social Lab has instituted a psychological assistance programme to support all employees, prevent any burnout and reduce feelings of loneliness. This free and confidential support service has allowed our employees to talk to a professional about their experience, get practical tips and ultimately take some distance from work to reflect positively on the previous months. The simple fact of knowing that someone is there to help goes a long way in making us feel less lonely.

But, while these services are important and can help employees weather the storm, this support is not the only effective tactic to uplift the general mood. Companies in our industry can also schedule regular check-ins between colleagues to get a sense of how

people feel. For many, this might be seen as a waste of time, but our HR team has phoned each and every one of our employees to catch up and show genuine support – for us, a golden opportunity to thank employees for putting in the work in such challenging times. In addition, the HR team ran a weekly ‘temperature check’ to assess the mood or the company, and identify possible problem areas or people that really needed help.

The lack of social events has also affected our **mental health** during the pandemic. It has reminded us that we are all social animals after all, striving to meet, communicate and learn from others. Once again, companies have a responsibility to keep a form of continuity in this field. Creativity is key for coming up with fun activities for employees. How about organising an online Thanksgiving feast, sending gifts for Christmas and Easter or giving away vouchers for pizza deliveries? All these ideas seem trivial, but having fun should be a key part of any company culture because it sets a positive tone for all other interactions, and breaks the routine of working from home.





# Communicating through uncertainty

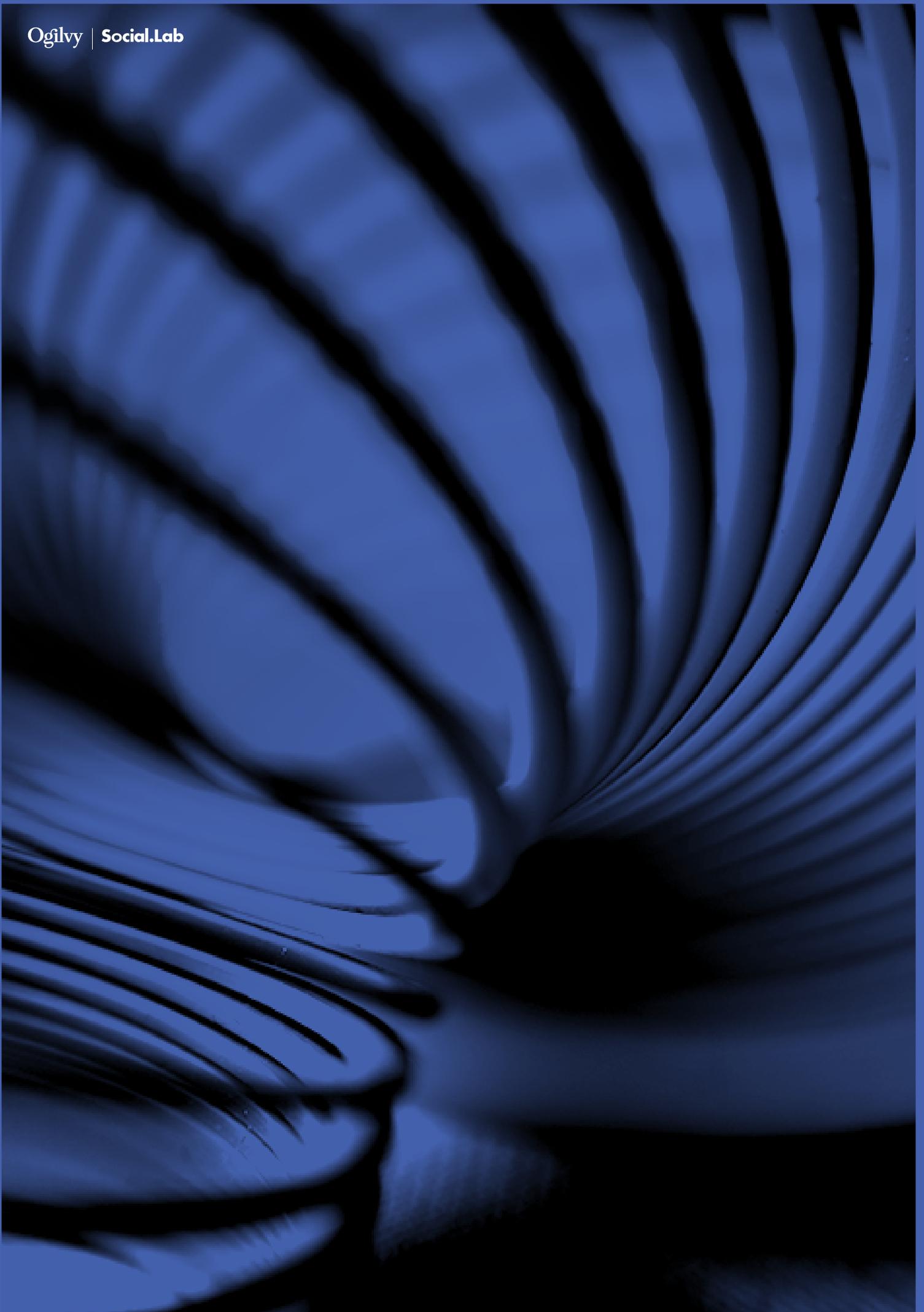
**M**any agencies in our industry have been impacted by the pandemic because of the uncertainty that resonated after the first lockdown measures. Unsurprisingly, about a third of all **communication** agencies operating in Belgium were concerned about the uncertainty that most employees experienced towards the COVID-19 situation and the governmental measures (You and Corona, ACC Report, April 2020). This uncertainty flowed in all streams of business, putting undoubtedly more pressure on management to keep employees informed and motivated while helping to regain a sense of serenity.

For us, this pressure turned into a flow of constant **communication** with our employees. We listened to them through internal surveys, and shared working-from-home tips and “small talk” posts to spark conversations on social media. We shared more useful instructions and offered access to many tools to help our people work from home. In addition, Rob Hill, our CEO, started sharing his personal thoughts and regular news on how our agency is adjusting to the

government’s latest decisions. By increasing the frequency of internal **communications**, and using online social communities like Facebook Groups, we’ve sustained a sense of belonging and engagement.

These initiatives have given us a sense of proximity and transparency that we lacked many months prior. Listening to employees and promoting dialogue is always a winning strategy. It helps companies provide the information and perspective employees need to process negative emotions and reduce uncertainty. Without falling into the trap of over-communicating, we think that many companies can gain from similar practices.

In the end, reducing uncertainty relies on a company’s ability to clearly communicate its mid to long-term goals and set clear objectives to protect employees from excessive disruption. The implications of change due to the COVID-19 pandemic are gigantic. But building a supportive culture where management informs and trusts employees has allowed us to be more resilient.



# Boosting flexibility

**F**lexibility is about when, where and how people work to better meet individual and business needs. These last months have shown how **flexibility** is key and how it needs to be progressive and adaptive.

“ Employees have proven that working from home is a viable business solution; it's now crucial that they are rewarded with greater **flexibility** and control over their work-life balance ”

*David Casa,  
rapporteur for European Parliament's  
report on work-life balance for parents  
and carers in the Parliament Magazine*

In past months, **flexibility** has been the leading principle in our industry. It was built on the idea of a mutually beneficial agreement between both the employer and the employee to get the best results. While **flexibility** has its own set of challenges, for employees, it means, among other things, that they can easily meet their family and personal needs, nurture their passions, and reduce commute time. Companies will benefit from a higher level of engagement from employees, acquire the best talents, save costs and eventually

reach the golden triple bottom line that focuses on people, profit and planet.

Easier said than done. How can we get this right? Companies need to cultivate a flexible and trusting culture focused on the following rules:

- ▶ **Flex-time:** Allowing employees to have flexible work arrangements with flexible arrival and departure times, permission to be out-of-office, unpaid leave and sabbatical, and free afternoons on birthdays
- ▶ **Flex-place:** Providing more opportunities to work from home, use co-working areas, and benefit from an expat, 'work from anywhere' policy
- ▶ **Flex-processes:** Providing access to tools and software, digitised onboarding and educational material

**Flexibility** is by definition a constant learning process, but staying optimistic and reactive will help to navigate the coming months, as governments eventually roll out new measures to loosen up restrictions that have and will continue to impact our business. Moving forward, companies should think about how **flexibility** could work for the employee, his or her team but also the company as a whole.

MAKE  
YOURSELF  
COMFORTABLE  
AT HOME

AT HOME  
COMFORTABLE  
YOURSELF

# Providing more tech support

In past months, we have relied on technology more and more to get the work done.

Alongside upgrading the technology we use, we also improved the technology employees have access to with our **'Make Yourself Comfortable at Home'** initiative. The initiative allows employees to choose the equipment that will help them improve their home office space with larger monitors, comfortable chairs and decorative items. This free scheme has helped employees be more prepared for the demands of homeworking. Virtual communications are different and won't be perfect, but equipping employees with the right tools helps them to stay safe and get the work done in a secure way.

Improving the way we work has not only changed the way we support clients in our industry, it has, first and foremost,

transformed the way we treat our employees. Resiliency can only be built around concrete actions that support better mental health, and a safe and more flexible environment, free from technological glitches.

There will not be a return to a "business as usual" situation. We have entered a new environment where a job is more than just a pay check, it needs to be employee-centric, flexible and adaptive. It's also about constant learning, engagement and remaining open to regular improvements and adjustments. At Ogilvy Social Lab, we've learnt some valuable lessons about the importance that mental health awareness, communication, enhanced flexibility and technology can have on the resilience of culture in tough times.

▶ Stay tuned for more articles where we look at the HR initiatives that have shaped our company culture in the past months.

For more information about our flexible remote working initiatives, feel free to contact Cedric van Kan ([cedric.vankan@ogilvy.com](mailto:cedric.vankan@ogilvy.com)).

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