Coronavirus could help re-imagine the world of work, if we are bold enough to seize the moment…

Here's how to help people impacted by Covid-19

Perhaps we have all been lulled by the - until recently – balmy weather and generous furlough scheme. But like rabbits in the headlights, collectively we seem to have not quite grasped the looming wave of job losses about to break.

Around one in three adults of working age is either unemployed, on furlough or claiming support from the government safety net for the self-employed. Many jobs will disappear permanently and some parts of the economy are unlikely to resurrect.

More than 50 people are chasing each vacancy in some places and the competition for work will intensify. James Reed, the boss of the recruitment firm that bears his name, warns of a tsunami of job losses and fears we could end up with five million people on the dole. It sounds grim - and it is. **But there is another side.**

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On the treadmill: Overnight, coronavirus has questioned the idea we all need to traipse into offices & factories

The pandemic has been a real-time mass experiment, showing how creativity can spring from adversity and how adaptable and versatile firms and employees can be. History tells us traumas are agents of destruction but also of creativity.

Our situation has obvious parallels with the Great Plague of London in 1665, but consider for a moment the Great Fire. The conflagration did not, as popular myth would have it, wipe out the plague.
It did, however, usher in far-reaching change, including new laws on building regulations and urban planning, transforming London.

The Great Fire also created a whole new market - for insurance policies against homes burning down. The Lloyd's of London market was set up a few years later in 1688, and the City has remained a world leader in insurance ever since.

Covid-19 is likely to spawn new markets and jobs of its own. Already, it has been the catalyst for the quickest revolution in working practices seen in this country.

Overnight, it has questioned the idea we all need to traipse into offices and factories, that people must be physically present at the same time for a set number of hours.

For decades, we assumed this was the natural and necessary way to work, but it is starting to look like an outmoded, rigid and restrictive 20th century construct.

Technology has made remote working possible and could go much further. Robots - by which I mean 'digital workers' or software that can be trained to carry out admin tasks as well as machines – have a place. As well as not needing pay, sleep or holidays, they don't catch or transmit coronavirus!
In retail, automated shelf-stacking and till-free shopping could reduce human contact, protecting staff and customers. Robots can work alongside us, doing the mundane stuff while we are free for more creative activity.

Economic history tells us that new technologies do not destroy jobs, they give rise to different ones.
In the transition there can be a great deal of pain and the only way to mitigate that is education.

Received ideas about universities – that they confer three-year academic degrees – need to adapt with more remote learning, short courses and part-time learning for older adults.

In future we are likely to have much longer working lives and will need to retrain possibly several times. Universities were designed as learning factories, which was great for the 19th and 20th centuries.

What is needed now is not just knowledge but creativity, imagination and innovation.

Productivity has been dire since the financial crisis. The pandemic could help re-imagine the world of work, if companies, educationalists and the Government are bold enough to seize the moment.