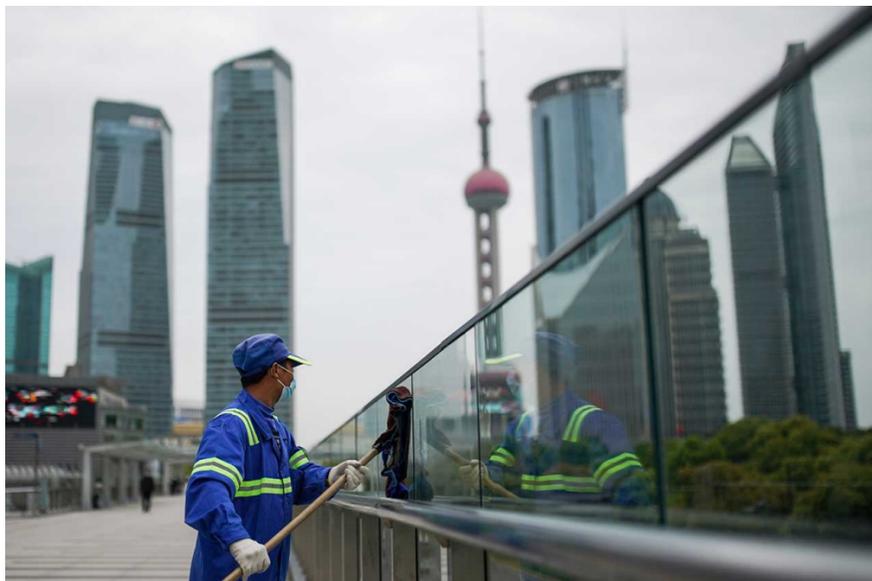


Staff | Added 17 hours ago

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Returning to the office: two perspectives from Chinese agency bosses

Businesses have begun returning to the office in China, where the coronavirus first emerged. Here, two agency leaders there share their thoughts on what they've learned from the period of remote working and how they are readjusting to the new context.



Shanghai: workers have started returning to offices (Getty Images)

‘I’ve seen an even stronger belief in creativity and collaboration’

Joanne Lao, chief executive, TBWA\Greater China

With Chinese New Year celebrations running from 24 January to 10 February and the working-from-home order coming into effect from 10 February, and people eventually returned to their respective office spaces from 10 March, colleagues in China had not seen each other in person for approximately two months.

Returning to the office for the first time was a feeling of pure elation. I just wanted to hug someone. I had to hold myself back and remind myself that social distancing was still important. There was a wonderful feeling of both joy but also concern. Joy of driving to work with the music blasting and singing out loud. Joy we were back. Joy in realising the world does move on. Joy of seeing people in person and just being together. The experience of being in lockdown made me realise that it’s very easy to take what you have for granted.

While we experienced delays and uncertainties on projects, downsizing of budgets and changed briefs as a result of Covid-19, our internal teams showed resilience. Cultural activities continued, spirits remained positive and our teams appeared to thrive within the challenging environment they found themselves working in. We even won two pitches – all while working remotely. This energy and togetherness have remained since we’ve been back at the workplace. Every day brings a new challenge somewhere, but I’ve seen an even stronger belief in creativity and collaboration. People are closer than they were before, more nimble and ready to pivot at speed for each other, clients and the company.

Concern of course remains, because while the situation appears to be in control, Covid-19 is still out there. We remain vigilant in protecting our people; temperature checks remain mandatory, masks are worn, we continue to practise social distancing within the office and there’s enhanced office sanitisation. Travel restrictions are still in place. We continually assess our clients’ businesses and our business based on changing market dynamics. Clients have faced huge uncertainty, with challenges around what to do to “restart”, changing plans, assessing consumer sentiment and reprioritising.

The situation is fluid. We remain close to clients; working with them as they evolve has been critical. We’ve also seen a very active new-business pipeline. We now have five active pitches ongoing, which will all be decided within the next four weeks. Clients are reassessing their needs and looking for the right partners to navigate a changing world.

There is a Chinese proverb that says: “When people work with one heart, they can even move Mount Tai.” Our culture has helped us be flexible, reactive and proactive together during these trying times that we know will continue to evolve.



‘It’s important to continue doing what worked during lockdown’

Jia Jiang, managing director, China, Oliver

Despite our lockdown lifting, life has changed in China. We are returning to work, but not to normal just yet. And that’s a good thing, as we are still mitigating the risks of Covid-19; everything from people flying in from other countries to people showing no symptoms of the virus. Now ahead of “the Covid curve”, we can see what we – and many other countries – must do collectively to save lives and livelihoods for the long term.

Day to day, desk distancing has become essential; one metre apart at all times, single tables at lunch and slimmer capacities for meeting rooms. The way we travel has also changed. Some more adverse measures are now in place for our safety – for example, everyone’s temperature must be taken before using the metro. Crowd control is in full swing as well to ensure that the millions of commuters of Shanghai can get to work without the usual shoulder-to-shoulder contact. (Masks are, of course, mandatory!)

Our brilliant teams across the country are returning to their offices in a staggered fashion. It was only this week that we welcomed back all of our U-Studio [Unilever’s in-house operation] employees and they wasted no time in getting processes back up and running.

It’s great to appreciate how many of our processes evolved during the past eight weeks. When the virus first hit, we went into a kind of rapid growth period to ensure immediate continuity for our clients. For example, to guarantee that the quality and speed of work was not compromised, we put additional support around our teams to ensure they could still focus on delivering great creative work. This happened within a week of full lockdown.

It worked so well that we’re adopting it full time. We’ve learned that it’s important to continue doing what worked during lockdown – in our case, enabling everyone to create and share work at any time – just in case a second wave hits.

Today, our staff need a lot of flexibility, from daily health check-ins to mask provision and child support. Many have children who have been unable to go to school for more than three months. We understand that parents therefore need to find things for their children to do just so that they can continue to work.

While we still face uncertainty, not knowing when normality will resume, we have realised our resilience. Naturally, some people and businesses have found it easier than others. The biggest thing that we learned, however, is to communicate continuously with our people, as well as be helpful to clients in any way possible. It’s difficult to know how people are coping individually, so you must keep communication channels wide open and be completely transparent.

Foremost, our people are our business and – with healthcare professionals telling us that this is very much a long game – we have to do all we can to sustain their health and well-being for as long as the pandemic lasts.

One thing getting better by the day is the availability of our favourite foods – a relief to everyone! Restaurants and bars have reopened. I am loving not having to set my alarm for 5am in order to snatch a delivery slot and some groceries, that’s for sure!

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