CoreNet Global | HACKATHON

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A COVID-19 Virtual Ideation Experience

Team Topic and Number: Hackathon Team #13 DISTRIBUTED WORK

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While it's hard to see past the immediate concerns and challenges in improvising an interim "back-to-the-office" process, we look ahead to what could be next.

Stay-at-home mandates imposed new ways of working in organizations that had no previous experience with them; and yet most have adapted remarkably well to maintain business continuity. And will likely find that many workers will reject the previous workplace status quo.

THE OUTLOOK
For many sectors, the adoption of distributed work was already in its second (or third?) generation of acceptance and innovation before Covid-19. For creative and knowledge-based industries, the ability to

work anywhere at any time has indeed lessened the impact of the recently mandated Work-From-Home policies. Within this sphere, productivity appears to be increasing after initial transitions, even in the face of the drastic slowdown of the economy.

The current crisis will continue to drive INNOVATION in even newer ways of working for organizations already practiced in distributed work; and may inspire the slow starters to look at others' best practices and re-assess their assumptions about productivity and workplace culture.

Going forward, working environments will be more RESPONSIVE, both physically and technologically, to the most effective modes of work and types of workers within an organization. Shifting from quick, touch-down conversations and updates to focused, heads-down production will be easier, whether within a physical team space or virtually distributed over a network of places. *Physically* responsive spaces provide variety in setting types and adaptability to reconfigure spaces quickly. *Technologically* responsive spaces anticipate the needs of users and require a robust platform of tools accessible from home or office.

At the risk of perpetuating generational stereotypes, digital natives tend to be quicker to grasp and adopt new technologies and tools, and already COMMUNICATE constantly in real time; but at the same time, may not fully appreciate the loss of the more comprehensive richness of face-to-face communications—reading body language and facial expressions—as compared to instant messaging or chat platforms. Organizational cultures may also influence the modes and relative formality of communication. This range of mediums and/or cultural norms will likely require workers to become both more literate in several types and more thoughtful about the optimal application of each.

In order to react more quickly to sudden environmental crises, such as viral illnesses or natural disasters, companies will see value in empowering employees to assess risk and adjust patterns themselves at the first sign of trouble. If an employee wakes up feeling ill, they need to stay home. If that employee is feeling well enough to work from home, the infrastructure needs to be there to make their engagement with their team as seamless as possible. This kind of SELF-DIRECTED workforce will have more opportunities to make adjustments and thus adapt more swiftly to changing circumstances.

One result of moving all meetings, presentations and workshops to digital platforms over the last couple of months is the advent of more egalitarian meeting space. There's no implied hierarchy in a grid of faces on a screen—no one sits at the head of the table. This potential new EQUITY has a lot of advantages in terms of team members' ability to make contributions without the filter of traditional corporate dynamics. When we remake work, the environments that support productivity will reflect the needs of employees more than ever before.

THE FULL POTENTIAL OF DISTRIBUTED WORK

Like most big changes, implementing distributed knowledge work come with a host of opportunities and challenges.

Opportunity: Extend the concept of "activity-based" workspace beyond the office to enable workers to choose the settings where they can do their best work. Rather than classifying people as "remote" or "office", recognize that the nature of a given activity dictates what kind of environment supports it best.

Challenge: Knowledge workers can be tethered to 'the office' by several things—regulations, protecting IP, the assets they work with, physical files, or processes like "agile"—and some may just prefer the routine and physicality of the office. In turn, many organizations own extensive campuses that don't lend themselves to disposition or leasing.

Can the organization master a pluralistic approach? How can leaders remove barriers to employees being successful regardless of where/when/how they are working?

Opportunity: Distributed work can increase productivity, widen access to talent, improve employee satisfaction, reduce stress, redundancy, environmental impact and, potentially, reduce real estate portfolio requirements.

Challenge: Legacy management styles and biases that place value on attendance and see "work" as transactional will be challenged by enabling more worker agency, autonomy, mobility and a performance mindset. We are designing with today's leaders but for tomorrow's workers. Managers new to distributed working will require training on how to effectively manage their report teams.

What new methods and mindsets regarding evaluating performance and accountability will be needed? Can workers become more self-aware of what they need (from space, tech and other provisioning) to support the range of their individual or group activities?

Opportunity: Momentum. With so many companies already enabling remote work and so many workers having been required to WFH, the demand for digital tools, higher quality collaboration and communication platforms and apps will only be intensified.

Challenge: Organizations who have not typically provided mobile computing devices, cell phones, screen/video sharing accounts and similar technology will be hard pressed to scale up larger deployments for their organizations.

Will technology (or the lack thereof) be a barrier that keeps smaller organizations from adopting distributed work, due to affordability, lack of IT expertise and the like? How will our old paradigms of 'sizing' a new location/lease by headcount need to change? What new *tools will we need?*

Opportunity*:* More productive task work can leave more time for activities that build social capital, like learning, community service, innovation, etc. Asynchronous communications—as work 'moves' across several time zones can, in some cases, increase efficiency. We can think in new terms about the construct of "work" and "time" beyond 9-to-5 and meetings in hour-long increments.

Challenge: How will enculturation happen when people's presence in the office is not consistent? How do we foster the sense of belonging/loyalty and responsibility to colleagues? The good news is that the basics of great interpersonal dynamics still hold true for regardless of the degree of 'virtual-ness:' build/reinforce rapport and trust, share information often and effectively, set explicit expectations, and hold each other accountable.

How do we balance our own agency with the responsibilities we have to teammates and colleagues with whom we are interdependent? How do we manage our own preferences and constraints, our self-care, the needs of others, and the challenges of time and space?

The biggest question each organization must answer is "What is the Purpose of the office?"

Technology has enabled many knowledge workers to no longer be tethered to a physical office. We don't have to travel to where the work is located as we did in the Industrial Age. Yet just because we *can* work anywhere and anytime, doesn't mean we should. What draws us to the office, then—when *is* the office the optimal place to get done a particular part of our work? And how do our strategies, designs and operations need to be reconceptualized to catch up with this not-so-new reality?

Each organization will define this for themselves, but we believe there are broadly held, deeply ingrained needs and wants offices satisfy: The office makes physical, tangible the construct of that organization; it houses experiences and can foster a sense of belonging, purpose and even pride, as well as provide the most robust interpersonal communications (without, for example the underlying stress caused with the slight delay that video platforms still have or not being able to read body language as effectively); it can inspire and comfort us, contribute to our wellbeing, and facilitate exposure to diversity and new ideas.

What we're really advocating then, is *agency*. Agency in choosing the most conducive place/setting, and in other aspects of our working lives. Distributed work expands our options and widens our world while giving us more ability to balance it.