



Recovery and the new normal for global organisations

In order to survive the recent crisis, businesses have made massive changes both in terms of digitalisation and workforce organisation. Technology roadmaps, which once covered years, were rolled out in a matter of weeks. Trends such as home-working and virtual collaboration, which were growing in popularity, have become mainstream for many overnight. It is not so much that the world has changed, rather that progress has massively accelerated. The challenge that global organisations now face is how they adapt to a future that has suddenly arrived.

Automation is growing, but people still make the difference

Empty skyscrapers in urban centres has been an enduring image of the crisis, with work being completed from multiple distributed locations. What has made this possible has been the leveraging of automation, especially for back-office processes. According to research from Bain, 84% of companies are now ramping up their initiatives in this area.¹ “If you go through the City of London, all the banks, all the insurers are closed, the same in New York City. Whatever happens, the new dawn will be different from the past,” Joerg Vollmer, CEO of Swiss Post Solutions, says.

But even with huge recent investment, a future of fully automated, digital systems remains a long way off. Even in the finance and insurance industries, which are heavily data-driven and transactional, digitalisation is not as advanced as many assume. As Vollmer describes: “Take banking, only around 50% of customers are signed up for e-banking, and only half of those actually use it on a regular basis. Preparing invoices manually, writing cheques and getting cash from the bank is still the reality.”



Joerg Vollmer, CEO, Swiss Post Solutions

In the coming months and years, the new normal for companies will be managing the combination of skilled workers and automated systems, and making sure the overall system is as seamless and efficient as possible. A realistic model is 50% automation and 50% manual work. For example, to process invoices, a service partner may deploy artificial intelligence (AI) and robotic process automation (RPA) to input key data, then utilise knowledge workers in a nearshore location to manage the operation and handle exceptions. As Vollmer concludes: “Ultimately, it is people and culture that still make the difference for companies, but it’s about making sure your workers have the right technology and processes to do the job effectively.”



Managing home-working on a global scale

In the early weeks of the crisis, this sentiment was put into sharp focus. Companies were forced to roll out massive work-from-home schemes in very short time frames. The fact that so many firms, across the world and in different industries, were able to do this while maintaining productivity levels, has been a major achievement.

A major challenge for global companies was communication, with thousands of workers situated in non-office locations across multiple different countries. Instead of relying on emails, many firms have opted for a new generation of internal messaging services that are enabled through mobile or desktop devices. Companies like Beekeeper, which specialise in connecting distributed workforces, have come to the fore during the crisis. They provide secure and configurable platforms, which act like social networks within an organisation. Today, where everyone owns a smartphone, workers can be easily updated on shift plans, corporate initiatives, or simply arrange social occasions with fellow workers, wherever they are located. They can also access all kinds of marketing materials, health presentations, or other company documents. Both top-down communication from the company leadership, as well communication from the team level can be easily facilitated.

Such approaches will help support flexible working practices in the future, while fostering collaboration. Like automation, home-working will not become standard, but it will increase significantly from pre-crisis levels. Thimon de Jong, a social psychologist, founder of think tank Whetston and lecturer at the University of Utrecht, who specialises in the business impact of societal change, explains: "If we analyse crises over the past 100 years, the societal impact has been always overestimated. But a realistic expectation for working from home in the near future would be around 15%-20% of our working time."

Companies will subsequently have to invest in remote-office environments. This could include providing stipends to help employees create a suitable home office infrastructure, or subsidising ancillary services like childcare, meal delivery or exercise equipment. HR departments will have to make sure that a culture of 'remote everything'² does not blur the lines of work-life and home-life, and that employees are adequately supported and transitioned into the new environment.

1 Bain, June 2020. 'The "New Normal" Is a Myth. The Future Won't Be Normal at All.' Accessed August 2020.

2 SSON, June 2020. 'Future of Work: Will it Lead to a Four-Day Week?'. Accessed August 2020.