



# COVID-19:

The impact on quality professionals

The **Chartered Quality Institute** (CQI) is a global professional body advancing the practice of quality management in all sectors.

**Qualsys** is a UK-leading quality management software expert delivering best practice integrated management system implementation services.

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# 01

## Preface

The spread of Covid-19 across the globe has had, and continues to have, profound effects on the way in which we live and work. While not entirely without precedent, the extent of these effects is unseen in modern times.

In an environment where organisations have had to make significant decisions over how they operate, and how they interact with customers, suppliers, and employees, the following considerations will have been foremost in the minds of business leaders:

- » How do we best protect the physical and mental health and wellbeing of our people?
- » To what extent has our ability to meet customer needs and expectations been compromised?
- » What effect has Covid-19 had on supply chains in the immediate short term, and how may they be obliged to change in the future?
- » How do we maintain regulatory and legislative compliance while making potentially dramatic changes in operations?
- » What opportunities for improvement have been exposed?

The role of the quality professional in navigating these extraordinary transitions is as important as in a pre-pandemic world; arguably it is even more so. The quality professional is critical in ensuring organisations continue to meet their customer requirements, remain compliant in a dynamic environment, and exploit those opportunities for improvement in product, process and system which inevitably present themselves.

In this report, the CQI and Qualsys have sought the experience and insight of the profession to develop our understanding of how organisations have responded to the Covid-19 crisis, and the role of the quality profession in these responses.

The situation will continue to evolve as more people return to their places of work, albeit under different circumstances, following different practices, and adapting to meet changing customer requirements. What remains constant is the purpose of the quality profession as the champions, custodians and practitioners of governance, assurance, and improvement.

***Alexander Woods, Policy Manager at the CQI***

# 02

## Context

If there is one thing we have learned since the Covid-19 outbreak began and countries went into lockdown, it is that there is nothing more important than an adaptive workforce.

Adaptive people have been found in organisations everywhere; from our healthcare workers on the frontline to those suddenly compelled to work remotely.

Everyone has had to adapt to meet the new work and life challenges thrown at them. This poses many new risks and opportunities for quality professionals as guardians of good governance, providers of business assurance, agents for change and business leaders.

New responsibilities have been taken on to help adapt and drive their businesses forward.

Quality improvement software experts, Qualsys, recently partnered with the CQI to get real benchmark data and to answer the following four key questions:

1. How have quality professionals felt about their roles during this period of immense uncertainty?
2. What role has quality played for businesses since the outbreak began?
3. What steps have been taken to address the challenges of a Covid-19 world?
4. What is next for quality teams?

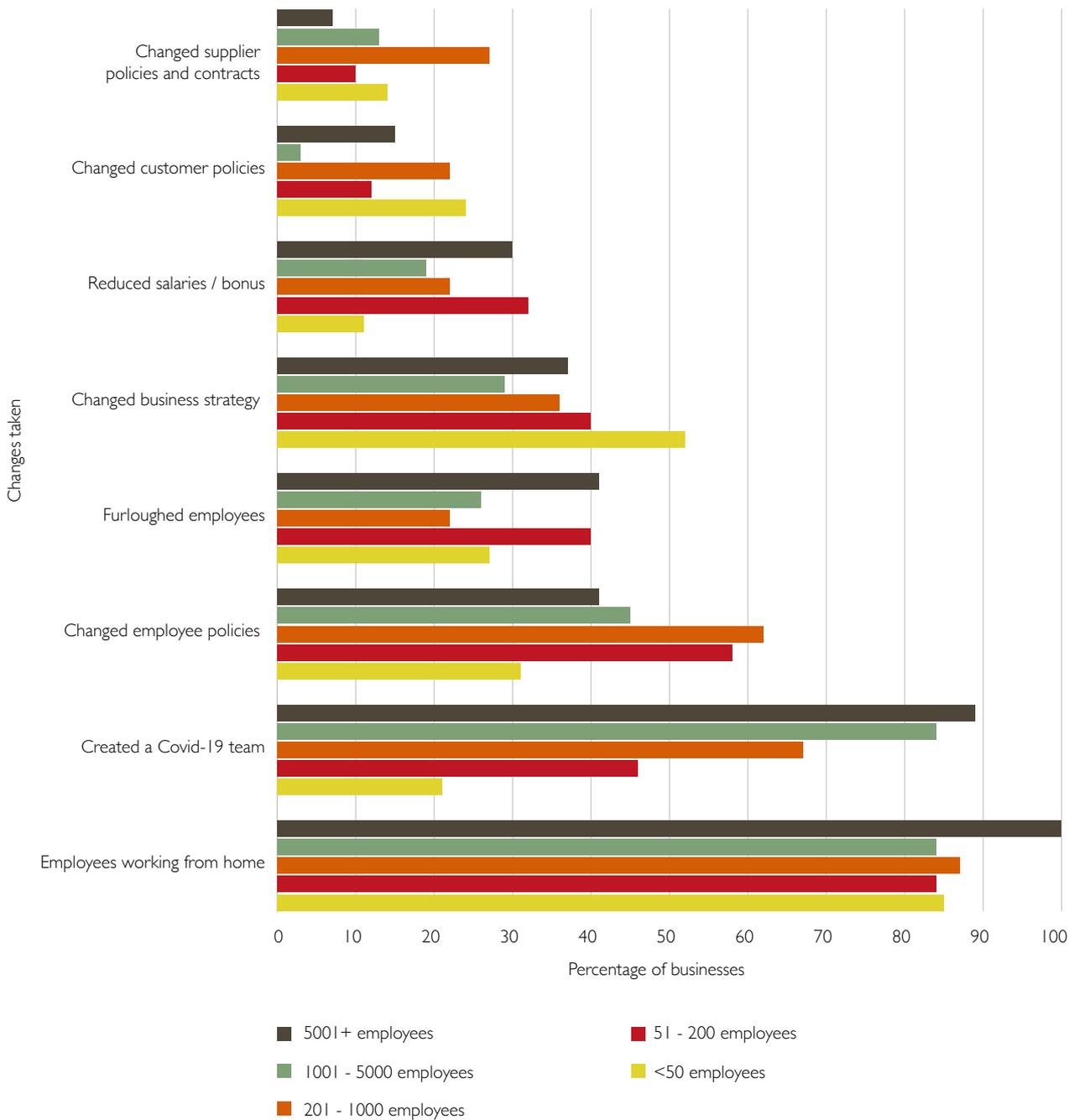
More than 250 quality professionals shared their experiences in an online survey. This report examines the findings.

***Kate Armitage, Compliance Director at Qualsys***

# 03

## Has your organisation made any of the following changes in response to the Covid-19 outbreak?

**Overview:** Larger companies are more likely to have created a dedicated Covid-19 team, while smaller businesses are being forced to adapt their strategies.



## Analysis:

Company policies and procedures were generally unprepared for major disruption.

Half of all businesses updated their employee policies and 40 per cent of all businesses changed their strategy during the first couple of months of the outbreak. Approximately one in five businesses updated either their supplier or customer policies.

However, the single greatest change to the business world has been employees working remotely. Larger organisations were also more likely to have created a dedicated Covid-19 team to plan, co-ordinate and communicate the response strategy.

Although smaller businesses were less likely to have a dedicated Covid-19 team, they were the most likely to have adapted their business strategy.

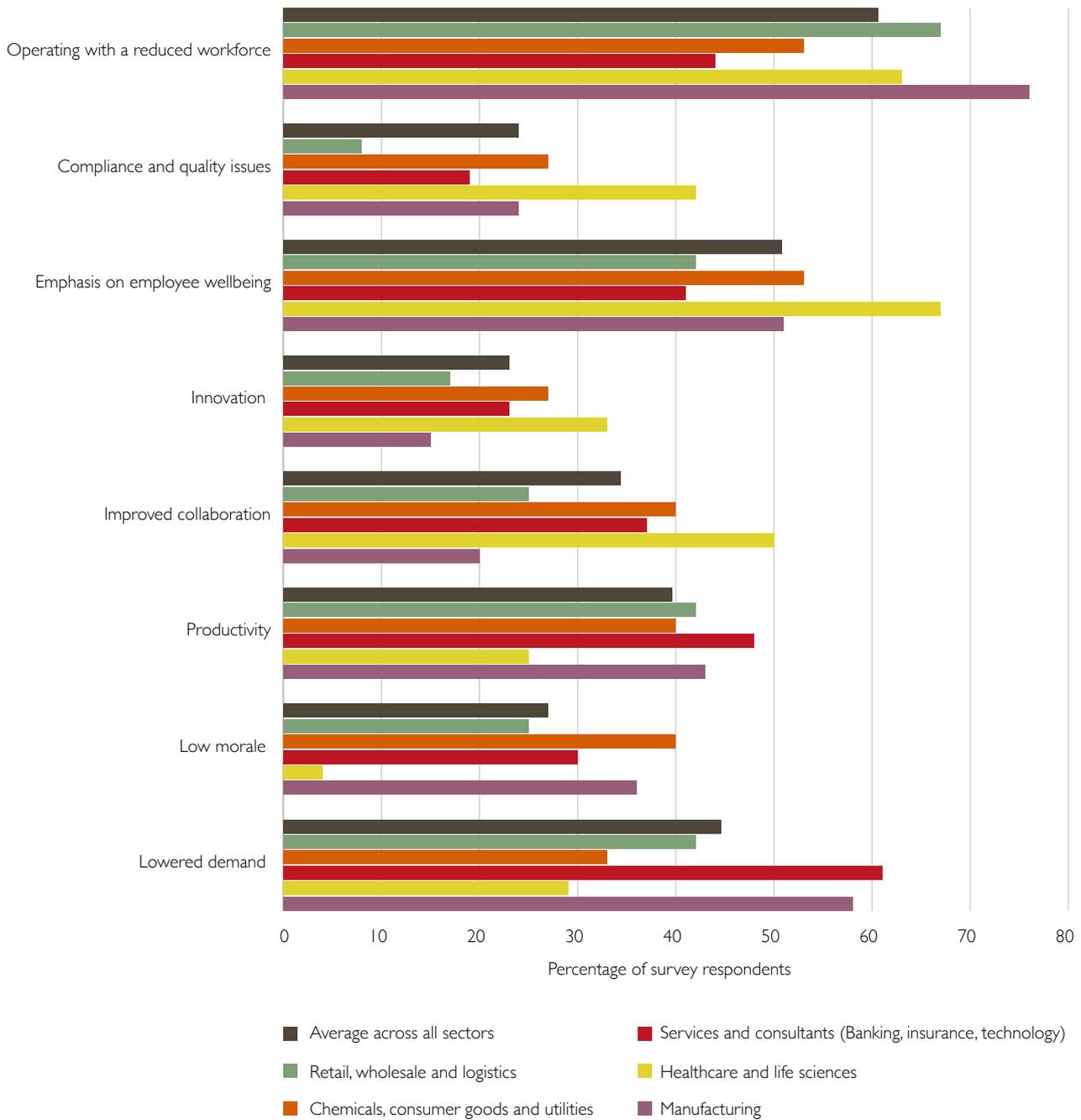
Alexander Woods, Policy Manager at the CQI, said: *“Organisations have had to adapt quickly to their employees working from home. While this has come about in extremis, for some organisations it may become the norm. The Future of Work report (quality.org/future-of-work-report), from the CQI, identified changes in workspace as including an increase in the number of people working remotely, either from home or shared workspaces away from a centralised corporate office, where “hot-desking” will become standard. It is likely that Covid-19 will accelerate this change.*

*“Organisations must plan and prepare for these changes. Aside from the investment needed for technical devices and infrastructure, organisations will have to pay particular attention to ensuring that staff maintain a sense of belonging and compensate for the opportunities to collaborate and build relationships, which centralised work environments provide. Companies will also need to respond to new ways of working, trusting employees to work from different locations at different times, or set up monitoring and performance management systems that risk alienating the workforce.”*

# 04

## Which of the following effects has your organisation felt to date from the Covid-19 outbreak?

**Overview:** Healthcare and life sciences are having more compliance and quality issues, but they are also innovating, collaborating and focusing on employee wellbeing.



## Analysis:

Approximately half of the respondents said that their organisation has placed a greater emphasis on employee wellbeing, a third noticed improved collaboration, and a quarter said innovation had been a direct result of the Covid-19 outbreak. However, there were different positive and negative effects of Covid-19 felt depending on the sector.

Despite many of these organisations being on the frontline, the healthcare and life science sector reported the most positive effects. Two-thirds of respondents from the healthcare and life science sector said their company was now placing a greater emphasis on employee wellbeing. This sector also reported the highest levels of innovation and collaboration and were the least impacted by low morale. However, they were the most likely to report quality and compliance issues, suggesting the organisation struggled to keep up with the volume of change.

Services and consultants have taken the hardest hit in terms of overall demand. Sixty-one percent reported lowered demand. However, this sector also reported the highest levels of productivity. Perhaps lowered demand provided more time to focus on key areas and propositions.

The manufacturing sector was the most likely to be operating with a reduced workforce with three-quarters saying there were fewer people covering shifts, possibly because there was a reduction in overall demand.

Retail, wholesale, and logistics reported the least quality and compliance issues, which was surprising given that two-thirds were operating with a reduced workforce.

Chemicals, consumer goods and utilities reported the lowest morale, but also reported high levels of innovation, collaboration and a focus on wellbeing.

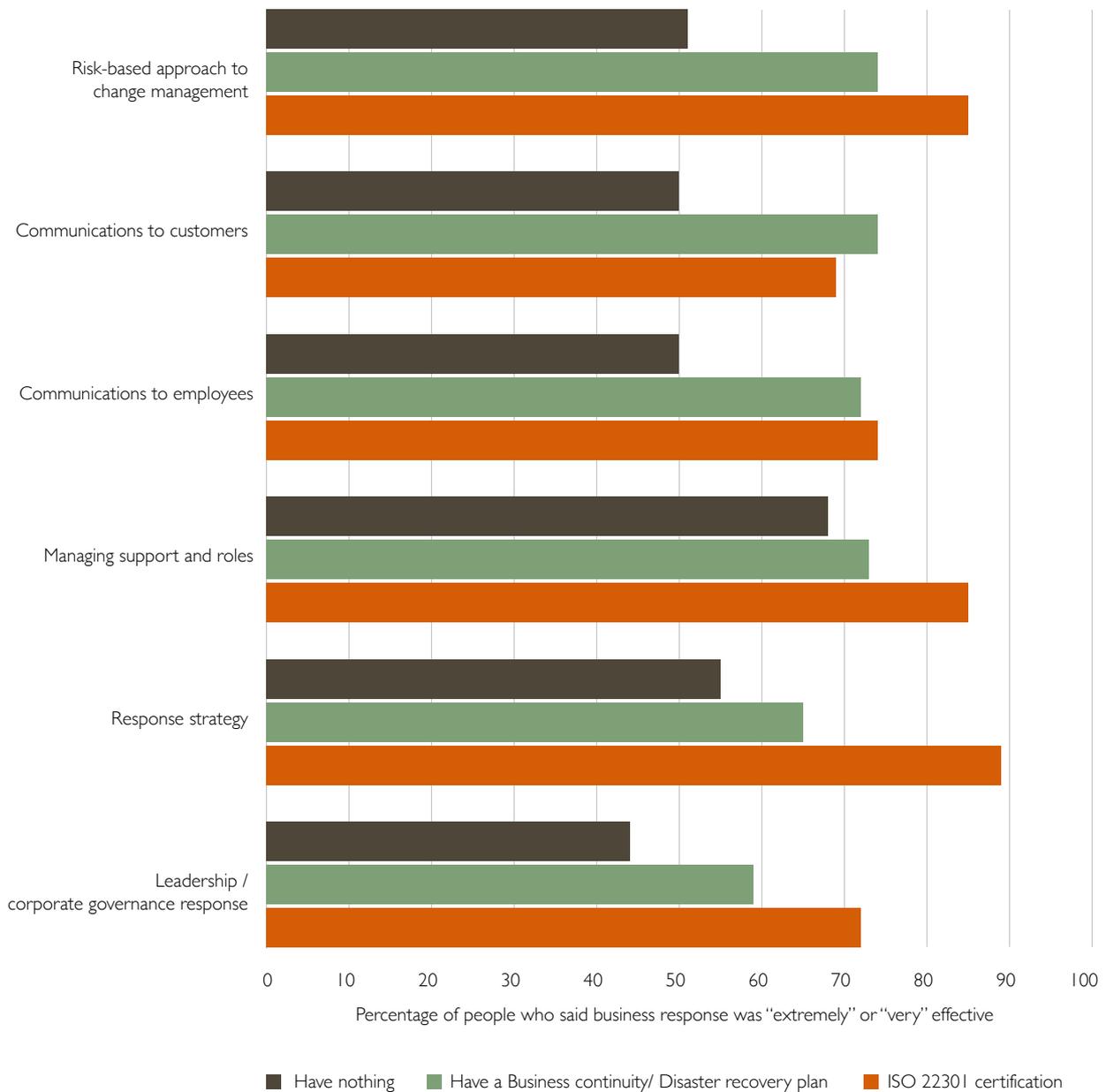
*Armitage said: "With such a high volume of the workforce working remotely, on reduced hours or furloughed, it's surprising that less than a quarter of businesses have experienced quality and compliance issues. That is a great success story for quality teams. It shows that our processes, policies and documentation are generally fit for purpose and resilient."*

*Woods said: "Organisations will be judged by their employees, customers, and wider stakeholder group on their response to the Covid-19 outbreak, and it is greatly encouraging that approximately half of the respondents report an increased emphasis on employee wellbeing. But equally organisations will be judged on their ability to continue to meet the needs and expectations of their interested parties, and to satisfy customer requirements. As organisations move from "emergency response" to "new normal", staff numbers may not return to pre-outbreak levels if they can continue to meet customer requirements with fewer people, particularly where productivity is shown to be on the up. Quality issues may yet be exposed as working practices again change."*

# 05

## How would you rate your business response to Covid-19?

**Overview:** Businesses certified to ISO 22301 – Business Continuity Management were best prepared to respond to Covid-19. ISO 22301 certification improved leadership response, communications and resulted in a better risk-based approach.



## Analysis:

Overall, quality professionals felt their business response to the Covid-19 outbreak was effective. However, organisations certified to ISO 22301 Business Continuity Management were generally better placed to respond to the crisis. Their communication to customers and employees were better managed, leadership teams were more proactive, and they were able to apply a risk-based approach to manage changes. Businesses with no continuity plan at all were consistently the least effective at responding to the crisis.

*Armitage commented: "The results prove that working to an established framework for managing business continuity, such as ISO 22301, has tangible benefits. Going through a formal ISO certification process demonstrates not just the ability of the management system to meet those requirements set by subject matter experts, but also the commitment of the organisation to protecting its governance and operations. Having a system which meets the requirements of an expert, as an internationally recognised standard does, and getting the certificate on the wall provides evidence and builds confidence and commitment. In this case, ISO 22301 has fulfilled its goal of making businesses more adaptive and resilient in times of disruption."*

*Woods said: "It's hardly surprising that organisations with no business continuity plan responded less effectively than those with one. Those with management systems certified to ISO 22301 stand testament to the benefits of using a reputable framework for managing business continuity. It is down to the quality professional to ensure that the lessons learned from this episode drive improvement throughout their entire organisation, noting that business continuity is not just about weathering a storm, but also trimming one's sails. Organisations and their ecosystems are likely to change irreversibly by the Covid-19 outbreak, and quality must be leading that change."*

# 06

## What has been your main challenge since the Covid-19 outbreak began?

**Overview:** Staying productive while faced with uncertainty was the main challenge faced by respondents.

The other top challenges, ranked most common to least common, included:

1. Managing compliance and legislation.
2. Long-term job security.
3. Managing employee health, hygiene and wellbeing.
4. Maintaining customer satisfaction.
5. Finding suppliers.
6. Communications: finding the best information and circulating to the wider business.
7. Promoting hygiene and use of PPE.
8. Disruption to audits: clients do not want to do a remote audit.
9. Chasing employees to complete their tasks.
10. Maintaining project momentum.
11. Confidence in the company's approach to IT security with a remote workforce.
12. Balancing working from home and parenting.
13. Business continuity and risk management.
14. Facilitating productivity.
15. Isolation and loneliness.
16. Finding valuable online CPD.

## Analysis:

Quality professionals put on furlough or working reduced hours are worrying about long-term job security. Many said finding valuable continuing professional development and online learning to keep busy was a real challenge.

For those who continued working on-site, one of the main challenges was implementing new health, hygiene and wellbeing policies and procedures. This involved planning and enforcing social distancing measures, sourcing PPE, and overall responsibility for updating hygiene practices.

For those who were now working from home, adjusting to the new working environment meant new challenges. These challenges included balancing parenting and work, maintaining project momentum, and coping with feeling isolated and lonely. However, the most common challenge expressed was interpreting the legislative obligations for the company and enduring compliance.

One survey respondent, a Head of Quality working for a manufacturer employing between 1,001-5,000 employees, said: *“I’ve been furloughed along with my team. The bigger challenge is going to be when we return to work – we need to realign our objectives and structure to fit the new normal.”*

Armitage said: *“When we look at the number/proportion of organisations that have changed employee policies, furloughed employees, reduced salaries and bonuses, or changed customer policies and supplier contracts, it’s hardly surprising that many quality professionals found staying compliant and up-to-date with changing legislation to be one of their main challenges. These changes would usually take months or years to manage. We’ve had to enforce these changes in a matter of weeks and days*

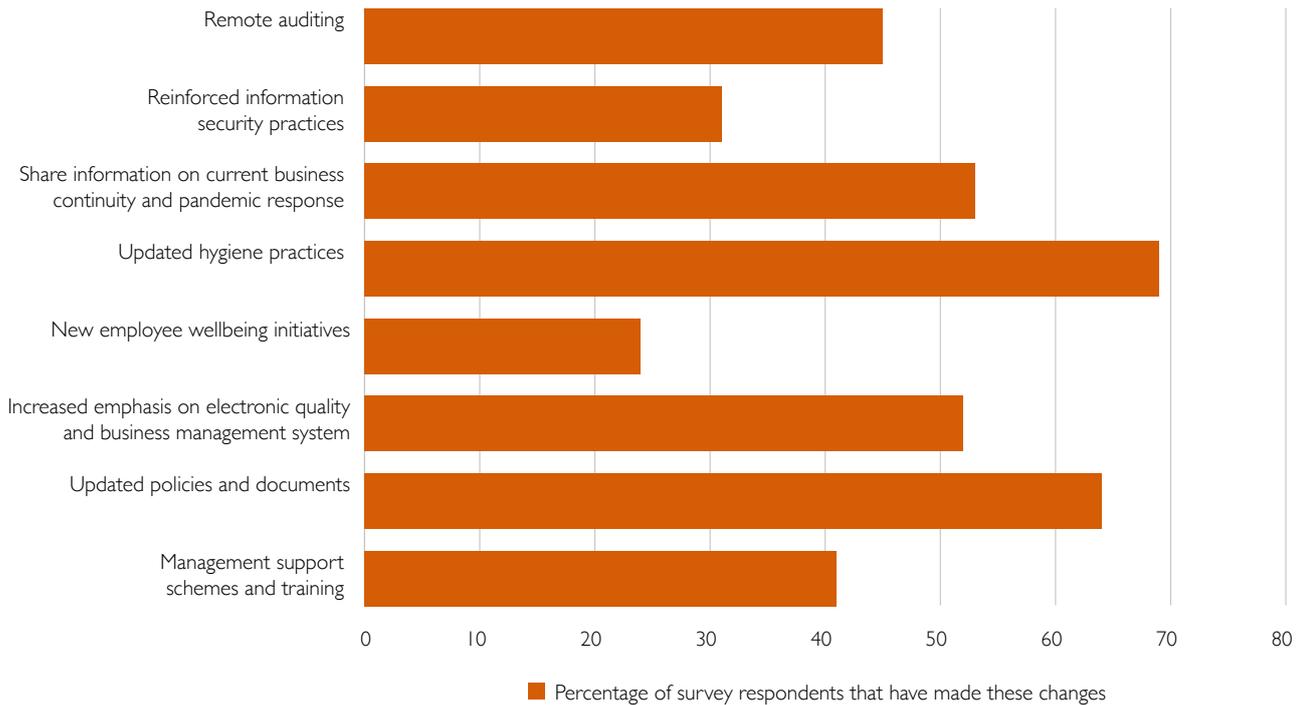
*“As for CPD and online learning, both the CQI and Qalsys have a range of resources available to help quality professionals expand their knowledge. Visit [quality.org/knowledge](https://quality.org/knowledge) and [quality.eqms.co.uk/blog](https://quality.eqms.co.uk/blog) to gain access.”*

Woods said: *“While the survey exposes personal anxieties and stressed processes, responding to a new normal ought to be occupying the minds of the quality profession and business leaders alike. If we are to assume that there is no going back to normal, business management systems and quality processes cannot expect to continue as before. Quality professionals must keep an eye on the immediate post-outbreak landscape, and further ahead to a new way of working.”*

# 07

## What changes have you and your team made during the pandemic?

**Overview:** Updating hygiene policies, documents and sharing business continuity information were some of changes adopted by most companies.



### Analysis:

For some, there has been plenty to do. Almost 70 per cent of quality professionals have been updating hygiene practices. Two in three have had to update policies and procedures, and approximately half have been auditing remotely or sharing information on current business continuity and pandemic response plans.

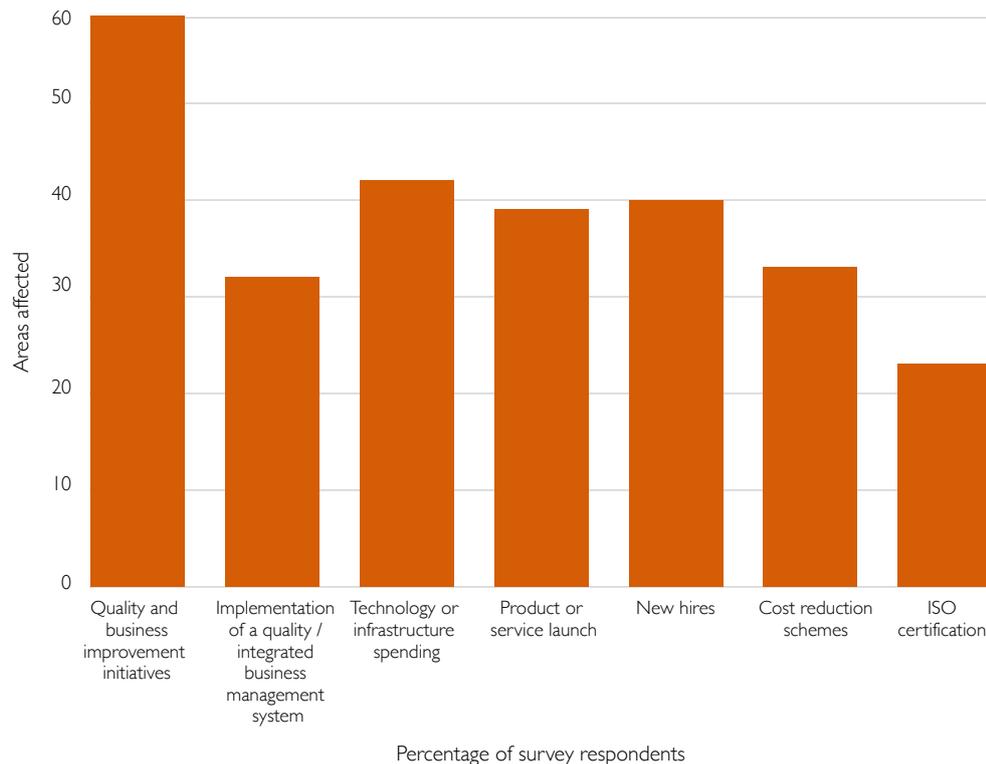
Answers from survey respondents included:

- » *“Every aspect of a quality management system, whether it be for medical devices, consulting services or document control, has been affected by this pandemic. I reviewed the company’s 2020 standard operating procedures and modified where necessary due to the pandemic.”*
- » *“I supported executive team initiatives.”*
- » *“Our team have implemented local good hygiene practices, but other than that, no management support.”*
- » *“While all sites are closed and all staff furloughed, we are unable to function.”*

# 08

## Has the outbreak affected any of the following?

**Overview:** Significant impact to business and quality improvement initiatives.



### Analysis:

Approximately half of all survey respondents said that their electronic quality management system had been key since the outbreak. Businesses have increased their emphasis on the use of these tools for keeping documents, policies, issues and training requirements up to date.

Businesses without such a system were less positive as 42 per cent said planned technology and infrastructure spending had stalled. One in three said the outbreak has caused delays to implementing a new quality and integrated business management system.

Growing businesses with new products, services and staff also ranked highly for disruption, with around 40 per cent noting an impact in these areas.

Armitage said: "These responses point to the importance of having a robust system already in place for times like this. Businesses are now relying more than ever on their electronic quality and business management systems. This is not surprising given remote working, the need to rapidly update policies and procedures, and the need to quickly share business information with colleagues no longer in the same room or office."

# 9

## What has your business done to maintain a positive employee experience?

**Overview:** Businesses have rapidly innovated with a focus on health, wellbeing and safety.

### Analysis:

It seems the benefits of skipping the morning commute have been dampened by feelings of disconnection. Many quality professionals said they were feeling cut off, with 30 per cent pointing to low morale as a direct effect of the lockdown. However, many could also list ways that their business had been making a proactive effort to keep employees happy and safeguard the wellbeing of staff. These initiatives varied from 'happy hours' to employee surveys, online CEO Q&A sessions, and reassurance of business stability in internal communications.

However, only a quarter of quality professionals said they had been directly involved in these initiatives, suggesting a disconnect between quality and health and safety initiatives.

Although regular communications with virtual video conference tools was one of the most common ways businesses were maintaining a positive employee experience, learning and skills development were also key, with quality professionals seeking to capitalise on their time at home with continued professional development.

For many of the respondents working in healthcare, general recognition from the public as a key worker has been a morale-booster.

Armitage said: *“Contrary to the norm, lockdown has in many ways forced us to put health before wealth. We have known for years that improved wellbeing makes for more productive, agile and proactive teams. I think it is going to take some time to establish what the new working norm looks like and to take employee wellbeing initiatives to a new level. I think once quality professionals have time to get beyond the busy document updating period that we’ve just been through, we’ll have a key role to play in looking at working hours, flexible arrangements, and promoting more team activities.*

*“It’s disappointing that most quality workers haven’t been directly involved in protecting the wellbeing and morale of their colleagues during the lockdown. Mental health should be a consideration in how companies maintain health and safety – and the quality, health and safety streams of the business should be brought as closely together as possible.”*



# 10

## In hindsight, would you have prepared anything differently prior to the Covid-19 outbreak?

**Overview:** No remote working provision or lack of digital quality management preparation stand out as the main regrets.



Photo: Shutterstock

### Analysis:

Many quality professionals said they were generally satisfied with their business response and would not have prepared differently. Of those that did identify regrets with the benefit of hindsight, three main themes stood out.

#### 1. Increasing staff agility with flexible working practices.

While flexible working practices are not uncommon in many industries, it is still far from the norm and many businesses had no pre-existing provision for remote working.

Not only are there practical, physical system and process implications, but the effect on employees' mental health and wellbeing, to team morale, personal relationships, and a sense of collaborative working, are critical to an organisation's resilience.

#### 2. Information security

Respondents reported concerns over a weakening of security during the transition to remote work, which could have been more adequately prepared for by reviewing some policies.

#### 3. Digitalisation

The third regret was a failure to digitise. Over-reliance on manual and paper-based quality management systems left some organisations vulnerable as offices and sites emptied, with ad hoc digital quality management having to be built on the fly.

This may well have come as a wake-up call to many organisations. Electronic media, management system software, remote document storage; these are 20th century, not 21st century tools and organisations which continue to rely on paper-based systems will have faced significant challenges in changing their way of working.

Taking all three elements together, flexible, secure working practices tied together with digitised systems stands out as the main 'missed opportunity' for quality workers and the main piece of best practice that could have minimised the impact of the lockdown.

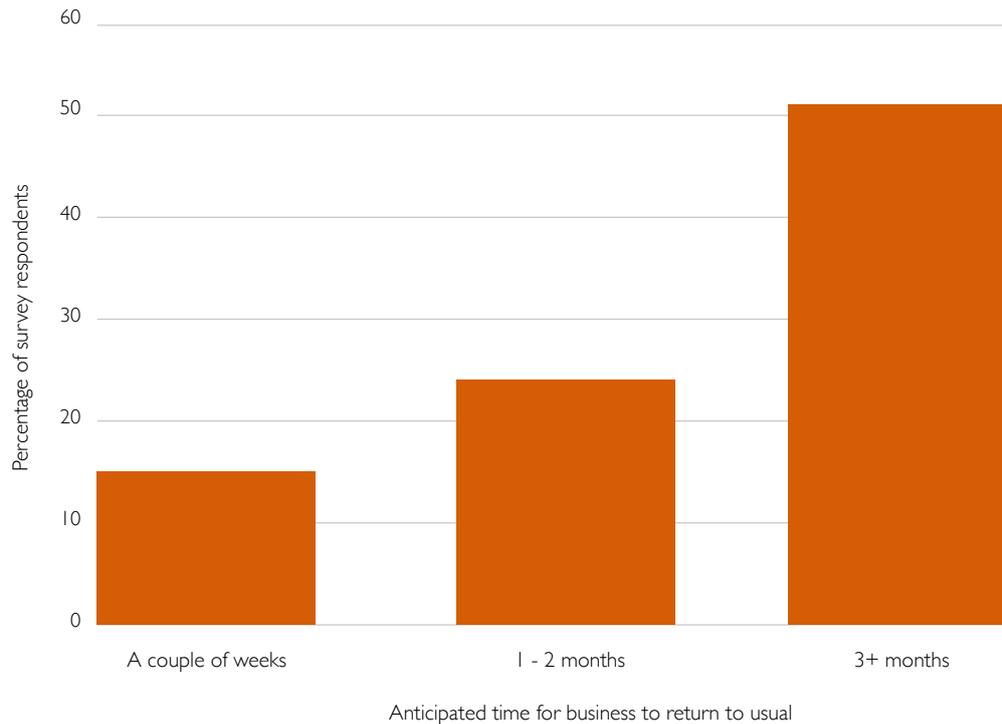
Other learned lessons mentioned by respondents included the following:

- » *"We need a more detailed knowledge base of operations and how to overcome challenges."* – Quality Assurance Manager, Services company with fewer than 50 employees
- » *"I wish we had better continuation policies and governance."* – Service Quality Manager, Energy company with 1,001-5,000 employees
- » *"We should have created a portfolio of web-based quality management training programmes."* – Quality Consultant
- » *"Review the business continuity plan more often."* – Head of Corporate Quality Management, Food and drink manufacturer employing more than 5,001 employees
- » *"We need a more effective electronic signature process."* – Quality Assurance Manager, Manufacturing employing 51 – 200 employees
- » *"We should have had more remote working, mental health and wellbeing resources in place."* – Quality Manager, Manufacturer employing 51- 200 employees

# 11

## How, if at all, are you preparing for business to return to normal?

**Overview:** A phased return to get the business back to a new normal: with PPE, split groups and new working environments.



### Analysis:

Approximately half of all survey respondents believe it will take over three months for business operations to return to normal. Many also said that it will probably take longer than six months due to the deep levels of socio-economic disruption. Many believe there will be a new 'business as usual', which will replace pre-lockdown working styles.

Armitage commented: *"As quality professionals, many of us now need to be proactive in defining the 'new normal', and work with leadership to adapt our businesses to meet the new requirements. In the immediate to short term, we need to review everything from our risk assessments to our standard operating procedures and business continuity plans. An integrated and holistic approach to quality, information security and health and safety has never been as important."*

*"In the long term, many businesses will have suffered financial losses due to the outbreak. We need to engineer efficient processes to start repairing that damage, but most importantly, we need to nurture and support our people."*

*"We are likely to see remote working becoming even more commonplace. As a result, we're going to need robust policies, infrastructures and systems in place to ensure we're connected and continually improving."*

*“Just as quality professionals helped their businesses adapt with new policies and with business continuity processes, they will be even more essential as businesses begin to craft a new normal for the future.”*

The breakdown of old ways of working therefore presents a fresh opportunity for quality professionals to guide their businesses forward as the pieces are put back together. Establishing a new normal post-pandemic with sensible, integrated processes and policies stands out as a key objective for quality teams. As with any piece of business assessment, the new opportunities for continuous improvement should be identified and acted on.

Answers from survey respondents:

- » *“The company workforce will be split into groups that alternate presence in the office. This strategy is likely to continue once lockdown is relaxed. Lots of other processes now are getting more focus using technology and automated processes, so we aim to continue to assess how that will look like once the lockdown is lifted.”* – Director of Quality, Banking and Finance organisation with fewer than 50 employees
- » *“Updating the QMS, refreshing templates, registers, documents, forms, process flowcharts, etc. Creating an online eLearning module for Construction Quality Training (and other modules), to upskill people while confined to home and in preparation for a return to work.”* – Quality consultant
- » *“Changes to working practices to ensure correct social distancing measures are maintained. More PPE and cleaning procedures in place, as well as staff training to ensure these are implemented correctly and staff are safe.”* – Quality Assurance Manager, Manufacturing with fewer than 50 employees
- » *“Business continuity plans have been updated to manage the return to the new normal. We have commissioned an internal study on the ‘future office’ and will use this moving forward.”* – HSEQ Director, Services company with more than 5,001 employees

# 12

## Advice for quality professionals

The final question in the survey asked respondents if they had any advice or tips for other quality practitioners to help them with their roles during the Covid-19 outbreak. Below are some of the responses we received.

*“Always plan your systems with a view that disaster can occur. Prepare everything with open visibility with a “just in case” backup. Be that documented instructions or easy to follow processes.”* – Lisa Kyle, Quality Consultant to Peter Duffy Ltd

*“This is the ideal time to tackle all the medium- to long-term projects that usually get put down in your priority list. This way, you are resilient in your return to work. It will be busier with fewer resources, so get everything organised now.”* – Martin Searson, Consultant at Quality Positive Limited

*“You are going to need to define what the new normal is when people go back to the office. Review every normal business routine step-by-step. Then you must identify risks: water, air-conditioning, restrooms, kitchen usage, IT workload, networks, etc. You must make sure employees have read and understood all these new policies.”* – Anonymous

*“Like many at the moment, I’m currently working from home though many of my projects in Balfour Beatty are active. Maintaining governance and assurance around our quality programme has required a rethink and the adoption of new ways of working, such as the use of technology for remote inspections, remote audits, and leadership quality tours taking place via Microsoft Teams. It is also a time to learn new skills and I’d encourage quality professionals to participate in online learning and webinars such as those from the CQJ and engage with the mentoring programme. Above all, have a plan for getting back to work and making sure everything is ready to deliver right first time.”* – Amanda McKay, Quality Director, Balfour Beatty

*“Encourage management to keep staff informed of the impact on business, celebrating any small success, ensuring that staff feel appreciated and valued. It’s also very important that you make sure the plans for the return to work are flexible - not everyone will be comfortable about returning to work at the same time.”* – Anonymous

*“Research everything available on Covid-19 best practice and fully support clients. For example, with policies, risk assessment tools, and operational controls.”* – Billy Naisbett, ISO Systems UK

*“Take one step at a time, prioritise people, then process, and wash your hands! We’re doing 30,000 tests a day, and I’m still washing my hands!”* – Becky Munford, Head of Quality and Compliance at UK Biocentre

*“As a profession, we’ve a massive contribution to make in terms of righting the ship once this is all over. Using lessons learned, we need to drive through changes to our organisation’s policies, procedures and processes to get compliant products and services flowing out the doors as quickly as possible.”* – Anonymous

*“Embrace technology. Lose the “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it mentality”. Stop building quality management systems you are afraid to change and improve because you have poor change management processes in place.”* – Anonymous

Quality professionals can also visit [qualsys.co.uk/covid-19-quality-checklist](https://qualsys.co.uk/covid-19-quality-checklist) to get a free comprehensive checklist designed for quality professionals. It has been created using the feedback from this survey and Qualsys' internal teams.

For the latest updates from the CQI on the Covid-19 pandemic, visit [quality.org/content/coronavirus](https://quality.org/content/coronavirus). Quality professionals can also attend virtual events held by the CQI, for example those held by the CQI branches. Visit [quality.org/events-calendar](https://quality.org/events-calendar) for the latest events.

The CQI has also been updating the Knowledge area of its website with articles on a variety of topics, including the recent changes to auditing following the Covid-19 pandemic. Visit [quality.org/knowledge](https://quality.org/knowledge).

There are also opportunities to join the CQI and IRCA's mentoring platform to share and gain insights. In addition to this, the CQI published its *Future of Work* report in March, which covers the effects of digitalisation in the workplace. The report is free to download. Visit [quality.org/future-of-work](https://quality.org/future-of-work).

# 13

## Conclusion

The transition to remote working has been widespread across businesses and sectors. Quality professionals have noted more quality and compliance issues arising because of these continuity challenges – particularly in the life science sector – as well as a disruption to their quality and compliance initiatives. The impact of the pandemic can therefore be expected to be felt long into the future, as long-term quality improvement projects are delayed, weakened or cancelled. However, the volume of quality issues remained surprisingly low compared to the level of disruption to traditional working styles.

At the same time, policy tweaks, new ways of working and business continuity initiatives have been important outputs from quality departments in helping their businesses stay up and running. Those who secured ISO 22301 – Business Continuity Management accreditation for their businesses are now reaping the rewards of a faster, risk-based response to the pandemic and maintained communications with employees and third parties.

The whirlwind of operational and compliance change has been the main challenge for quality teams to tackle, followed by supporting the wellbeing of colleagues. Remote auditing, changing policies and practices and sharing information have been the focus for many.

Quality workers are generally satisfied with their businesses' response to the pandemic. The main regrets in hindsight were a lack of pre-existing provision for remote work or for digital quality management.

The next hurdle for the profession is to continue the adjustment to the new normal post-lockdown. In many organisations this may represent an acceleration towards ways of working outlined in the CQI report, *The Future of Work*. Changes to the workforce, workplace, and workflow will all be required.

In the short term, while inevitably there will be a focus on health, safety, and the environment, organisations must ensure they have the controls and protocols in place to ensure that any return to work is not only done in a safe manner that protects lives, but also a controlled one which takes an overall view of business systems and processes.

Managing this adjustment will be challenging as organisations define new ways of working, navigating new customer, supplier and societal needs and expectations. Throughout all of this, management systems must continue to understand and meet these expectations, exploit new opportunities, and to provide resilient and adaptable systems and processes. Insulating their businesses from further risk, ensuring policies and practices remain relevant and optimised, investing in tools for a remote working age, and helping businesses bounce back with healthy growth and happy employees stand out as the challenges for quality professionals.

# Read The Future of Work report today

Uncertain times have encouraged us all to embrace digital transformation sooner than expected. *The Future of Work* report will open your eyes to an ever-changing world.



"As a quality professional, *The Future of Work* report was very insightful. It reaffirms how quality professionals must step up and examine organisation business models and strategies to assess how they embrace technology to derive the maximum benefit."

Ian C - Safety, Health, Environment and Quality Manager at FBR



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