

Discovery COVID-19 Podcast Series

Transcript: James Gower – Employee Wellbeing during COVID-19

May 2020

	Speaker	Dialogue	
00:00	VO Intro	You're listening to the Discovery COVID-19 Podcast. Our expert guests help you understand Coronavirus disease 2019 and how you can manage your health, wellbeing, and financial security during this time.	00:16
00:16	James Gower	Hi. I'm James Gower. A psychologist with counselling practice in Alberton, and Bryanston and extensive experience in employee wellness programs. Today, I would like to share my thoughts on COVID-19, facilitating a dramatic way in the way we work - just for now? Or forever?	00:37
00:28		<p>Since we can remember, all of us have been working like ants. Day in and day out. Repeating the same behavioural patterns that we were used to and that we believed were efficient, productive, and expected. South African employers and employees have been a well-oiled economic machine. Most employers expected a certain standard of work, whereas most employees provided that which was expected and sometimes even more. Work, work, and more work. Employees waking up at five, going to the gym, taking the children to school, having a nanny or aftercare look after the children while you were in meetings, boardrooms or at our open planned desks in offices until we collected our children, went home, cooked dinner, helped with homework, watched some TV and slept, only to hit the repeat button the next day.</p> <p>But then we encountered an obstacle. A great, formidable wall. Greater than any of our preconceived and completely accepted and expected behaviours could manage: COVID-19. This obstacle changed every aspect of our lives; how we live, work, eat, sleep, and generally interact with every other human being on our plant. It started in Wuhan, China, far away. We thought we were safe. The virus, however, had other plans. It spread and spread and spread. Previous measures we had put in place with the SARS virus and even Swine flu were completely ineffective. We needed to change, and speed was essential. Change was our only tool in an empty and unprepared arsenal. Employers who had previously encouraged in-office, open plan, socially interactive work environments, due to their</p>	02:56

		proven increase in productivity had to change the concept completely. Being close up and in close proximity spreads the horribly contagious virus named COVID-19.	
02:57		The answer was, wear masks, sanitise, personal distancing and eventually, if you could, and later had to, work from home. Tools that have always been available to us like Zoom, Skype, teleconferencing and the use of email, now became the way to communicate and manage our business environment and keep the wheels turning. Although these actions have been necessary, they've had serious positive and negative effects within the corporate world and our households.	03:34
03:36		Let's first focus on the perspective of the employee. Our previously perfectly time managed schedules have had to change completely and yet is this necessarily a negative? There are no more long commutes that could last up to two hours a day to and from the office. This saves a tremendous amount of time and eliminates a significant frustration, helping with anger management as we don't experience sitting in traffic unproductively every day and we don't have to put up with other drivers and their bad driving habits as well as giving us up to two hours of time which we can use productively now. We now have more time with our children and family that have been in lockdown with us. We actually see our children grow up and accomplish tasks. As an employee, we can start our day with a much more relaxed and balanced attitude and this in essence should increase productivity in itself. We can manage our time much more effectively, setting up to a schedule that includes work, family and especially that work-life balance that so many of us have lacked. Our work can also be more predictable and structured. Open plan offices are wonderful for a quick question to a co-worker, but it can also hinder an employee who wants to focus on a goal and accomplish a task without interruptions. In the South African work environment, we've also been a bit stuck in the rut of endless meetings that in essence simply have the goal of distributing information, which could have probably been done more effectively via other media. Now those endless meeting that consumed our productive work time at our desks can be condensed into emails that are read in the time available. It is also easier to identify what media suits the goal that a person wants to accomplish better. Helping to streamline communication with the appropriate communication method, used for the appropriate task. For example, a Skype meeting for a face-to-face encounter or Zoom webinar for brainstorming, however, we also need to look at changes due to transformation of the workplace into a	06:42

		virtual reality and the obstacles not anticipated. Multitasking has become a way of life. Now you are mommy, daddy, teacher, employee, childminder, counsellor, and the list goes on. This needs to be managed effectively and with caution. We'll be used to having a complete split between work and home. Well the ones that try to practice healthy work-life balance, anyway. Now, it is all merged.	
06:43		A child of 2 years old wants mommy or daddy now. This can be managed by setting schedules and alternating tasks and many other creative solutions. This may appear to prolong the day, in a sense but the quality time that you have is worth it. After a bit of trial and error, of course. Having to spend 24 hours a day with a partner you may have previously tolerated for the children's sake can go either way. It can make or break a relationship. I've found that with proper guidance and counselling, which can also happen over Skype or Zoom or other platforms with a psychologist or counsellor can assist tremendously in this growth period and does not need to become a negative. Flexibility becomes the norm. Employees need to take appropriate responsibility to perform their work , communicate effectively with their employer , multitask, have a balance between work and their personal lives and work together with their partners to ensure a cohesive and healthy functioning system	07:55
07:56		We also need to look at the impact to the employer. Contrary to popular belief and maybe more over the long term, employers can also benefit hugely from the transition from open plan offices to distance work via media and technology. Astronomical physical, retail, and business structure expenses can be avoided. The unneeded retail and office space costs could be utilised to the rapid acceleration of digital platform uptake to facilitate remote work. Although some companies will still have to have some office space available for specific needs and circumstances, these offices will have to be minimal and include certain health security measures. This could range from screens to masks, regular testing of body temperature and scanning equipment that could indicate where an employee has been within the company premises and whom he or she has been in contact with, should there be any indication at a later stage that they have tested positive for COVID-19 or any other pathogen. Even and especially with distance work, managers can monitor the staff more effectively with cyber monitor programs. Goals set can be measured with set time frames that could be a much more effective tool to establish KPAs and KPIs with less subjective input from managers. This could even have the positive effect of less disputes from employees regarding their yearly evaluations. When	10:47

		<p>we look at the revolutionary open plan office, it is clear, the presumed positive impact it provided in the past is now possibly a thing of the past. It has always been proven and disputed that open plan offices are more effective, yet many researchers suggest that it was an economical decision by companies in the past to minimise office space. Irrespective of this controversy, offices will probably have to be redesigned for the future, and physical distancing will become a necessity with or without an open plan concept. Open plan offices can definitely be present in our future, however, change on office design is paramount. The distancing between employees and the method of providing physical distancing will have to change. For example, half a metre screens may become 2.5 metre screens and the distance between occupants will probably increase as well</p>	
10:48		<p>Where companies cannot function completely without a workforce that is physically present, and in close proximity, for example the manufacturing industry, very stringent and long-term health, and hygiene standards we'll have to put in place. Masks, sanitisers, taking peoples temperatures on site and sanitising entrance and exit booths, education of employees regarding health and safety outside the workplace as well as many more precautions yet to be identified. We need to be sensitive to the employees and employer's needs especially when the lockdown phases move into lesser stringent categories. Employees need to reach their goals, but employers also need to be careful in their expectations. We are all eager to return to a sense of some normality, but we run the risk of overreaching and over working ourselves and each other. We need to build and strengthen the economy over time and systematically. We cannot afford to tempt it at the great cost of overly high expectations for employers and eventual burnout from employees. This will not strengthen us, it will, in the long run, destroy us.</p>	12:15
12:16		<p>In conclusion, COVID-19 is a fact. It has changed all of our lives and the way we think irrevocably and even made some of us paranoid and live in fear. There are lots of negatives, but it has changed us and made us grow in a forward direction. Even though it may not seem like it, there are opportunities for growth and hopefully, eventual economic triumph. Just as conflict is sometimes a needed catalyst for change, we need to utilise this horrible, intrusive, and destructive pandemic and find some meaning in the situation to establish positive change for our future. A future that takes a negative and creates opportunity and growth around it and in spite of it. We will have to change the way we work, the way we interact and the way we live. But we will live. We will function, we will survive, and</p>	14:04

		<p>we will flourish. Maybe differently and with precautions but this pandemic will pass and just maybe, just maybe we will be more prepared for the future. We can see this a catastrophe, which it is, but we can pick ourselves up employee and employer together, we can go forward. We can stop fighting each other and become an employee/employer powerhouse. A better more balanced and more productive economy. At times, physically distanced, but socially integrated and healthy with a bright and sustainable future</p>	
14:07	VO Outro	<p>This podcast was brought to you by Discovery. Stay informed. Stay healthy.</p>	14:14