

COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities for a Communal and District Heating Solution Supplier

Evinox Energy has been involved in the design, manufacture and supply of HIU solutions for more than 14 years. From before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic through to the current lockdown in England (especially given its seasonal timing), additional pressures have been placed on organisations to ensure that on the one hand, demands for product and services continue to be satisfied whilst on the other, ensuring the safety of staff and their wellbeing has necessitated ever more stringent measures. Evinox Energy's Managing Director Terry Mahoney describes the company's experience:



Safety and Staff Wellbeing

Keeping people safe has to be the most important challenge faced by all companies. This includes taking practical steps to protect our employees and the people they interact with from coronavirus. From the outset we have needed to take care of both our team of mobile engineers as well as our team based at our office in Chessington. This seems an obvious thing to say especially with the benefit of hindsight, but back in the middle of March 2020 it wasn't that straight forward.

On 12th March 2020 having travelled on a crowded Northern Line tube train, I met up with my fellow directors in a busy Sports Bar in London which was showing the Cheltenham Festival on TV only to be interrupted by Boris Johnson and Chris Whitty announcing that with over 8,000 Coronavirus cases it had become too overwhelming to continue to track and trace infected people, but we should carry on as normal but keep washing our hands whilst being "prepared to lose loved ones", all the while we were aware that although Italy was into its third day of a national lockdown and had reported more cases than the UK, we seemed to be only two weeks behind. On the following day, the Premier League cancelled all its fixtures.

In the face of such conflicting and contradictory news, information and experiences we concluded that if we were going to keep all our employees safe, we were going to have to start making our own decisions straight away and not wait for guidelines or directives from the government, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) or from anyone or anywhere else.

This was the biggest change in mindset we had to come to terms with.

Our immediate conclusion was that we needed to get our office-based people working from home effectively. As a result, and because of the technology and IT support we already had in place, working together with our managers, their teams, and our IT support team, we were able

to ensure that all office-based staff were able to work from home by Friday 20th March, i.e. in the week before the first lockdown was announced.

During this first lockdown, demands on the business were reduced and several staff were furloughed but we made sure everyone got 100% of their pay.

As a supplier of products and services to the construction industry, we were able to register Evinox as an employer of essential workers. Apart from a period at the start of the first lockdown, construction sites remained open. Our engineers have been in attendance and we found that overall, construction sites have implemented safe working practices with regards to Covid-19. During the current lockdown and as it is winter, our engineers are also attending occupied apartments where there is a lack of heating or hot water. Our priority however is always to ensure that they are safe. So, there is no pressure on them whatsoever to work on a construction site, in an apartment or anywhere else for that matter, where they deem it unsafe.

At the end of the first lockdown, to facilitate the anticipated return to office-based working, we implemented safety measures in our office in Chessington, including Perspex screens between desks, Covid-19 safety signage, copious supplies of hand sanitiser, good ventilation and limiting the number of people and in the kitchen and the toilets at any one time.

Despite these precautions, we restricted to less than half, the number of our office-based team who are present at any one time with everyone else working from home. The office is registered with Track and Trace and there are formal procedures for signing in and out, including temperature checks.

Two things are important. Firstly, we never insist that anyone works in the office if they can work effectively from home. Secondly, we give the option to staff to work in the office rather than at home if they prefer. They can also choose what days they are in the office and what days they are working from home. To do this, the office must be a safe environment to work in.

Since early December, all staff are being tested for Covid-19 every Monday morning by a nurse who attends our office organised by Independent Clinical Services. This is the rapid anti-gen nasal swab, from which results are available within 15 minutes. This confirms that our office-based team are safe. It means that our engineers know they have tested negative before attending their appointments. This gives not just them confidence but also residents and people from our clients' organisations who they will be interacting with during their work.

Weekly testing in this way which increases opportunities for people to interact with each other safely. This contributes significantly to everyone having as positive a mindset as is possible in this extraordinarily difficult and challenging time.

Our collective mindset regarding flexible working has completely changed because of the pandemic. We can rely on technology that enables people to work from home effectively. This offers a lot more flexibility regarding where people live and work, increasing job security and productivity. We are more likely to retain good people if their personal circumstances change. We will also be able to recruit from further afield as we no longer need to insist that people are office based five days per week. Even for people who live locally, after the pandemic we will give office-based people the option of working from home one day per week, this means one less commute and would be a contribution towards reducing road traffic.

We do know however that the quality of our collective capability is dependent on the quality of human interaction. Therefore, despite our newfound awareness of the capability of the technology associated with working from home, there is no substitute for real-life face to face interaction with each other.

In conclusion, we have on the whole managed to keep safe. At the time of writing, 3 people out of a team of 46 people have tested positive for Covid-19 since March 2021. Fortunately, no one was ill enough to require hospital treatment. This is testimony not only to our working practices keeping everyone safe. It is also very much down to the whole Evinox team, outside of work, and their families and friends respecting guidelines, protocols and legislation for the entire duration of the pandemic. We have taken advantage of the technology that facilitates working from home and this will always now be a factor in our everyday working life, but we have concluded that there is no substitute for real-life face to face interaction.

In the very near future, we will be describing how Evinox SmartTalk® technology has been especially beneficial during the pandemic, so watch this space!