LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE IN THE MIDST OF A CRISIS

How to find opportunity in crisis and build blueprints for future success

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INTRODUCTION

The word “disruptive” has been well used — some might say overused — in recent years, but even that apt descriptor doesn’t begin to describe the extraordinary impact of COVID-19.

The global pandemic will undoubtedly leave its mark on the social, political, and economic fabric of our nation, but its impact on our work environment is likely to be monumental. Almost overnight, the ways in which we work, connect, collaborate, and communicate with our teams, clients, and customers have been redefined. Work might not ever be the same.

“We are conducting a natural experiment, one we would prefer not to have conducted,” Peter Schwartz, a futurist and member of the California Future of Work Commission, told The New York Times recently. “But we’re going to learn the hard way, rather quickly and by necessity, everything that can be done remotely. … We’re not going back to zero afterward. What do we learn out of all this in terms of how our society can change?”

We will undoubtedly struggle at first. Bandwidth and technical capacity may present challenges for some. Processes and oversight — or more specifically, a lack thereof — may be issues for others. For some employees, loneliness and isolation will be burdens.

But amid all of the challenges lie an array of opportunities — to unlearn old, inefficient strategies, to master new skills, and to relearn what efficiency and effectiveness look like at work.

We may very well look back at this pandemic as an inflection point that changed work forever. Those of us who master the right tools and processes early will have a clear advantage in this “new reality.”

CHALLENGES... AND OPPORTUNITIES

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the United States was reported on Jan. 20, 2020. Just two weeks later, Bloomberg reporters Shelly Banjo, Livia Yap, Colum Murphy, and Vinicy Chan predicted the pandemic would result in “the world’s largest work-from-home experiment.”

They were right. In March, many states closed all non-essential businesses and urged residents to stay home. In an effort to maintain some semblance of normalcy, many businesses turned to remote work. Offices were shuttered, employees grabbed their laptops, and we all walked straight into a new, virtual, socially-distant world.

For many businesses, especially those that weren’t adequately equipped to go remote, the transition wasn’t smooth. We’ve been talking about remote work and the benefits it offers both businesses and employees for years now, but many businesses were resistant to change, and hadn’t made the switch. And then the coronavirus came along, and there was no other option: suddenly everyone was forced to go remote, or else shut down operations. That added another layer of stress to an already stressful situation.

But opportunities abound to leverage this crisis and build blueprints for our future of work. According to research compiled by Global Workplace Analytics, organizations that offer well-structured work-from-home opportunities have more satisfied employees, lower attrition rates, fewer unscheduled absences, increased productivity, and reduced costs.

And help for those new to the remote game is remarkably easy to find, courtesy of work-from-home innovators and early adopters.
The first round of help focuses on our mental well-being and mindset, and that of our teams.

Leadership expert Patrick Lencioni, author of such best-sellers as *The Advantage*, *The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive*, and *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, offered these recommendations for leaders and managers.

- **Be exceedingly human.** “By that, I mean that you should demonstrate your concern for the very real fears and anxieties that your people are experiencing, not only professionally and economically, but socially and personally,” he wrote. “Even though you don’t have definitive answers to all of their questions, don’t let that keep you from listening to them and empathizing with their fears.”

- **Be persistent.** “This is not a time to hold back,” Lencioni said. “Send people updates and regular communication, even if there is not a lot of new information, and the message is largely personal. When people are isolated, over-communication is more important than ever.”

- **Be creative.** “Try new things,” Lencioni suggested. “Call semi-regular video-conference meetings that allow employees to not only talk about work, but to share their experiences dealing with this situation. Crises provide an opportunity for people to come to know one another and establish bonds that will endure long after the crisis is over.”

There are many things out of control in the world right now. Rather than focus on those, focus on the things that can be controlled, such as attitude and the response to this fear. Ask what can be done together to provide hope and inspiration to the community. Look at this and say, “What would an extraordinary person in my situation do right now?”

The next round of help zeroes in on the nuts and bolts — the workflows, processes, and strategies that businesses need for remote-work success. Much of the popular guidance here falls into three categories:

- **Consistent communication and clear expectations.** “Managers must make expectations crystal clear: X is the work you should do, Y is the quality standard, Z is the deadline,” Jennifer Robison writes for Gallup. “Executives should provide higher-level expectations aligned with the company’s purpose: We’ll keep our customers engaged by doing X, we’ll maintain our standards by doing Y, we’ll fulfill our mission by doing Z. The more detail, the better.”

- **Clearly defined policies and processes.** Extending deadlines and keeping people on the same projects longer isn’t effective long-term. It’s imperative to improve the workflow, inspect the steps, and look for every opportunity to streamline. Consider focusing on remote guidelines, the use of virtual private networks, disaster recovery and business continuity, and risk management.

- **Cloud-based technology investments.** TechRepublic’s Moira Alexander urges companies to invest in the right cloud-based tools that will enable them to maximize workflow and collaboration. These tools should provide seamless integration into existing technologies without sacrificing security or user efficiency. The goal is to increase productivity, not set up roadblocks to efficiency and effectiveness.

We have learned from COVID-19 that it isn’t enough for technology to enable staff to be more effective and productive in an office environment. Technology must enable staff to perform at the same levels of productivity in a location-agnostic manner. It doesn’t matter if a manager is in office or under a shelter-in-place order in NYC, that manager must have access to the same data and information.
INNOVATORS AND EARLY ADOPTERS... AND EVERYONE ELSE

Innovators and early adopters in the remote work landscape had a competitive advantage when shelter in place was ordered. Not only was the technology necessary to function in a distributed environment already deployed, but they had moved past recreating the office online.

These organizations examined every facet of their in-office environment, from processes and policies to passing work from person to person. They even considered interpersonal communication and interactions, such as walking down the hallway to ask a question. They didn't just implement technology that allowed them to track project status and provide updates when the organization was working in office. They looked beyond and asked what would be needed when coworkers couldn't just walk down the hallway, or when it wasn't possible to drop a stack of paperwork off at someone's desk. They asked what was needed to seamlessly transition from an office to a remote environment without anyone noticing the difference in quality or quantity of work.

Consider an organization we'll call Delta. They are a 1,000-person CPA firm with 16 offices and $180 million in revenue, with shared staff throughout the business in various niche areas, performing audit, tax, and advisory services. They used an inefficient paper process that included more than 50 point solutions.

Long before coronavirus was a concern, the firm deployed XCM to review its inefficient paper processes and apply Lean 6 principles to streamline and automate. XCM enabled the firm to connect the total business process lifecycle, absorbing existing technologies while giving each professional the insight and guidance to meet client demands.

And because the firm had implemented technology solutions such as XCM, when it came time to move from an office to a remote environment, the firm barely blinked. Their investment in process improvement and best-in-breed technology was critical in their ability to survive in as close to normal as possible during COVID-19; the move to a remote environment was seamless.

For those organizations who resisted the move to a distributed workforce, the sudden changes thrust upon them by the coronavirus was jarring. In some instances, just obtaining the laptops needed for everyone to work from home was a struggle. These organizations lacked the technology and tools to remain productive and lost precious time defining remote-friendly processes in this temporary reality.

Consider if organization Delta, with its 1,000 people and 50 point solutions, had not deployed XCM to improve their processes and connect the business lifecycle end-to-end. How would their manual process have been completed with restrictions against gatherings of more than ten people, and with shelter-in-place orders in effect? Without these actions, the firm would have struggled to track the status of various engagements and projects. If an employee contracted COVID-19, had to take time off to care for a sick family member, or care for children, Delta may not have everything needed to complete the project.

If an organization hadn't taken steps to document and improve processes, establish workflow tracking, and connect the business lifecycle before coronavirus, it is not too late. Indeed, by investing in the right technology and collaboration tools now, they have the opportunity to become the champions of a distributed workforce, and possibly even become known as one of the next innovators.
THE END... IS JUST ANOTHER BEGINNING

At some point, the coronavirus will relax its hold upon us, and upon our economy. We don’t know when shelter in place orders will be lifted, and when social distancing measures will relax. We do know that not all of the changes will be temporary. To revisit the words of Peter Schwartz, “we’re not going to go back to zero.” The temporary reality that we find ourselves in will change, and in its place will be a new normal, the landscape both familiar and unfamiliar.

Yes, restaurants will open back up, schools will go back in session, and toilet paper will no longer be worth its weight in gold. But the ripple effects of COVID-19 will be seen in more subtle ways; it will be seen in the changes in how we work, communicate, collaborate, and even relax. So how do we take advantage of the knowledge and experience gained from this crisis?

Future-facing organizations won’t lose sight of the fact that when this passes, they will need to be ready. They will question if current processes and policies are doing what they need them to do and if that will continue to be the case post-coronavirus. They will move past old and inefficient practices to master new skills and new technologies. And they will make prudent investments in those technologies to maintain productivity levels not only during the COVID-19 crisis but afterward.

This crisis is an opportunity to fundamentally change how, when, and where we work, to streamline, automate, and leave stronger than we went in. Those organizations who learn from the challenges presented by COVID-19 by investing wisely and preparing for the future will be ready to take the new landscape on – full speed ahead.

If you’re interested in learning more about how XCMworkflow can help your teams connect, manage workflows, and collaborate remotely, or to request a complimentary consultation, call 781.356.5152 or visit xcmsolutions.com today.