Beyond The Pandemic: Rethinking Work And Thinking About The 'Next Normal'

Akshay Bhargava Forbes Councils Member
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Akshay Bhargava serves as the Chief Product Officer at Malwarebytes. Former McKinsey consultant, Oracle Cloud Executive, FireEye Products.

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There's no going back to the old ways of working.

The pandemic has caused employers and employees to rethink the workplace, with many employees now working from home, and it would be naive to think everything can — or should — return to "normal" after the pandemic ends. It's clear that work from home is not going to go away. More fundamental changes in the way companies and individuals approach work will prove to be vital.

So what will work look like post-pandemic?

When the Covid-19 global pandemic burst upon us in early 2020, it changed our lives. Companies reorganized workspaces, mandated mask-wearing and significantly enabled employees to work from home. Within four months, according to Brandon Hall Group research, more than half of organizations had more than 75% of their workforce working remotely. A long-predicted transition to remote work blew past expectations.

So although the end of the pandemic will see some employees return to the office, we may see that post-pandemic remote work will rise. This new normal presents challenges in areas like security, morale and team cohesion. Companies will need to rethink where, how and why we work.

Where We Work

Some businesses will need employees on-site: think manufacturing, distribution and service. Nonetheless, Global Workplace Analytics, which researches work-at-home trends, projects that 25% to 30% of the U.S. workforce will be working from home at least part of the time by the end of 2021. Remote working also will evolve into the

distributed office. Companies like WeWork are trying to position themselves as hubs to connect employees across locations. The real estate services company JLL predicts that flexible workspaces will make up 30% of office inventory within a decade.

"There are a few things like business trips that I doubt will ever go back," says Bill Gates, Microsoft co-founder and philanthropist. Business trips will become less common, replaced by video calls with customers and teams. This shift will lead to offices being redesigned to accommodate targeted group meetings.

The new normal is a transition to a next normal, defined by flexibility and the notion of working from anywhere. Getting ahead of this evolution will require thinking in terms of a total workplace ecosystem. The office of the near future will allocate space in different ways and may be deconstructed into hubs, homes and other components of a virtual office.

No one solution will fit all companies. Every person, company or industry will have to find what works best; however, it appears we now have more flexibility and this is to everyone's advantage.

How We Work

How we conduct meetings could change fundamentally. While in the past you held an in-person meeting to brainstorm ideas, now you might instead enable asynchronous idea sharing on a chat channel, followed by a video conference to discuss the ideas. We may, in fact, get more done in moving to more flexible, asynchronous decision-making.

When people are no longer occupying office space, it becomes easier to think beyond defined roles. Thinking beyond fixed roles and instead focusing on needed skills and giving employees the opportunity to develop the skills the company needs can be a win. But failing to recognize potential problems would be dangerous.

Although some studies show little impact on productivity, research from the Society for Human Resource Management found that a majority of employers reported it hard to maintain employee morale with remote work, and one-third reported that it impacted company culture. Simply transplanting processes to homes will not work well if employees lack appropriate work areas, equipment or secure connectivity.

Videoconferencing fails if attendees don't have the resources to interact at the same level. From chat and project management to secure access and file sharing, at every technological chokepoint, it's critical to ensure everyone is on the same page.

Why We Work

As we rethink work, we can re-examine basic assumptions and refocus. However, some principles are not going to change and, in fact, will be more important than ever.

So put yourself in the seat of a CEO or a board. What steps should you take to ensure continuity of business no matter what curves the future throws at you? Here are my three golden rules for navigating change:

1. Eliminate Communication Barriers.

Effective communication will matter just as much — even more — when people are not co-located. The challenge is that you'll need to approach it differently. For example, your executive presence on video is different than it is in person. In person, you can scan the room, pick up on people's attitudes and re-engage people as needed. You'll still need to do all this, but the techniques will be different. You might consider going through executive presence online training with an expert.

2. Share Your Purpose And Vision With Your Entire Staff.

Shared purpose and vision matter even more. Purpose should be something that really inspires people to wake up in the morning and get on a Zoom call because they feel passionate about what the company's doing. And in terms of vision, you want everyone in the company to know what the "north star" is. Where are we trying to head?

When people are distributed, having a clearly understood purpose and vision for the company may require adopting new tools. OKR, for example, which stands for objectives and key results, is a goal-setting framework to create alignment and engagement. Having a performance management system that aligns the company will be crucial.

3. Have Visibility Into What's Happening In Your Business And With Your Employees.

Managers need to know what's going on in their company and how their employees are getting along. Yet in a distributed workplace, you can't manage by walking around. You're going to need more metrics around your tools and performance management to stay informed about employee satisfaction. The goal is to know what's going on in your company.

No matter your business, these three golden rules can help steer you through uncertain times.

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