

MINDFULLY RETHINKING THE MINDFUL BUSINESS CHARTER

Professional Development
- By **Paul McKeating**

Paul McKeating, Business Development Lead (Disputes), discusses reframing the Charter in light of the new working environments the pandemic has forced upon us.

It was November 2019 when I first wrote about the Mindful Business Charter in the context of Marketing and Business Development, and how mindful leaders in professional services firms can effect change and improve mental health and wellbeing for their teams. It was a time with no thought to and (somewhat blissfully) no awareness of the seismic changes to the entire planet that the year 2020 was going to bring.

Now, more than ever, the business community needs to be brave, as encouraged by the Mindful Business Charter. How will the elements of the Charter need to be updated, expanded or simply reframed as more people will be asked to work in teams that rarely meet in person? And how will those who do still want to work in an office environment be supported?

It's good to talk

The first pillar of the Mindful Business Charter, concerning building trust and effective communication, has never been more pertinent than over the past six months or so. 'Normal' working patterns for marketing and BD teams were disrupted by the pandemic, as people began to navigate office closures, school closures, caring responsibilities and shielding the medically vulnerable.

Many teams, although already successfully 'dipping a toe' into agile working patterns, have had to work remotely full time, physically distant from their stakeholders and without the benefits of face-to-face networking, both internally and externally with clients. In this 'time of COVID', the line in the Charter around "clarifying any relevant implications of an individual's working patterns" simply jumps out from the page and even further underlines the importance of the Charter's promotion of respect and courtesy.

As a Mental Health Champion at my firm, I have been incredibly proud of the culture of openness and support that has been built around mental health. The Champion scheme,

which was designed to train employees with an interest in mental health on how best to support others and provide effective sign-posting, has been more valuable than ever in 2020. The pandemic has brought challenges for many in terms of mental health and wellbeing, for example through feelings of anxiety, isolation or loneliness and the topic has, often literally, been at the top of agendas across the firm for Partners and Business Services Leaders alike.

Promoting a culture where people can speak up early about any concerns that they might have with their wellbeing (or the wellbeing of colleagues) is a key commitment for signatories of the Mindful Business Charter, and this matters now more than ever. Talking openly about my own experiences of virus-related anxiety in a supportive environment at work has been hugely cathartic.

The email conundrum

The soundtrack to the pandemic? For those working from home, aside from the sound of home schooling or rambunctious new puppies, it surely has to be the wavy beeps and bouncy tones of an incoming Skype call or Teams meeting. For much of 2020, those platforms (along with Zoom and others) have all but replaced physical team meetings. However, for marketing and BD teams already collaborating across geographies and time zones, this transition was made much easier by the existing familiarity with concept of virtual meetings. Few would argue that this type of collaboration can completely replace face-to-face meetings, but while we continue to be restricted in such activities and of course in travel, we must find a measured balance of email and virtual meetings. We should be aware of the impact of staring at a computer screen throughout the day can have, and take regular breaks.

For me personally, 'Zoom-Fatigue' set in around April or May, after I would find myself staring at my laptop screen all day and then again into the evenings to connect with family and friends after working hours or to attend my tenth virtual pub quiz of the week. Whilst sticking to my mindful mantra of removing email alerts and push notifications, email can of course also provide a welcome respite of ploughing through a to-do list in one's own time. There will be a balance to find for smart emailing and (when we meet again) for smart meetings.

Switching off at home?

For many of us, the pandemic has acted as a catalyst for new ways of working. Agile working policies amongst professional services firms are rapidly evolving, with leaders recognising that teams have welcomed having even more flexibility to decide how, where and when they work, gaining more time for their families, health and other commitments. Signatories to the Mindful Business Charter should embrace this change; firms and their clients are unlikely to return to the strict 'business hours' of the working week of yore. A balance in communication, exceptional time management skills and managing expectations of working times, will all be key in promoting wellbeing amongst marketing and BD professionals.

We should be creative in looking at new ways to work; working from home full time would have been unthinkable even in 2019, yet few would argue that the enforced test has not been largely successful. It remains vital to be able to draw distinctions between time for 'work' and time for 'rest'. However, it cannot be overstated that in many ways the office in its traditional form remains an important place for connection, collaboration and learning, with clients and with each other, and the Mindful Business Charter should reflect this new balance as our offices, cities, working practices and daily lives continue to evolve.

Mindfully delegating

Collaboration, instruction and delegation are all key elements of the Mindful Business Charter. Negotiating a deadline, rather than imposing an arbitrary one, remains an important factor in improving wellbeing, brought to the fore even more so as our working patterns continue to change. It's unlikely that a deadline for time-critical pieces of work such as pitches can be moved, but we should still have the confidence to flag the unrealistic or unachievable in many areas.

Collaboration has taken on new formats – virtual water coolers, coffee breaks and social events have become the norm (although I wholeheartedly resist using the term 'new normal'), and while this new form of socialising is unlikely to replace those 'real life' interactions, they are vital to continuing to create links and bonds between teams. Take the time to spend time with your teams – whilst working from home, the norm should never be 'out of sight, out of mind'. Embracing technology forms a key part of this.

Do we need to rethink?

The pandemic and the situation in which the world finds itself in 2021 has amplified the vital importance of the pillars of the Mindful Business Charter. At its heart, the Charter calls for businesses to do things differently. If anything, its key messages of bravery and commerciality are even more important now and will continue to be so in a post-pandemic world, as the business world faces challenges unlikely to be experienced more than once in a generation. Some have commented that "the Charter is not a panacea". Perhaps the Mindful Business Charter doesn't need a re-think in a post-COVID world, because it was already ahead in its thinking; it needs us all to be brave and to continue to embrace the change, thinking about the present and indeed the future.

In many ways, the authors and signatories of the Mindful Business Charter were just one step ahead. It's encouraging to see that the rest of the world is catching up.

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