

Four Things We Learned in 2020



By E. Wallace

We know it's February, but... we needed a moment. We know you did, too. It's been six weeks since the weirdest, most challenging year we've seen in a long time — a year full of tragedy, uncertainty, and a few moments of hope here and there.

It's safe to say that we learned a lot in 2020. And although we're ready to move forward into a new era, we don't want to forget these learnings so we can apply them to our future endeavors.

Resilience is the New Metric

Before this disruption, companies leveraged data for efficiency. Businesses made decisions based on lean operations or reducing waste, and data allowed industries to operate on razor-thin margins. All was well. Productivity was up, and the business moved.

When COVID-19 caused global disruption, we learned one fundamental lesson: efficiency for efficiency's sake doesn't work. Our new metric is resilience.

Data-driven decision making frees businesses and allows them to be flexible — giving them real-time decision-making power without the red tape. Data should help us transform operations into something new, not just place old models into a data space. It's time to view the end game of synthesizing our data and create true resilience.

We Can Innovate or Die

If resilience is the end game of data insight, what is the end game of resilience? Innovation. Data gives us so much insight into our customers' patterns and desires, the world, the things around us. The entire purpose of resilience is to use this data for continuous innovation. It's no longer good enough to operate on a year-to-year rollout of products and services. For many of you, it's not even good enough to operate on a quarterly basis.

"HEY," you say. "You just told us that data was critical in the previous three sections."

We did. But data is not enough. What you do with that data is the answer. Those championing data as the answer and then letting all their data sit in hopeless gridlock and complexity know the real truth — data is only as good as its process.

When disruption hit, companies like Target, Walmart, and Home Depot used data to overcome the lack of foot traffic into physical stores. They designed a seamless online checkout system with pickup, creating hyperlocal distribution centers from what was once considered essential — a physical store.

This kind of innovation brought Target a 25% jump in sales year over year by the second quarter of 2020. Home Depot experienced the same. Even Walmart, a company so entrenched that it rarely experiences any significant movement in any direction, jumped up 6%.

Even more interesting, these companies also invested in employees, bumping up baseline wages and pledging more benefits for these suddenly essential workers. Companies that couldn't make the shift fast enough? Dead and buried.

Disruption is "The Always" Normal

We've seen so much chatter about disruption being the new normal, but we'd like to take this moment to shout from the rooftops: Disruption is the always normal. It's the only normal. The sooner companies embrace the idea that if we aren't in the middle of a disruption, we're gearing up for one or recovering from one, the better.

2020 should be a wake-up call. Companies didn't think they could operate remotely, and then they had to. Companies didn't think they needed to address their data fragmentation just yet, and then they had to all at once. Companies thought they could make it through just one more quarter skating on the laurels of a product everyone thought they needed, until they didn't, and they couldn't.

You should understand that resilience is the metric and innovation is the culture. Strip the veil away from the truth — disruption will always plague your company unless you get your data handled once and for all. It's a digital transformation era, and it's time to make the leap.

Data Isn't the Answer

Data should be dynamic. Enterprises now have legacy systems with historical data trying to connect from department to department. In some cases, acquiring other companies also means acquiring their data, systems, and legacy maintenance.

It's a wealth of information, but real value is obscured by unnecessary complexity. It's more important than ever to understand how data can move and flow to all stakeholders safely. It's the normalization of data that really matters. It's making sure everyone speaks data and has access to the data they need to make decisions.

A report from Cisco found that 58% of businesses began using technology that was previously available to them, but they'd rejected it. In many cases, this readoption is data-focused, allowing companies to collaborate and deliver the value customers expect. Thanks to 2020, we know how vital the right system is and has always been.

Life Moves Forward

We love technology. We love the mystery and majesty of data. But 2020 also showed us how small, simple things could create moments of joy that sustain us from moment to moment. The real lesson of 2020 is how data can help us understand and care for our customers, how it can create real value for all these lives we're involved with.

We understand more than ever that it's time to start experimenting with things you never thought were possible. Whether it's pursuing a new hobby or thinking of data in a way you never have before, 2020 reminded us that one of the best things about being human is the chance to ask, "what if?"

It's that simple question that led to the creation of The Modern Data Company. It's that question that brought us into 2021. We are excited about where this question will take us.