

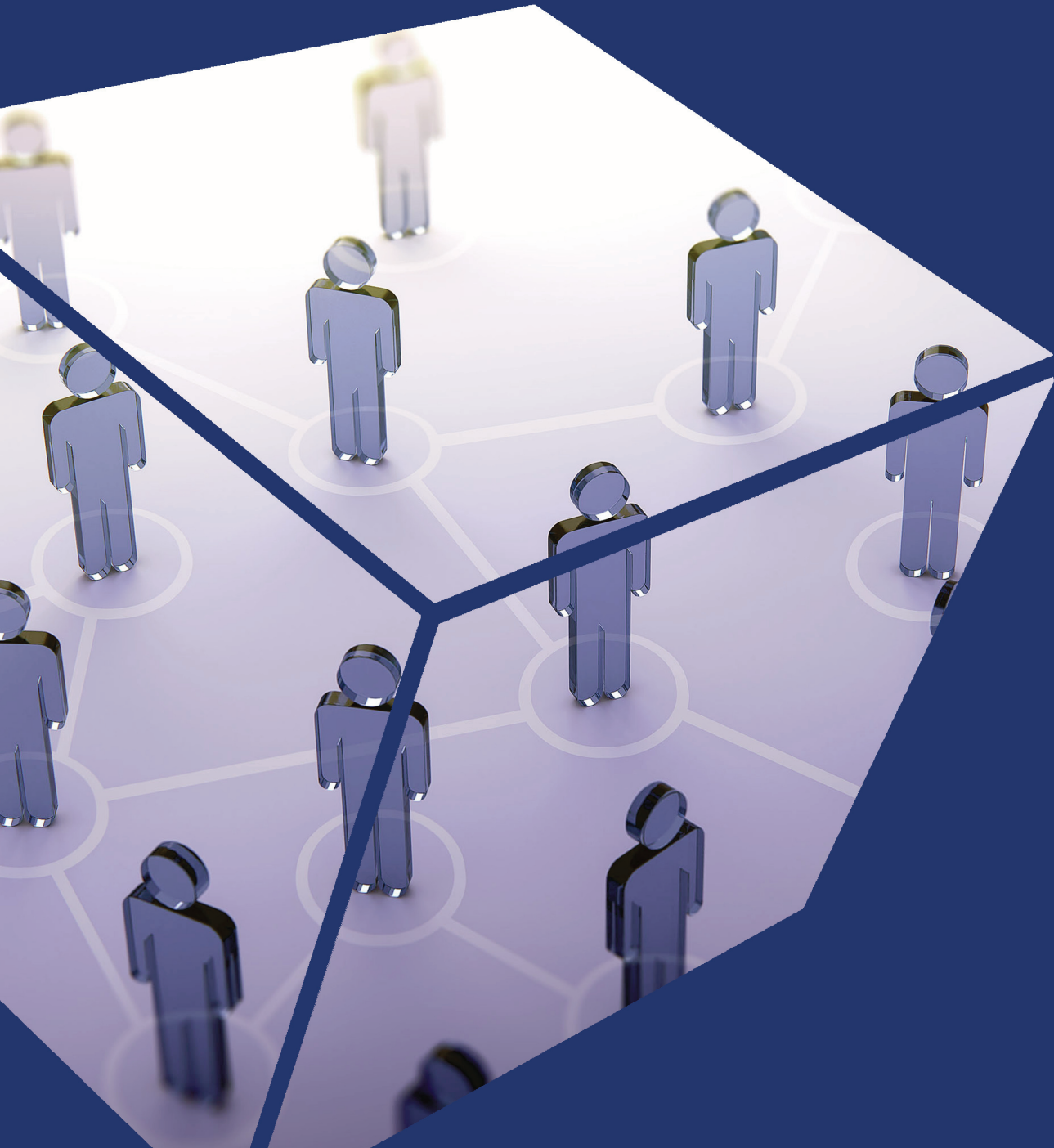


ODGERS BERNDTSON

# Pandemic Placed Candidates

How industry leaders were  
successfully placed in new roles  
during the pandemic

December 2021



## What's it like to be recruited during a pandemic?

For the last 21 months, the Covid-19 pandemic has thrust us into new ways of living and doing business. For a short time, things seemed to halt and we held our breaths, waiting for what was coming next.

The future was largely unknown, but despite the new territory we were transacting in, people kept their sights on their careers and ambitions. Executive recruitment quickly adapted and, through less-than-ideal communication methods, continued to keep the wheels of leadership and innovation fresh with a pipeline of eager candidates.

Odgers Berndtson has worked closely with clients throughout the pandemic, confidently continuing to recruit for C-suite, board level and head of function roles, honouring the commitment in the market to keep industry thriving.

### **The cream will rise to the top, in spite of challenges**

Not deterred by exclusively online communication or an uncertain journey ahead, professionals have been brave enough to take roads untravelled and continue to pursue their career goals.

We selected people whom we placed in new positions during the pandemic and interviewed them. What we found common to their experiences were the great rewards and learning that came from having explored new paths during challenging times.

### **Read how executives negotiated the path to new positions**

Find their personal journeys here - the unexpected hurdles and their individual ways of continuing to connect and lead successfully throughout the pandemic.

## Are you ready?

If you're ready to think about your next move, be inspired. We'd be delighted to partner with you on your next career chapter.

We interviewed **Phil Wilkinson**,  
**European Ecommerce Director**,  
**Kellogg**, on relocating to Ireland for  
his new role during the pandemic

Nothing that's happened since I accepted my new position was planned for. It's been a bigger adventure than I foresaw but has rewarded me with far more than a new job.



## Pandemic Placed Candidates - Interview One

### Phil Wilkinson, European Ecommerce Director, Kellogg, on moving country to a new position during the pandemic

- **OB: Phil, congratulations on your appointment in Ireland as European Ecommerce Director, Kellogg. How did you find the preparation process for relocating during lockdown?**

Phil: “The decision to take my career in a new direction and introduce a fresh challenge was a very positive one. I felt I committed to it for all the right reasons; being pulled to something that would spur me to grow professionally and personally rather than any reason to leave were I had been. Little did I know the twists and turns that lay ahead.

My recruitment process with Odgers Berndtson Ireland for my current role as European Ecommerce Director, Kellogg, was extremely positive. Even though it took time, I felt well looked after and always thoroughly respected. Soon after my contract was finalised, while still working my mutually agreed long notice period with my previous employer, Covid-19 happened.

Ecommerce being my area of expertise, things got wildly busy. My skills were vital in putting new plans in place and accelerating others. I am still astounded at what we achieved in such a short time period, for example doubling delivery capacity in just three weeks. I have more faith than ever in the power of collaboration and cooperation among a team when laser focused on a goal.

In the atmosphere of disruption of a pandemic, I felt privileged that I was in a position of surety that my career would not be affected. It put any stresses and challenges in perspective. I set about preparing for our move as a family.

The most difficult element was letting wider family know about our plans. I come from a background where people tend to stick close to home and this news was a big adjustment for our nearest and dearest.”

### **“A well planned nightmare!”**

“We proceeded to sift through the sea of belongings gathered over our family life. It was a lesson in thinking twice about what we really need, and in approaching purchases with a sustainable attitude. Our decisions on what to bring, leave and store weren’t spot on, but things have organised themselves organically.

Finding a school for our two girls, somewhere to live and getting other practical things in place for our move was made more difficult during the restrictions of the pandemic. There was also such uncertainty about when we could travel. We did manage to visit Dublin once ahead of our departure which reassured us, we were more than happy with our choice. The famed local friendliness greeted us everywhere we went. The pace of installing basic services like Wi-Fi and a TV package were frustratingly delayed. They seemed less surmountable than running a \$4bn business, but all worked out in the end.”

## “Two girls, two cats, two rabbits go on an adventure”

“Flights were disrupted, unsurprisingly, but our departure on this big adventure got under way. We headed to Ireland with two excited girls, two uncertain rabbits and two cats who took a long time to agree this was their new home. After some weeks in temporary accommodation, we choose our dream home for the foreseeable years.

Once we settled in, the charm of stunning walks along the coast hooked us in; where people don't need to know you to stop and chat. To be in a place we love has made lockdowns the best they can be. Our girls are very happy here and we're delighted at the new experiences, friends and backgrounds it's exposed them to. We know it's very enriching for them. And we've gotten used to foxes who look as big as small horses!”

### ■ **OB: How have you found running a new organisation remotely and during the pandemic?**

**Phil:** “This was a brand new role for Kellogg so there was no handover. Between contract signing and my start date, my position was steered by three different bosses due to unforeseen changes. I didn't let this detract from the plans and goals I had for the position I was developing. It's been a challenge to build personal connection through digital channels. I thrive on in-person interaction and the value and richness that comes of it - multi-faceted, multi-dimensional communication.

Yes, we've all learned to relate remotely, but to me, the one recent face to face three-hour meeting I had with a new team member was more valuable than 20 Teams calls. Social media is powerful but can't replace social interaction. It's too formal, too staged; no real eye contact and dialogue is less relaxed. I'm not alone in looking forward to being back in the office, but also enjoying some quiet working from home time.

I've been in my office just three times, the first to present my plans to the Dublin and global executive teams. My confidence in my vision was confirmed with the level of support I received, and I enthusiastically shared it with the wider team based in Dublin, UK and France.

My move was from Grocery Retail to Manufacturing. This meant I had substantially less access to data than I was used to, a vital lever in my business tools. It has meant a bigger emphasis on strategising and thinking to influence retail customers like my former employer. I like landing, and executing but action plans now have to be carefully thought out and talked through first.”

### ■ **OB: How have you found recruiting remotely? What did you find challenging and what works well?**

**Phil:** “Once the scope of my area was established, I was given the luxury of ample resources here in Dublin, including the freedom to design and build a new team. Recruiting during the pandemic was difficult. People were nervous to commit, particularly when a relocation was involved. People are usually very open minded and were attracted to Dublin but put off with uncertainty around Covid-19. I was also competing with the big tech companies and exciting start-ups who make attractive offers.

I cast my net wide, with a global reach and also looked locally. I was looking for some ecommerce capability, but not replicas of me. Leading a developing area, I needed to be prescriptive and hands-on with creating the exact profiles I needed. I've managed to put together a terrific group with diverse skills and unique perspectives that have brought fresh energy and capabilities we lacked.

Looking back, the challenges made me try harder to look outside my usual thinking and we've ended up winning. I'm very proud of the diverse team we have built accross Europe and in Dublin – including a programme manager, digital marketing and data manager, digital shelf executive, UK and French ecommerce leads and a commercial manager.”

■ **OB: What are your top tips for interviewing online?**

**Phil:** “There’s no silver bullet on getting online interviewing right. I wanted to encourage natural dialogue and found shorter, less formal sessions better to begin with for this reason. Next, I’d set up a meeting with the candidate and a colleague whose opinion I respected and who understood our business channel before a longer, formal interview. I relied on others for a 360° view, to sense check for a collegial and professional match. What’s so important in business today is that our people fit comfortably into company culture and bring unique talent that complements what we’re doing. And of course, fuels the business.”

■ **OB: How do you build connections throughout Europe without meeting people?**

**Phil:** “It’s been a learning experience. I’m still developing plans for changes to resources in Germany, where our channel’s potential has sparked much enthusiasm, and also in France, Benelux and Russia. I’ve found pushing on open doors a good strategy. I look for ‘honorary’ team members who are inquisitive and have a passion for this channel among either top or emerging talent and build an ecommerce focus into their professional development plans. It becomes part of their role.

I work on building a plan that’s easy to articulate and has buy-in from the top. When it’s talked about credibly, word spreads and interest and momentum build. I came from a team of almost 50. I know it’s the people on the ground who make things work, not leaders!

One of first things I did was identify anyone throughout Europe who has anything to do with ecommerce. I connected through half day sessions so they could get to know me, shared initial plans, heard from other markets and introduced ‘rhythm + routine’. Comms plans happen over various platforms - Yammer for internal comms on ecommerce once monthly. This spreads connection with key people in business. I overinvest in meetings.”

■ **OB: What surprised you most about all this during pandemic? What was your biggest challenge?**

**Phil:** “My biggest challenge, in the beginning, was keeping the confidence that I made the right decision to take on this new challenge and do something different. Our current circumstances may not go away quickly but we can’t put our lives on hold. Embracing the change opportunity has put us in a better place as a company, and as a family. When unexpected twists happened, I stuck to my original motivations and didn’t focus on things I couldn’t control. My biggest learning was to embrace change for the positive differences it can bring. Organisations and people work well in adversity. Lots of good has come of this disruption, like new and innovative ways of working and achieving. People have also become more respectful and thoughtful.”

**“I’m very happy with my move. I had a good life, now I have an even better one.”**

■ **OB: A big thank you, Phil, for your time and intriguing insight into your move to Ireland in unusual circumstances. We wish you continued success at Kellogg and with your new life in Ireland.**

**We interviewed Brian O’Sullivan,  
Managing Director, Retail, Keelings,  
on joining and leading a new  
organisation during the pandemic**

I made a conscious decision that I wanted to connect with people immediately. Over my first ten days on the job, I did 40 one-to-one online calls with people all over the organisation; at all levels, in all functions.



**“I wanted to make a big statement to people that it was top of my agenda to get to know them and their views. Even though they were at home, they could see I was on site. It showed my commitment to connect as genuinely as I possibly could. The insight into the business, as a result, was a huge plus.”**

■ **OB: Brian, congratulations on your appointment as Managing Director, Retail, Keelings. How did you find the online interview process as opposed to an in person one?**

Brian: “I found it very different. It’s a very practical way to keep things going during a pandemic but wouldn’t be my preferred way to recruit or be recruited. But it does show it can be done. The online version for me was very pragmatic. It allows you get across your experience, talk about the job required. It’s very functional as a transfer of information.”

#### **Technology has its advantages but also drawbacks**

“When giving a presentation for example, content takes up the main area of screen. Participants are reduced to very small pictures. You get absolutely no sense of their reactions. It’s much more difficult to get good dialogue going. In the same room, you can sense when someone might want to ask a question. You can pause, deal with it on the spot, offer clarity to everyone. This is missing online. Someone has to make a big deal of interrupting and people tend not to. It adds awkwardness around presenting during an interview situation.”

#### **Some face-to-face time is essential**

“What was missing was made up for in face-to-face meetings. Only when you met people in person did you realise how little feeling you got for personalities during the online process. If I had gone fully through an online process only, I think it would have been a shock at the other side - finding out late how you interact with people you’ll be working with and vice versa. A blend of the two allowed them a view of me, my experience and suitability for this role from a skills point of view, and also allowed me to get a sense of my future colleagues. How they interact, body language, all the aspects of communication and engagement we usually take for granted. Being more natural in people’s company. This was the biggest difference for me. The lack of the 3D experience during the online parts.”

“When I met people face-to-face it was off site. I wasn’t onsite until I was actually appointed. I would have preferred if I could have been, it gives a good sense of what it’s like to work in the organisation. But as Keelings is an essential service I was in the office from the start of the job and every day since then.”

“Because we’d been in a pandemic for almost a year, I was used to so much online engagement, when I arrived for a face-to-face interview, I suddenly felt a bit naked without all my supports around me on my desk. Once it began, that quickly disappeared, and it was a much more productive meeting than any online. But I can see how candidates might feel thrown initially in readjusting to in person interviews again.”



■ **OB: What did you do to prepare for online interviews? Anything different?**

Brian: “I upgraded my technology. I had been doing a lot of business meetings online. I decided to buy a good camera and screen so I was meeting people at eye level over a good quality picture. It made a difference, comes across as more professional and natural. Senses are more limited online, I wanted to minimise the drawbacks.”

“My overall and content preparation was the same. The way I laid out the tools I had prepared—there’s a discipline there that could be brought forward to face-to-face meetings. What would I want on my desk? How can I ensure I have these clear in my head going into an in-person interview? It’s a process that could be practiced.”

“If there were to be another pandemic without face-to face-time? I’m not sure I would take a job without any face-to-face meetings, to agree to work with people without getting a feel for who they are. What I got from my in-person meetings, the understanding of people I’d be working with, I would never have gotten online. The degree of risk would be much higher. As a recruiter the risk is also higher. You need to fill a job and may need to go ahead but the risk is high.”

■ **OB: Keelings is a family business, does that mean the company dynamic you needed to connect with is specific?**

Brian: “I think it would apply equally to any company. We don’t work in silos, we work with people. Having good relationships is vital. Long term, online recruitment meetings serve a purpose, especially in the early stages to check skills and credentials. It takes away the interpersonal piece so you’re not side-tracked by that in the initial stage. The focus is just on screening for necessary requirements. It can speed up this stage of the process.”

■ **OB: You’ve been in the company building since day one?**

Brian: “Our building is an operational unit of an essential service. We’re producing and it’s a very hands-on business; farms, a packing house. My first option was to be on site. 1. To feel the business. To walk around the operations floor, see the process hands on. 2. It was very important to me, as MD, that the whole team saw I was on site, connected to the business. Most of our office staff were actually not in, they were working from home. I couldn’t meet them as I would have liked.”

“But in the first ten days I did 40 1-hour zoom calls with people all over the organisation. At all levels, all functions. One-to-one calls. I made a conscious decision that I wanted to connect with people immediately. It made a big statement to people that it was top of my agenda to get to know them and their views. This gave me invaluable insight into the business and our people, a real plus. Even though they were at home, they could see I was on site and I showed my commitment to connect as genuinely as I possibly could.”

**“I reflected afterwards; technology actually made these meetings easier than in person. I couldn’t imagine physically asking all those people to come from all over our site to meet for an hour. The beauty of online meetings is that if they take less than the hour both parties are straight back into productive time without any awkwardness.”**

“I had been through the numbers before I started, had a good view of the financials and where challenges were. 10 days after starting I then had great insight into the people, the culture and what was on their minds. It rounded the picture beautifully.”

■ **OB: How was your team about working from home when you were based in the office?**

Brian: “I never put pressure on people to feel they should be in the office. At this point, I have asked leaders to make sure everyone is in at least one day per week. It’s very difficult to know how being at home full-time has affected people’s lives. It’s a step towards getting to know more about the effects. We can identify people who are struggling with reintegrating. And it’s allowed me to get to know people in an easier way. Building knowledge.”

■ **OB: What’s been your biggest challenge in joining an organisation during the pandemic?**

Brian: “The lack of human connection has definitely been the biggest challenge. Even with all I’ve said, this is lacking. Large elements of personality are lost online. You do what you do and get on with it. It’s possible, but it’s not optimal.”

■ **OB: What’s surprised you most about taking a new role during the pandemic?**

Brian: “One surprise is how functionally effective meetings can be online. The structure does give a discipline which is positive. Even with many people in a meeting, despite how much you miss out on relationship building, body language etc, there are times when the boundaries and culture of relating online helps things to work efficiently. It’s also revealed how much we can cut down on travelling for meetings. Quarterly in-person meetings can be reduced to yearly with online meetings in between. This is a huge ease to businesses all over the world.”

■ **OB: How has pandemic affected Keelings business?**

Brian: “It has remained buoyant. Consumption at home has been on the increase and we’ve benefitted from this. Our food service business hasn’t been favoured. Our biggest challenge has been keeping our necessary people on site safe. Operations continued to run fully as before. We needed to keep the virus out of the site. We invested largely in both finance and time to put procedures in place.”

■ **OB: How have you personally found recruiting for new hires online?**

Brian: “I’ve just completed one internal hire from our UK business, a relocation. I did a couple of online meetings to go through functional requirements, then a face-to-face one to make sure we were a good fit. She just started and though the process isn’t ideal, it has worked very well.”

■ **OB: A big thank you, Brian, for your time and insight into your appointment as Managing Director, Retail, Keelings, in unusual circumstances. We wish you continued success with your business plans.**

## Odgers Berndtson Ireland Candidate Care Team



Helen Thomas  
Head of Candidate Care,  
Ireland

Helen works to appoint C Suite and Board level executives and their direct reports across the private and public sectors. Since 2007, she has managed international executive search assignments for a cross section of FTSE and ISEQ quoted companies. She leads the Candidate Care Agenda at Odgers Berndtson Ireland, championing all candidates and ensuring they receive the best possible experience from interactions with the firm.



Ruth Anne Kilduff  
Marketing Executive,  
Ireland

Ruth manages all marketing initiatives Odgers Berndtson Ireland, continually innovating with new digital marketing campaigns. Through social media management, analytics and online mediums she creates an interactive space for clients and candidates and looks for novel opportunities to strengthen these relationships.

