What's next for the way we work? Leaders must adapt, innovate and find new ways of working and managing.

By Peter Braithwaite and Damien Dent

Failure to do so will mean a loss of productivity, service and quality.

How will the new world work? Is there any going back?

It is clear that no one will go back to 2019 ways of working. People at all levels in most organisations are pondering what the future looks like; some are wondering whether the new ways are sustainable. Some of the changes will be good, some will pose significant challenges to organisations

If an organisation does not focus on understanding their current way of working and managing, they will struggle to maintain an effective and efficient operation.

The future

Organisations that re-think how they work and manage will recover quickly and move effectively to a sustainable way of working. Make no mistake, the last few months have hammered most organisations' cost bases. Hammered. Costs are up, revenue down, uncertainty about whether current performance is sustainable. Those that are able to reduce their costs significantly and sustainably will be better placed versus their competitors. True productivity growth - doing more with less - will be the focus over the coming period. And it will need to be done quickly.

Current Environment

> Everyone is congratulating themselves on how well it has gone.

> Productivity is up.

> Technology has worked and continues to evolve and improve.

> People have proved that they can work remotely, even in some fields that have had a high reluctance to try it. When forced, they made it work.

> Employees have changed - and have demonstrated that they can change quickly, under the right circumstances. This is about the right situational leadership.

> People are enjoying the flexibility of not commuting, setting their own schedules.

Currently a lot of quick action is driven by pandemic need (fear, constrictions) enabled by existing relationships and ways of working. Time will erode that.

No one has yet determined if current performance is sustainable. We are still in the uncertain times of managing in a pandemic. But it is an opportunity for a reset of how we do things.

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Where to Focus

What should organisations focus on to lift and sustain performance and manage and reduce costs?

New ways of working

- Role Clarity
- Technology
- Culture
- Standards
- People
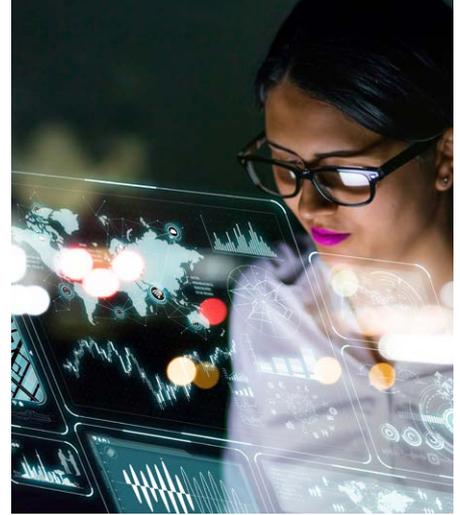
Managing in the new world will require a steeliness from management that has not been as comprehensively necessary as it is today.

Leveraging not only technology but the human capital will be critical. To do this, a number of inter-related factors need to be examined, re-thought and implemented.

Standards

Your network of workers is dispersed, physically isolated. It will be imperative that you establish very clear definitions of *what good looks like*. Understand the role of standards and use them to manage in the newly volatile environment. Why is this important? **Over time, without solid, requiring standards, process variation will start to emerge**. People are working remotely, have little interaction. Teams are fractured. Management has reduced oversight. There is a poorer ability in this environment for management to react and respond to issues as they emerge. If today's standards are weak, inaccurate, not conformed to, then a dispersed team will only increase these weaknesses. Also, it will become harder to identify opportunities to improve without standards, without visibility of performance. Standards cover many things; SLAs, turnaround times, quality, timing.

Linked to this is the ability to measure performance. Honestly. What was done, how efficiently was it done? Did we deliver an outcome (the commitment to the customer) or an output (a task)? Are we able to maintain our current pace or

rate? In the current environment, much success has been delivered by momentum; either the residual performance from pre-pandemic or the fear or adrenaline driven activity. Measuring performance should flag variances, meaning management can turn their attention to that.

Role Clarity

Now more than ever people need to understand in high levels of detail how to perform their role and what this looks like. This is a strong behavioural focus. For instance, if a manager should "stay connected" to their team, each manager is likely to have a different definition. What they do, what they use, how often they do it, what they avoid doing. An organisation needs to be very clear about what good

Define your expectations of what good performance is for your people.

Be clear on who is accountable for what and their responsibilities.

looks like in the way a role is performed. Much of the role of the worker has not changed; they are still using the same tools, systems, processes. **But a manager has a vastly different environment.** They are charged with a specific set of outcomes (quality and efficient service), yet they are now dealing with much higher levels of complexity in their operating environment.

Also important is for people to understand what each person is responsible for. In a dispersed group, more things can fall between the cracks. In traditional environments, there are many simple triggers and touchpoints that enable people to understand what is going on. Now people have to work harder to garner the same understanding.

Technology

Technology is good, getting better, but not good enough. Whether it is 'zoom fatigue' or irritation at patchy coverage or erratic behaviours, these are all quite visible. But there are also less obvious traps. Even when working at its optimum, zoom-like technology has a minute slight lag in the

audio. We are attuned to a 'no gap, no overlap' experience that guides our reactions and acceptance of what is being said. This refers to the silences between conversational turns. Zoom technology delivers audio fast, but of medium quality, but not as fast as in a normal conversation. This triggers a reaction that the person talking is not genuine. In a conversation, it gets compounded. And the harder it is to hear or understand someone (lag, quality, overtalking), the less trustworthy or convincing they are perceived to be. And compounding this will be, over time, new people being recruited, joining groups.

> Technology is good, but cannot replace direct, face-to-face interaction.
>
> *And security is likely to become even more important.*

What is today a familiar cohort will evolve with new members. Everyone is learning how to work in a more technologically driven work environment and some of it will be hard to correct for inherent weaknesses.

Additionally, security issues with dispersed workforces will emerge. A recent article cited home wifi routers as being "as secure as a cardboard shark cage". The more dispersed a network, the more opportunities for risk to intrude. It can be and is overcome with more investment in technology; but at a cost.

Culture

Building a sense of team purpose is tough when people are dispersed, may never interact directly (or have even met) and work different patterns. It is already an evident problem with some of the off-shored or near-shored operations. Those that typically work best usually are dealing with simple tasks or those that are not interdependent on other areas or functions. Without a range of types of interaction and physical co-location

> How do you create a sense of team and then maintain it?
>
> *How do you do that with new starters who you may never meet?*

it is hard to create a unified culture. There is not the opportunity for the range of small signals, ad hoc influencing opportunities, brand presence, observation of how others operate to create that sense of a cohesive unit. And again, as people leave or join teams this will start to unwind any sense of a distinct or desired culture. Onboarding people to an organisation is a complex and multi-faceted task. Doing it in the current environment is likely to provide high failure rates and disengaged employees.

People

This picks up many of the themes already examined. But with your network dispersed, the less transparent it becomes: who is working on this? What is being done? Is it the right quality? Is it the right work? Are my people ok? Systems will give us some of this, but not enough. Systems cannot provide the casual influencing or insight that traditional offices provide. Nor the casual networks

> How do you align your people to the organisation's intent and expectations?
>
> *How do you ensure that they are safe and productive?*

that allow people to seek assistance, give advice. It is likely to nolonger be a two-way interaction; it will tend to be one-directional, from the manager out to individuals.

It will also exaggerate current individual pre-dispositions. Working in physical team environments tends to align behaviours and approaches; we all have to modify something. If everyone stays remote, they will revert to what is comfortable. And this may be hard to detect. Approaches, working patterns will start to drift apart. Some need the discipline of a work environment. Without this, days get longer, more distractions, less focus and therefore harder to complete work well or efficiently. There can be an inability to separate work and home, driving stress, impacting mental wellness. Separation of work and home gives people variety in their lives. Something to talk about - "how was your day?" - is far less interesting if you've both been sitting at the same table all day. Not everyone needs or relishes this - but many do and have lost it.

Equally, organisations need to determine whether they can sustain the cost and risk associated with people working remotely. Do you provide dual screens for all at-home staff? Chairs? Ergonomic desks? What if someone doesn't have the space or inclination to set up their home like this? Is data security at a level that is required when it is unclear who can see screens or hear conversations? How do you stop sharing of devices?

And technology choices can also impact people's engagement. Direct voice to voice will diminish; most people don't like calling. Would prefer to sms or use chat functions. These cannot only become disruptive (in the way in which they make interaction like ping pong) but miss the many nuances that help us make sense of what is being said. Distance will increase. Technology as an enabler can also be a distancer in cultural terms.

Conclusion

There are many challenges facing organisations going forward about the future of work. The genie is out of the bottle and we can't put it back. Facing those challenges will define who succeeds and who fails. Facing them quickly and nimbly will be imperative. One thing that we can all be certain of is that things will continue to evolve and change much more quickly than we have seen before.

In our next article, we will reflect on this and talk to what the future of the office may be.

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