

Karl Simons

Thames Valley Chamber steering group member



— Background and career

With a background in HM Armed Forces and having served in multiple conflicts, I have 30 years of employment experience, having worked across all continents and numerous safety critical industries including oil, gas, minerals, rail, roads, construction, and utilities. I am an Electrical & Mechanical Engineer and hold a Post Graduate Masters Degree in Environmental Management, Safety & Health. As well as this, I am a Chartered Occupational Safety & Health Practitioner and member of the Institute of Directors.

I am a lecturer at the University of Cambridge, regularly advise Government and am a radio show host. I also hold a position as Non-Executive Director on the Board of the global organisation 'Water & Sanitation for the Urban Poor'.

In 2020 I was awarded an OBE by HM the Queen for Services to Mental Health Policy and in 2019 was voted 'The Most Influential Person in Health & Safety' by the 600,000 global readers of SHP.

— How do you think the pandemic has affected people's mental health?

I personally believe coronavirus has only served to speed up what was inevitably going to happen to business. I'll explain – if you take start-up tech companies, for several years they have begun making changes to the modern working environment, such as the way people dress and flexible working arrangements. The best way I can describe it is 'the coronavirus has made working from home socially acceptable'. The changes that have been enacted by companies across the UK to keep us all safe and well are radically shifting the organisational psychology of business in that remote working becomes an acceptable part of the future face of business engagement. No longer will employees feel they must be at the meeting for fear of perception that their boss will think they are simply sat at home and don't care. Going forward, the question good leaders of teams should now be asking to those around the meeting room table, is why are you here and not remotely dialling in. Great leaders will not be in the room themselves!

We are all very aware of the fact that many employees have adapted well to life working from home and have enjoyed the flexibility and break from the mundane routine, whilst others have struggled due to challenges of space, isolation or equipment. What is being missed by companies is the hidden emerging risks that are yet to surface and be recognised.

Of all the changes and risks that have arisen, there is one emerging hidden risk yet to be fully explored but must be considered by companies. Historically organisations preached to their employee's phases such as 'keep your home at home and leave your work in work' or 'don't take your work home with you'. Then in recent years there has been a recognition in many mature workplaces from a psychological standpoint it's impossible to separate fully the workplace from the home life, so intelligent companies started to introduce initiatives that positively affected the employees at work and home.

The world we now live in has a reality that the home has become and will remain the workplace of many in the future. This causes some credible benefits but for some brings a massive hidden threat, the blurring of the physical separation barrier. By this I mean that although psychologically it was almost impossible to fully separate work from home in the past, what assisted was the always present office environment and the journey home.

Let's take stressors triggered by work where someone was in the office, for example a call centre agent who is in a high-pressure role and is always on the phone receiving generally negative by nature customer calls. After several calls their break would come which involved a manager conversation or a cup of tea with a colleague and a chance to download with a likeminded fellow or a quick chat with a manager who would provide positive advice like a quick pick me up, prior to returning back to the headset which placed them back in a positive zone to receive the next tranche of incoming problem calls. Finally, at the end of the day there was another key physical barrier, the journey home. Jumping in the car or on the bus, leaving the workplace behind and getting that time to think about looking forward to the sanctuary of seeing their pets, children, or spouse upon getting home.

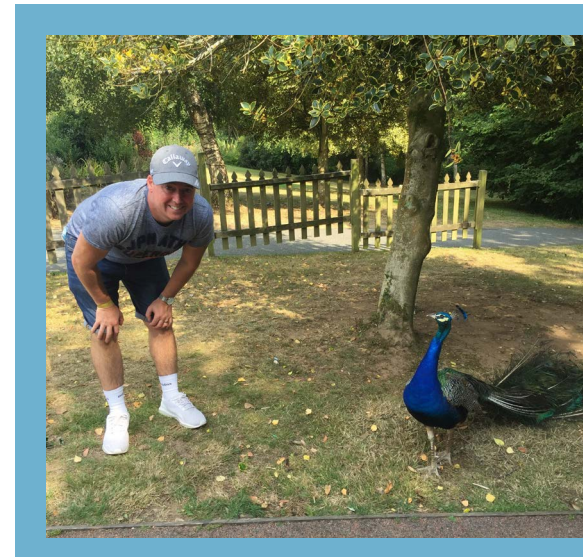
Right now, these physical barriers have vanished for many and the breaks have now been met by loved ones seeing their mother, father, or spouse immediately after dealing with repeated negative calls. At the end of the working day the routine positive journey home has also vanished and is replaced by the exhausted employee confronting the family in a state of decreased mental health.

Chronically this, I believe, is only serving to impact negatively on home life relationships in the future. Loved ones aren't used to seeing this daily grind and this can affect an immediate short-term impact upon family life from frustrations or snappy behaviour alongside a longer-term change in perception of the family member.

— **What does nature mean to you?**

Words that come to mind are, family, fun and feeling good! Life is all about memories and I'm fortunate enough to live in the New Forest and amongst my huge bank of memories from living in such a picturesque area there is one stand out moment I experienced that defines nature.

I had recently returned from the Middle East and settled in the now forest and whilst out running in the forest I followed a trail and came to a clearing where I came face to face with the largest stag I have ever seen. We were only 50 feet apart and both just stopped and stared at each other. The animal was magnificent, and the moment lasted for what seemed like an eternity as there was total silence. My thoughts weren't of fear or intimidation, it was simply in awe of this majestic wild creature that obviously was responsible for the herd. Once finished he turned and ran across the ground and disappeared into the woodland followed by the pack. Being outdoors and connected to nature in this way is superb for my personal mental fitness.



— **Have you connected more with nature since the pandemic began?**

Absolutely. In the early days, family walks increased massively due to the time being freed up for us all and we have kept this going throughout this past year. It's a great chance to catch up with my two teenagers who normally are as busy as I am!