

THE NEW NORMAL: DIGITAL WORKING APPROACHES

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that what has been termed the ‘new normal’ – the phenomenon of wholly digital working approaches – has been largely driven by the consequences of the ‘once-in-a-century’ COVID-19 pandemic. *VUCA*, a managerial acronym signifying the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of conditions, distinguishes the four different types of challenges organisations face and the responses necessitated from them. (Bennett & Lemoine 2014). The scope of this report informs on the impressions digital work has made on employees, the inhibiting misconceptions circumscribing this notion, as well as the possible areas for improvements by managers. Deliberate consideration of the contents of this report indicate a prospective future characterised by hybrid working methods. The amalgamation of the digital workspace and the traditional workplace could likely capitalise on the benefits of digital work while addressing its shortcomings.

2.0 DIGITAL WORK FROM A BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE

Since early 2020, governments around the world have imposed social distancing measures, warranting the impermanent closure of ‘non-essential’ business and non-business operations. These mandates emphasised the need for employees and organisations to promptly adapt to the new ways of their work life, which has since seen all employees working fully digitally – through the use of information and communication technologies from home. (Richter, A 2020). Accompanying this phenomenon is an increase in digital transformation; organisations are increasingly propelled to capitalise on technology enabling online collaboration through platforms and audio- and video-conferencing (Schwarz et al, 2020). This has seen the upsurge of tools (*Microsoft Teams* and *Zoom*), cloud hosting services (*Amazon Web Services*) and online project management platforms (Atlassian’s *Jira*) as well as concepts facilitating digital transformation such as *Internet-of-Things*, *Machine Learning*, and *Artificial Intelligence* (De, Panday & Pal 2020). Organisations have also increased their investment in bandwidth expansion, training, network equipment and software to accommodate this growth. As employees adjust to the once foreign concept of digital work, organisations will likely employ digital working methods and digital transformation as a standard practice rather than a rare occurrence. Extensive considerations of the way digital work shape the experiences of employees may inform organisations on whether hybrid working methods can be considered a pragmatic prospect (De, Panday & Pal 2020).

3.0 IMPACTS OF DIGITAL WORK ON EMPLOYEES

3.1 GREATER NEED FOR CONSTANT CONNECTIVITY

The provision of mobile work devices such as laptops, tablets and smartphones as well as communication platforms enable employees in accessing work-related emails, instant messages and calls during both working and non-working hours. Additionally, the utilisation of the aforementioned can lead to employees feeling scrutinised and tense, due to increased perceived expectations concerning their connectedness (De, Panday & Pal 2020). These perceptions contribute to constant connectivity or what has been termed as an ‘electronic leash’ – the use of information and communication technology to permit 24/7 availability, responsiveness and connectedness to the organisation (Büchler, Hoeven & Zoonen 2020).

Evidence show that constant connectivity in a digital work environment is negatively related to employee wellbeing and can weaken their psychological detachment from work. This exists regardless of whether employees prefer to integrate or separate different domains of their life (Sørebø & Fugiseth 2014). Although connectivity may be considered a benefit an employee's professional life, too much can restrict their ability to physically and psychologically disengage from work.

3.2 GREATER TIME-MANAGEMENT

Greater autonomy and skills concerning time-management prove to be an accompanying advantage of digital work. The notion of autonomy includes the decisions employees make regarding when they believe their 'most productive time' is – when they commence and end their working hours. Research indicates that greater employee autonomy in time-management is positively related to their fulfilment with work (Nakrošiene, Buciuniene & Goštautaitė 2019). As digital working methods eliminate daily commutes, existing studies reveal employees working digitally work longer hours than those who do not; they, however, lose less time owing to unproductivity (Cerqueira et al 2020). As employee productivity is largely driven from their 'most productive time', the autonomy and skills associated with time-management are invaluable resources advantageous to employees working digitally.

3.3 CHANGING DYNAMICS OF HIERARCHIES

Organisations are characterised by the indispensable need for traditional hierarchies that particularly facilitate in preserving the formal flow of information and resources within the organisation. Hierarchies however can be considered intangible barriers, segregating individuals from varying hierarchical levels and inducing feelings of respect or fear among subordinates (Meske, Kissmer & Stieglitz 2020). The introduction of new collaboration and communication platforms enable an informal way for employees to connect digitally with people of varying hierarchical levels, chiefly their managers. The increased use of new communication technologies can consequently change the dynamic of interactions, as employees form relationships grounded in informality and reciprocity with their managers, deviating from the rigidity of traditional hierarchies (Meske, Kissmer & Stieglitz 2020). Proponents of technology argue that the increased use of technologies through digital working methods may thus, weaken the function of traditional hierarchies, further transforming the way information and resources flow through the organisation (Meske, Kissmer & Stieglitz 2020).

4.0 INHIBITING MISCONCEPTIONS OF DIGITAL WORK

4.1 "THE TRANSITION TO DIGITAL WORK IS CONSISTENT FOR ALL ORGANISATIONS"

The notion that the transition from traditional working methods to digital working methods can be executed in a seamless manner that is consistent among all organisations, is a fallacy. With the prevalence of digital work emerging in a VUCA environment, COVID-19 has exposed the digital divide – the frailty and unpreparedness of organisations digitally immature and the privilege and flexibility of digitally mature organisations (Fletcher, G &

Griffiths, M 2020). It is thus, unreasonable to presume all organisations sit at equal levels of digital maturity and all employees, at equal levels of digital literacy. Increasing an organisation's digital maturity through digital transformation i.e. the introduction of new collaboration and communication platforms, is not a swift process. Consequentially, evidence show that initiating this process as a response to VUCA conditions is a time most unsuitable to do so (Fletcher, G & Griffiths, M 2020). Digitally immature organisations can, as a result, struggle in its attempt to maintain its current practices in a digital work environment. Employees not highly digitally literate may also contribute to this shortcoming, since many will be working in an environment where the demands and competency level of information and communication technology will exceed their own (Davison & Ou 2017). Those finding the technology too complicated to learn, comprehend, keep pace with and utilise, are most likely to experience a reduction in their satisfaction and willingness to employ those technologies at work (Davison & Ou 2017). The acceleration of COVID-19 through the VUCA vehicle strains the potential for digitally immature organisations to sustain current practices in a digital environment.

4.2 'DIGITAL WORK IS DEFINED BY THE EXPERIENCES OF COVID-19'

The experiences of 'working from home' during the COVID-19 pandemic, under the guise of the VUCA framework should not be deemed a hard and true definition of working digitally. It should merely be considered a vehicle through which digital working approaches have been made prevalent. Opponents of digital working methods have put forth that digital work exclusively allows for online meetings. As such, many employees have inadvertently associated the notion of digital work with having no form of physical interaction with their colleagues and being overrun with *technostress* – the psychological stress associated with the frequent utilisation of technology (Christ-Brendemühl & Schaarschmidt 2020). It is another misconception that having the physical training or support associated with the utilisation of technology at work is nearly impossible in a digital work environment (Sørebø & Fugiseth 2014). Not only has the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated the propagation of digital work but has created an almost dystopian environment, inducing a plethora of restrictions relating to social distancing. These conditions would traditionally not exist under the standard conditions of working digitally (Richter, A 2020). All arguments challenging the experiences of digital work must thus, be considered with a grain of salt, as these are likely to be the results of COVID-19 and not digital working methods. As the emergence of digital work has only recently emerged as a conventional practice worldwide, it is important that it be considered an evolving concept, requiring quantitative and qualitative improvements. It is for this reason that the recent developments made in digital working methods should be studied as an empirical period of trial and error.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 TECHNICAL SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYEES

Managers have a key role in assisting subordinates in their utilisation of technologies as they work digitally. This is particularly critical for employees working in organisations that may not be highly digitally mature. It is recommended that managers offer institutionalised technical support and continue to implement mechanisms that strengthen them (Sørebø &

Fugiseth 2014). Regardless of the form of support offered however, it is vital that it is given without additionally inducing the stress level of employees. Findings indicate that technical support such as the provision of a high-quality helpdesk and issue log is positively related to employee contentment regarding the use of technology and in turn, improves their willingness to continue using the technology for work purposes (Sørenbø & Fugiseth 2014). The provision of personal end-user training, user experience seminars and interactive Q&As can allow employees to strengthen their technical skills and knowledge, as well as their digital literacy (Sørenbø & Fugiseth 2014). Managers can also assist in fostering a work environment that is based on teamwork, support and learning, particularly concerning technology use. Establishing a closer working relationship between employees and the information systems department is also known to vastly improve the accessibility of technical assistance employees receive (Sørenbø & Fugiseth 2014). The provision of technical support and digital literacy facilitation is hence a key aspect in improving their transition into fully digital working methods.

5.2 EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT

When expanding the technical skills and knowledge of employees concerning technology use, it is also imperative that managers focus on the involvement and wellbeing of their employees in the digital work environment. This incorporates improving employee engagement, particularly when using new technology. It is recommended that managers actively encourage employees to continuously experiment with utilising new technologies; and establish incentive schemes based on employee participation when transitioning into new processes (Sørenbø & Fugiseth 2014). It is also a manager's role to be proactive and take initiative in increasing the frequency of communications with subordinates. For instance, implementing daily one-on-one catch ups to consider challenges an employee may face, and to prioritise strategies that address these encounters (Nawaz, S 2020). Not only do these recommendations improve the engagement and familiarisation of employees with their digital work environment but are also proven as mechanisms in reducing the effects of technostress on employees.

5.3 FEEDBACK AND RECOGNITION

The digital work environment can unquestionably create a challenging space for managers to assess the performance of, as well as impart constructive feedback, to their subordinates, potentially impeding their career development. Platforms to the likes of Microsoft Teams and Zoom have been prominently employed in the digital workspace and have made it even more difficult to ascertain whether employees are optimising their time behind the screen effectively. Hence, managers must adjust their measures for the digital work environment by implementing tools, mechanisms and policies to accurately assess the performance of their subordinates. Regardless, it is critical managers also direct their attention to regularly providing recognition, positive feedback and incentives as a reward for good performance (Nawaz, S 2020). Digital work environment can threaten employees with the need for constant connectivity and the absence of frequent physical interaction can evoke a feeling of being 'distanced' from their managers. Frequent recognition can not only

motivate employees and improve their psychological wellbeing but can also bridge the disparity caused hierarchies in the traditional workplace.

6.0 A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, my role as a full-time university student and a part time intern proved to be incredibly challenging. My experience of working digitally was characterised by the use of information and communication technologies in both my university life and my work life and materialised with various silver linings. In my personal life, I truly felt I had far more time and energy to relish in pursuits that improved my psychological and physical wellbeing. I had greater quality time to spend with myself and my loved ones and I found more time for cooking healthier meals, exercising and resting than previously imagined. In my professional life, digital working methods served to improve my contributions to my manager, colleagues and organisation. The increased frequency of team meetings commingled with the colloquial use of video-conferencing and instant messaging features on Microsoft Teams conjured in me a sense of confidence and candidness. Feelings shared and stories communicated about our experiences working digitally, evoked in my team an informal dialogue that would never otherwise exist in the workplace.

The flexibility offered by my workplace gifted me with far greater autonomy in the time I devoted to working, studying and resting. I experienced no hindrances in my transition towards greater time optimisation, as I was able to work during my 'most productive hours' without being confined to the traditional working hours of nine-to-five. Although I did not experience the consequences of constant connectivity due to my firm ability of disconnecting work time and rest time, many of my colleagues were challenged in not being able to physically and psychologically 'log off'. The blurring of boundaries once separating my work and university life however, proved to be the greatest challenge for me, as I constantly found myself studying in my fifteen-minute breaks at work. I believe accompanying digital work, are many benefits that allow us to be more productive and efficient. Discerning different life domains and spending time solely focusing on a single activity seem to be one of the greatest challenges that come with digital working methods. It is important to consider the possible establishment of mechanisms to assist employees in their experience.

A harsh reality I faced from my experience of working digitally was the existence of the 'digital divide'. To support my transition into working digitally, I was fortunate enough to invest in additional infrastructure, as utilising a single thirteen-inch laptop provided by my workplace only seemed to double the amount of time I spent working on a single task. Following my purchase of a monitor, keyboard and mouse, quite high-priced I may add, I instantly recognised the privilege I held. I thought of the individuals that were financially disadvantaged, those that had lost their jobs and those deprived of an undisturbed and ergonomic place to work. The reality is that not every employee and every organisation are equipped with the technology, skills, knowledge and infrastructure required to transition to digital working methods. It is atypical encounters with those once-in-a-century events like COVID-19, we experience through the VUCA lens, that reveal the unequal distribution of resources and knowledge among employees and organisations; whether it be digital maturity, literacy or familiarity. Although I write favourably of digital work, it is critical to

consider, is this a suitable choice for every organisation and every employee? By transitioning from traditional working methods to digital working methods, who will be disadvantaged? More importantly, how? Overall, I do consider myself a proponent of digital working approaches and what they can offer to organisations and employees. However, I do believe it is vital each of us consider its strengths and weaknesses to us as individuals.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The prominence of digital working approaches, propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic through the VUCA vehicle, has introduced notions of greater employee autonomy in time management and has transformed the dynamics of traditional work hierarchies. However, it has also exposed employees to the threat of constant connectivity and has revealed the digital divide between organisations of varying digital maturity levels as well as between employees of varying digital literacy levels. This may be the 'new normal' at present, but the future holds the possibility of a more flexible and hybrid way of working, that is working digitally as well as in the workplace. The various experiences of employees and organisations as they trial the methods of full digital work in the midst of a VUCA environment, undoubtedly prompts a fundamental dialogue that determines the role of digital work as a likely future prospect. It will be important to consider how organisations can capitalise on the benefits accompanying digital working methods; how they can mitigate the risks and facilitate employees in their challenges of working digitally and most importantly; how the introduction of digital work may present society with a plethora of other opportunities and what these opportunities may be.

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