

Work in a post-Covid world

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A change in old organisational hierarchy

The team you will need to navigate this new world may be very different from your old organisational hierarchy.

If you genuinely want to put clients first, then your best resources will be your client-facing people, not the ones who are best at landing the sales, but the ones who have the greatest empathy for who your clients are.

Remember that your clients will now have massively depleted wallets, so if you can't identify what they need, then you're out of the game. But if you're going to require your whole operation to pivot fast, then you will need a whole new way of organising how you work.

When the lockdown hit in South Africa, we organised an interesting contest. Quite likely the contest idea was conceptualised to bolster our feelings of connectivity at a time when we would be scattered to our homes to continue our work. But the contest was brilliant at teasing out why change was so difficult in a company that is as mature and process driven as ours.

The contest was an innovation exercise. Find some aspect of our business processes or client services or product design that could be dramatically revised to great effect, both for the client and the company. But here was the catch: we had to create teams of ten people.

Those ten people had to come from totally different areas of the business, totally different geographical areas, and totally different job levels. We've probably all done something like this on the usual team-building days our companies put us through.

But this time was very different. We had to achieve this over Microsoft Teams and Zoom. We couldn't see each other, only listen to each other. Connectivity was a constant challenge as was organising a time when everyone could be available. There never was such a time, so our brainstorming was asynchronous by necessity.

Prioritising business problems to be solved

To be clear, I'm not so sure we came up with any brilliant innovations. But we did develop some incredible insights into how other people in our business prioritised problems to be solved and the optimal ways to solve them.

What was extraordinary was to see how out of sync we were with each other: commission-based workers solved problems one way, typically prioritising sales; IT people were focused on delivery and practicality; and those of us who were paid to imagine found clever ways to re-imagine the company as an NGO.

Workers not located in the head office demonstrated the greatest ability to think on their own, perhaps because that's what is required of them when the mother-ship is absent. Again, there's nothing surprising in those results.

Remember though, that the contest required us to produce something. At one level, it was particularly illuminating to watch how strategic decision-making evolved. While we were together, some degree of consensus emerged. When we each went off to do our own asynchronous project development, we each reverted to our idea-processing type.

The future of work

The exercise provided some important lessons for a future of work where daily interactions with teammates cannot be assured.

Currently the discussions about the future of work focus on such issues as:

- > Whether to work at home, or in the office or half and half – and what that means about cutting back on office space.
- > How to accommodate for flexitime in a world where the barriers between work and our lives have become blurred.
- > How to assess whether our employees are being as productive as they should be.

Whether retrenchment is our only option in these times. But these are not the most critical issues.

Recreating critical human connections

If we want our future business ambitions to get off the ground, the real focus must now be on how we can re-create those critical human connections that we've never really completely credited for our past successes.

Here are the real challenges we need to solve for. The workplace plays an essential role in requiring employees of diverse backgrounds and mindsets to problem-solve together.

We clearly don't capitalise enough on this opportunity because we create organograms that allow different aspects of the business and different levels of employees to remain disaggregated. This is what sits at the root of intransigence to change.

But consider how much greater the problem could become in our future world of work if we don't recognise the challenge up front.

At some level, the open access that video conferencing now affords all our employees – no matter what level – to learning about aspects of the business that they didn't know before or to participate in global strategic debates that they would never have been invited to before is enormously empowering.

The learning curve that workers in knowledge-based businesses have been able to experience in these last five months could never be replicated by on-the-job training programmes.

So now we have a clue as to how important this experience can be for getting everyone on the same page and dramatically enhancing our ability for work with agility.

But that also means that when we do come back together in the workplace – that time must be equally impactful and change focused.

The evolution of workspace

Coming back to the office' for those businesses that are knowledge based or require extensive strategic planning will be less about finding a place to work – the famous hot-desk' solution – and more about having a place where you can collaborate.

As Jennifer Magnolfi Astill, one of the leading researchers in the evolution of the workspace, points out:

- > We will need space for teams and leaders to make sense of the complexity of what their businesses will face and to distil a plan of action.
- > We will need space to make decisions together – where we have simultaneous access to the big picture, where we can see each other's faces, read each other's body language, and then find ways to respond to that tensing jawline in our colleagues' faces.

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Magnolfi Astill points out that workplace evolution is least effective when it's a top-down solution. When workplace solutions come from the users, it has lasting value.

Her research suggests that the real power of the workspace is in its ability to foster focus, socialisation, collaboration and learning. What this socialisation aspect contributes to our strategic thinking is that it allows for 'collisions' to occur between potentially isolated people or groups.

In conclusion

Coming back to the office must be about providing an opportunity for people who would not normally be video-chatting or texting each other to come together and share ideas, sort out differences and misperceptions, and learn from each other.

For our business ambitions to work, it will be in these encounters where the magic happens. This is where the corporate culture will evolve, where we can acknowledge each other and extend an elbow to each other – or at least look each other in the eye – even if we are still socially distanced. This is where employee engagement will crystallise.

Rutger Bregman is right about one thing: for 'human kind' we need a physical presence, a physical connection of some kind – even if it's not all the time.

Article tags

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