

COVID-19: Lessons from a pandemic

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The novel coronavirus that has swept through the globe will long be considered as one of the largest disruptors the world has ever had. The crisis has caused unprecedented change globally, notable of which were the large-scale adjustments to people's everyday lives. Working from home, a method that had been more the exception than the norm, suddenly became necessary overnight.

For years, companies have sought to harness technology in more effective ways in their operations. Digitization became a buzz word for many multinational companies, but it took on renewed importance when stringent quarantine measures took effect in various locations around the world.

Physical Distancing

We live in a highly digital world, but so much of our day to day lives has remained dependent on actual physical presence and contact. This ran completely contrary to one of the leading strategies of medical experts to beat the virus from circulating – the concept of physical distancing.

Physical distancing meant avoiding close contact with one another, limiting people's movements, and not being in places where mass gatherings would occur. Working out of an office with colleagues? No longer allowed (with the exception of essential services). Attending classes at school? Definitely no longer allowed. Going to the mall to eat at a restaurant or watch a movie? Yes, you get the idea – also no longer allowed. And just like that, as one government after the other began implementing strict physical distancing measures, all these activities we had gotten used to doing came to an abrupt halt. But life couldn't stop indefinitely, and when it became clear that things weren't going to go back to "normal" anytime soon, people and businesses alike had no choice but to adapt.

Working from Home: The New Normal?

For companies that already had significant numbers of employees working flexibly, working from home wasn't too much of an adjustment. But this was hardly the case for all, and in many industries, working from home was never even an option, either because it made no sense (e.g. retail establishments) or because the infrastructure just wasn't there (e.g. offices who still predominantly use desktop computers, and therefore employees had no work-issued laptops). Other companies that were somewhat better prepared proceeded to implement their Business Continuity Plans (BCPs). Now a key component of any BCP is having the capability to continue key operations from multiple locations – the concept of redundancy. However, when country after country shut down all but essential businesses, even the best BCPs were tested.

Take for example the shared services and business process outsourcing industries. Companies based in the US, Europe, and Australia who outsourced their customer service or support functions would tend to have operations in at least 2 separate countries outside of their home country, to ensure business continuity. However, when strict lockdowns were implemented in both the Philippines and India – two of the world’s largest countries for BPO and Shared Services work, the decrease in operational capacity was significant. While Operations teams were working out how to adjust to new government quarantine guidelines and get employees back in the office safely, similarly veined questions were emerging among the Human Resources groups of companies. Questions about which employees can be transitioned to work from home arrangements, how to continue tracking attendance and doing payroll while working remotely, or what to do with newly hired employees in the midst of an operational shutdown, all started cropping up.

Online Learning: Easier Said than Done

Outside the corporate environment, another industry that got hit badly was Education and Higher Learning. While some of the nation’s top universities had begun using online solutions (e.g. Canvas, Blackboard, Moodle, Sakai, etc.) for classes, it simply hadn’t reached the point of maturity yet. Even in universities with established online systems, classes were still predominantly held in the classroom, as has been the norm for decades.

When the quarantine resulted in long term class suspensions, universities that already had the infrastructure had little choice but to shift to conducting classes fully online, albeit to largely unfavorable feedback from students and faculty alike. There was simply no shortage of problems – poor Internet connections, faculty members who were simply uploading material without any discussion whatsoever, instructors who were not comfortable running online classes, students who had new quarantine-related responsibilities and couldn’t concentrate on their lessons, etc. The list went on and on. Because of the negative experience, many students had indicated that should online classes still be the norm in the next few months, they would rather not enroll first and just wait for face to face classes to resume. However, this whole experience has created a human resource problem rarely seen for the education sector – with potentially far reduced enrollment numbers, what would that mean for faculty members and non-teaching personnel, whose salaries are mainly derived from student tuition?

Looking Ahead

Having seen what has played out over the past few months, what can we do to make sure that we are better prepared, should this happen again?

Engage in Digital Transformation. Those long term, multi-year plans to go digital? As this pandemic will show, that just won’t work. Companies need to start thinking of digital transformation today. While working from home may still not be a feasible option for some (e.g. those working in restaurants, department stores, supermarkets, etc.), for many office-based employees, it can actually be possible. However, companies will need to be serious about exploring this option for the future. Yes, there will be capital investment required to potentially purchase new equipment, invest in the right software, and so on. But going digital is not just about preparing

for another future pandemic – it can also lead to significant cost reduction and simplification for a business in the long term. By reviewing key processes and systems for opportunities to go digital, the overall net result is also optimization, often leading to financial savings that offset the investment cost in the transformation.

This does not just apply to the corporate environment either. While this may not hold true for all levels of education (e.g. primary school), secondary and tertiary level institutions can benefit from ramping up efforts to integrate online classes as part of their regular operations. As many universities can now testify, having the online infrastructure and using it to effectively hold classes are two very different things. While not much can be done about client-side factors such as a poor internet connection, a lot of the other issues that came up, such as faculty unfamiliarity with online tools, an aversion to online teaching, etc. can be remedied by ensuring its greater use during even times of normalcy. For schools that haven't even invested in online delivery methods yet, this is a good time to reconsider the initiative and begin budgeting for it, as taking a proactive stance will only serve to benefit their preparedness efforts in the long term.

Ultimately, having a strong digital backbone across a company or institution's operations is beneficial not just from a business continuity perspective, but also from a human resources standpoint – when employees and stakeholders can continue to do business virtually, people can stay employed and there is a higher likelihood of operations remaining online.

Build up Crisis Management and Business Continuity Planning. Most major companies will have crisis management and business continuity plans, but not all will adequately test and update them regularly. Good BCPs are living documents that contain detailed response plans to many potential scenarios, such as natural disasters, data corruption, cyberattacks, and yes – even severe illnesses and pandemics. Having one prepares the company to answer questions like:

- In the event of a BCP scenario, which roles can continue working flexibly?
- How does company leadership reach out to, and check in, with the whole workforce? This includes urgent communications, advisories, etc.
- Are there clear prevention measures in place – and teams assigned that can step up to implement these measures – in the event of a crisis?
- What is the command and control structure in place if something happens?

In the wake of COVID-19, many companies have had to come up with solutions to respond to the shutdown and support employees on the fly – some by offering financial support to their personnel affected by the stoppage in operations, some by subscribing employees to telehealth and online medical consultation services, others by providing paid pandemic leave in case the employee (or a family member) was infected by the virus. In many cases, there was a scramble to transition employees to work from home arrangements and identify and protect critical sites required to maintain operations, all while remaining open to serve clients and the general public.

To reduce the need for improvisation, continuity plans can be worked out ahead of time, with management testing how these can be implemented and deployed at a local, regional, and global level without too many approval touchpoints and unnecessary delays. Especially for multinational companies, ensuring that local teams are empowered to make decisions on the

ground, while coordinating with global leadership, will help to ensure that response plans are applicable locally but still remain in sync centrally. Even smaller companies that may not see a need to have a comprehensive BCP in place can benefit from having a basic crisis management plan. This plan would answer at the very least the important questions, like in the event of another interruption to the company's business as usual practices, what steps need to be taken? Do employees know what they need to do, even for the most basic disruption scenarios? Having a clear plan to answer these questions is the first step to having a coherent response in times of a crisis.

At some point, the spread of the virus will be largely contained, with quarantines and travel restrictions lifted, and establishments slowly reopened. The Black Swan theory, popularized in the world of finance, talks about extremely rare events that are unpredictable, have widespread effects and consequences, and after its occurrence, leaves people with the general belief that the event could have actually been anticipated to happen. The COVID-19 pandemic has become the Black Swan event for many companies in 2020, but if history is to be the judge, it will not be the last unpredictable major event to hit businesses and organizations in the years to come. Being prepared for the next one is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Even after the semblance of "normal" has been restored, the lessons from this pandemic must never be forgotten.