



PRESENT



A COVID-19 Virtual Ideation Experience

Team Topic and Number: Distributed Work – Team 4

Team sponsor/chapter (if applicable): N/A

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Distributed Work – the new normal?

One of the consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic has been the rapid and enforced move by many of the world's biggest firms to a distributed workplace model. Will this lead to a permanent change in working practises? Jess Staley of Barclays seems to think so, being quoted widely in the mainstream press as saying “The notion of putting 7,000 people in a building may be a thing of the past,” a sentiment echoed by many other CEOs around the world.

In order to realise the benefits of this new world of work, it's clear that several factors need to be considered. Leadership styles will need to adapt, virtual collaboration tools will need to be adopted at unprecedented levels and wellbeing and inclusivity will become the number one concern for business everywhere as the workforce comes to terms with increased isolation and lack of social connection.

The one benefit that we all agree is encouraging us to remain socially distant and making us question our pre COVID-19 habits, is the hope that we achieve more sustainable outcomes and make a real impact on the climate emergency – a battle that felt like no one could win pre-pandemic.

Digital Transformation – its suddenly arrived!

Many organisations have gone through an overnight digital transformation to support the global exodus of their people to work, collaborate and interact from their homes. Tech firms have emerged big winners and will continue to innovate and push boundaries to render distributed working efficient, productive, collaborative and creative.

In the short to medium term we are likely to see an increased use of cloud-based services, task delegation software, project management tools, real-time communication apps, messaging and video-conferencing - live streaming will be the norm. Collaboration platforms e.g. Teams, Slack, G-Suite will be enhanced for mass workplace usage. Hardware and Networks will be bolstered to support distributed working. Online training and qualifications will increase, and customer services function and helpdesks will become automated. This will bring with it a renewed focus on cybersecurity, privacy concerns and an acceleration to 5G as demand for online collaboration tools increase.

In the medium term, immersive AR and VR tools will be utilised and automation of roles will start to increase. Workplace apps will be expanded to better track productivity. Employee health and wellbeing apps that promote physical and mental wellbeing will be used extensively. The dependence on Cobots and virtual assistants like Alexa and Siri will increase to carry out administrative tasks. In the future we may see Google Glass and MS HoloLens stretching the boundaries of distributed working, AI enabled empathetic tech to ensure inclusion of global and intergenerational workforce and creating personal avatars to conduct meetings to benefit from hyper realistic collaboration.

Flexibility & Adaptability – the return to the office

As we return to the office, workspaces will need to evolve from steady-state environments to a world of perpetual change. Creating building and space typologies for team-based work, ad hoc collaboration and deep focus, whilst also supporting social interaction and nurturing a community-based culture, will be pivotal in delivering successful workplace experiences and supporting employee wellbeing.

In order to deliver such a workplace, moving away from design perfection to prototyping and learning from experimentation and pilots will be essential. This will need to be underpinned by constant innovation and a culture of engaging with users across all levels of the organisation, ultimately drive co-creation and curation of a variety of work settings that offer choice, flexibility and adaptability.

Distributed Estates – the future of workplace

Centralised headquarters may give way to distributed sites to provide staff alternative workplaces for emergency situations. Employees, wary of traveling on public transit, will require realistic alternative commute options—biking, driving, walking reasonable distances to maintain their isolation.

The outsourced hub & spoke model became more popular with the rise of co-working, and can be supplemented by paid-by-hour sites (e.g. hotel rooms) which will be especially useful in the short-term, or partner locations (e.g. universities) which will become more relevant in the long-term. 'Outsourcing' and introducing remote work provides organisations with the flexibility to accommodate capacity fluctuation and the opportunity to reduce estate cost. However, the impact on brand, community, talent and wellbeing should be taken into consideration when making short or long-term decisions. Outsourced models will provide limited control over culture and brand presence as well as site access. Also, outsourced models, whilst having benefits in terms of opportunities for networking and cross-organisation contact, may significantly impact mentoring and learning by 'osmosis' within an organisation.

Leadership and Culture – now more important than ever

If we accept that a Distributed Workforce model and home working is here to stay, then we must concede that organisational culture and leadership styles will need to change.

The skills required to work in the office as part of a team are different to the skills required to work in a mix of settings with less face to face interaction. At the moment, the majority of people are working from home as they have been told to. This has led to some individuals and businesses realising that work from home is possible. However, to get the most out of this for the long term requires a change in approach to work and leadership skills – just recreating working in the office, online will not improve performance in the long term.

To get the most out of distributed working, CRE will need to work closely with HR to help upskill the employees. HR will need to support in training the companies' workforce to move away from 'command and control' and towards improved emotional intelligence, resilience and agility. This will ensure that the individuals within the business have the right personal toolkit to allow them to work away from the office and thrive.

Some businesses will already be moving in this direction but for others this will require a large pivot to support the 'new normal'. Having a strong relationship between CRE and HR has never been more important.

Diversity and Inclusion – what it means to be human

In addition to a more 'listening culture' there is a huge opportunity for organisations to leverage the workplace experience and cultivate a 'diverse and inclusive culture'.

With the business case for diversity becoming more widely accepted. So is 'diversity of thought' – people with different perspectives, backgrounds and experiences coming together to problem solve and be creative (Like this Hackathon).

Many of the steps that companies are discussing in the short and long term to promote safe working environments, increased work life balance, a greater focus on mental health and well-being, provide an opportunity to think about people with alternative thinking styles and invisible disabilities.

We are living in a time where HR policies are becoming Leadership priorities – where organisational goals across the globe focus on talent and innovation. Typically, hiring processes, management practices and workspaces have been designed only with neurotypicals in mind (relying on occupational health to adjust the workplace). As part of the Distributed Work model employers need to make a conscious effort to look at these with a neurodiversity and universal accessibility lens.

This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to bring together collective intelligence and review the holistic workplace and employee experience. As companies rethink the contract between Employer and Employee there is an opportunity to rethink HR policies and reframe terminology – instead of disclosure, use the term sharing; rather than diversity and disability, talk about difference and variation, and so on.

Sustainability – our conclusion

We conclude our findings with some reflections on how an increase in distributed work might have wider sustainability impacts on the world. Some short-term effects have already been evident with decreases in pollution reported globally

There are many sustainability benefits to be derived from an increase in distributed work. An obvious one is reduced travel, both commuting to a single place of work and business air travel, which respectively represent 28% of carbon and 2.5% of greenhouse emissions.

Others include reduced pollution and waste from office buildings, both in their construction and operation (from HVAC emissions to unnecessary paper waste). There is a note of caution in our findings too, however – such as the potential

impact of more people working in energy-inefficient homes, increased local car travel, and job losses in the construction and travel industries.

But the bigger question is: will COVID-19 simply prompt an insignificant and temporary reversal of what the RIBA declared as an 'environment and climate emergency', or will it instigate a global social, political and economic shift towards a more sustainable future? As real estate professionals, we sincerely hope that our global 'experiment' will be a catalyst for change.

"Because we all share this Planet Earth, we have to learn to live in harmony and peace with each other and with nature. This is not just a dream, but a necessity." His Holiness the Dalai Lama XIV