

COVID-19: Interview with Paul Statham, CEO of Condeco

Condeco is a market leader in workspace management and resource scheduling software that, during COVID-19 have pioneered a solution to enable social distancing in the workplace by controlling space and capacity to ensure employees are not exposed to risk. Maddyness spoke with Paul Statham, CEO of Condeco about how they have coped during lockdown and what the future holds.

I founded Condeco in 2005, and we employ 350 people working from our eight offices around the world. Historically, our customers have been larger-scale employers with a significant commercial real estate footprint, and these companies use our software to manage their meeting rooms and workspaces efficiently.

How did the initial lockdown in March impact your business plans?

In March, the work-from-home mandate set about by the UK, and most other governments around the world, came into force as the scale of the pandemic

became clear. While this was the right decision in light of the public health situation, for us, as providers of a software that helps people book physical space in offices, this put us in a challenging position. It became clear to management that, if this remained in place for a prolonged period of time, our software could essentially become redundant – at least, when applied to meeting rooms.

As a result, we potentially faced a cliff-edge drop off in new business if we didn't change our offering. At this point, we decided that we had to find a way to stay relevant in this new world, and the obvious solution was to adapt our desk scheduling technology to focus on the re-opening of offices, which we're now seeing happening in most European markets.

Could you tell us more about the product you came up with during the lockdown period?

It is called the 'return to office' desk booking tool, we've built a new frontend with a new UX, but it otherwise relies upon the existing Condeco technology stack. This is a hotel room-like booking system for office space providers, which allows companies to navigate the current regulations on phased office re-openings, office sensitization, track and trace and social distancing.

This allows businesses to limit office access to their employees, manage cleaning processes efficiently, and to track exposure to COVID-19 if an outbreak occurs in a workspace. Since its launch in early June, a growing number of organisations around the world have used the software to either help safely reopen their office space.

How did you come to the decision to invest so heavily in this new return-to-office safely product, and how did you develop it so quickly?

Quicker than you might think, the general delivery time for a product like this would be between 6 and 9 months, but our team of developers were able to ideate, develop, test and then launch this function in just 8 weeks. Before the lockdown I'd have considered myself to be fairly old school when it comes to remote working, with a general feeling that teams are more productive in the office – but, I've been surprised by just how efficient the team has been

working from home.

Primarily, I was concerned about how the product and engineering teams would have the creative freedom to develop a product that we could take to market in a really short time-period. But, these fears were entirely unfounded – the team were more efficient than ever.

“It’s safe to say that we’ll be more flexible in our approach to remote working in future.”

Do you think it is now safe for UK companies to begin re-opening their offices?

Yes, now is the right time for a phased re-opening, with the right procedures and technology in place. Particularly with larger companies, we’ve seen a big increase in demand for the technology to re-open, and this has largely happened in the last 5/6 weeks.

As with the re-opening of pubs, restaurants and shops, there will need to be tougher discussions around how to make the office safe – which the government doesn’t seem to be particularly willing to do at the moment. More clarity on the safe re-opening of offices will, we believe, lead to more companies trialling phased re-openings.

What kind of appetite is there among the corporates you work with to re-open?

The demand we’re seeing is consistent – a huge proportion of Britain’s largest companies are all looking to re-open their office space as of now, but only partially. Typically, we’re seeing large enterprises wanting to allow between 20% to 50% of their workforce into their offices, but rarely more than this at the moment. Our new business efforts, and our own planning, is based upon this trend lasting well into 2021.

We very strongly doubt that we'll see more businesses bringing back a higher proportion of staff before then. We're also seeing no real demographic trend either with companies sending back a balanced mix of junior and senior staff, it's not one or the other, as far as we can tell from the conversations we've had.

What do you think about the government's plans to re-open offices?

Through u-turns and vagueness, the government has completely fudged this issue. The initial suggestion that offices should look to bring back 50% of the workforce, with divisions of teams or shifts to reduce numbers on any given day, was simply too vague for businesses to make any meaningful plans. Likewise, the briefing on the economic impact of working from home in recent weeks, hasn't worked – businesses are concerned about liability, and won't be strongarmed into returning staff by a government that changes its mind on the issue on a near daily basis.

Coming to the office is driven by the desire to collaborate and socialise, and human nature and modern business practices will mean that this short-sighted plan to halve building usage through allocating people into teams and mandated shifts will undoubtedly fail. If we re-open offices without proper planning and capacity management, there is a very real danger that people will simply turn up, regardless of whether it is their allocated day.

If we aren't careful, office space will be overwhelmed and it will be impossible to properly socially distance inside them. Thankfully, large enterprises are showing more common sense than our own government.

What else could be done to ensure that offices re-open safely – is there anything else that companies should consider?

Yes, companies can listen to their employees and work with them to provide access to offices that meet the individuals' requirements. Some workers will jump at the chance to get back 5 days a week while others, who maybe have difficult commutes, or are more at risk, will plan much less time in the office. This flexibility and understanding will help encourage people back, while not mandating a process that feels unsafe or dictatorial.

Do you think there will ever be a full return to office work?

No, quite simply, things have changed forever. Employees will continue to want several days a week to work remotely, while still happy to go into the office 2/3 days for more collaborative work and in-person meetings. This is generally what we're hearing from the large FTSE 100 / Fortune 500 organisations that we work with.

The big change though, is that with the freedom to work from home, the design of the office will change, with less allocated desks and much more touchdown style desking, where people can use a workspace where and when they need it. This is one of the main reasons our 'return to office' software is gaining such strong support from the market.

Post-COVID, there will still be a push to maximise the efficiency of real estate, and this tool will allow companies to treat office space more like a hotel room or flight. Even when social distancing is a thing of the past, offices will still be smaller and going to the office will require a pre-booked space to ensure employees have somewhere to work when they arrive.

Companies will start to plan for desks numbers to be around half the number of staff they employ, which will easily accommodate the normal working week, but it does mean that everyone can't come into the office on a Monday, as there will simply not be enough desks.

What do you make of Jes Staley's suggestion that the return to the office will be gradual, but certain that remote working is temporary?

Jes Staley's comments reflect the desire of the business leaders we're speaking with to not force workers back into the office, but there is a long-term hope that things will return to 'normal' once the pandemic has passed. Most large companies understand the value of the office, with collaboration and innovation being essential for long term success, but I think this is more hope than belief that this will happen, and the shift to more remote working will be a permanent result of this crisis. However, there is deep mistrust at the government's messages on the re-opening process as this is focused on economics.

Rather than warning businesses of the damage that remote working is doing to

city centres, the government should focus on providing information as to how to re-open safely. The answer, which the government hasn't spent any time talking about, is technology, this is now readily available and by helping companies let the employee choose what days they want to be in the office, and ensuring that when they do return, the office is clean and safe, this will encourage a gradual phased approach to happen and for companies to get back to the expected new normal of much more flexible working.

Companies understand the importance of putting the employees first in these difficult times and realise the seriousness of not getting this right, so won't be pressured to force the return of staff, just to protect city centre jobs. It is the government's job to put in place clearer plans based around a return to the office where certainty and safety are key.

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Article by PAUL STATHAM