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A new default in the wake of COVID-19?

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Covid-19 has upended the way we live, work and play but will these effects last once the pandemic ends and will we continue to adapt and innovate? This was the subject of a recent virtual event hosted by the organisation Common Purpose Ireland.

This article was written by Meredith Salois and Dara Connolly of Common Purpose Ireland, Tim Noone from Malone Group, Dublin, and Nevan Clancy Hanumara from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The authors would like to thank the November 2020 Common Purpose Ireland participants who graciously and candidly shared insights from inside their organizations.

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"We don't need to meet people to close deals." "We found out that we can do without paper!" "Prisoners can now video conference with their loved ones."

These were some of the comments at a recent Zoom forum of Common Purpose Ireland where leaders representing the public, private and not-for-profit sectors were asked the question: *How have you changed your default approach?*

COVID-19 has upended the way we live, work and play and now, with multiple vaccines nearing distribution, we hope for a return to normalcy and rebuilding of industry sectors which have been devastated. Those organisations soldiering on have adapted, making changes both large and small to their processes, and we saw an opportunity for self-reflection: Are these changes transient or will COVID have a lasting impact on how we do business post-pandemic? Have we learnt unexpected lessons? Can we be more flexible problem solvers and innovators?

As an opener, we presented the Malone Group's unprecedented effort to design an emergency ventilator. This project proceeded at breakneck speed, while still following the Republic's COVID restrictions, leveraged resources in Ireland and Bulgaria and interfaced with a hastily convened research team at MIT.

While the pace and urgency of this project may not be repeated, Malone Group developed the ability to rapidly build internal and external consensus, enter an entirely new field, engage non-traditional resources and prototype fast. Across the Atlantic, the MIT researchers dusted off a decade-old project and, not waiting for funding or approval, pulled together a team of faculty, students, alums and doctors.

They iterated and tested, with overnight design sprints, and shared the research publicly with collaborators across the world. Together, both groups discovered the power of real-time industry-academia collaboration.

Turning the discussion over to the participants, initial hesitancy and anxiety about opening up was soon replaced by a sense of community as participants, representing thirty-four diverse organizations, used our forum as an opportunity to pause and reflect. Discussing in small, cross-sector groups and reporting out, five common themes emerged:

1. Organisations are focusing on purpose
2. Relationships can be built remotely
3. Barriers to people and information have decreased
4. Increased flexibility is a double-edged sword
5. Focusing on mental health is not optional

Those organisations that are the most adept at adapting to the challenges of COVID-19 have expressed a strong sense of purpose. Employees will not try if they feel that it's just another day at the Zoom office — the pandemic has forced employers to clarify their organisation's values and live their missions.

Many participants discussed how pre-COVID mission statements and values were just a poster on a wall, unknowingly bypassed every day, but now they were topics of discussion and actively being pressure tested. Did they effectively connect between the employees and the customers? This focus has helped companies learn to better prioritise tasks, maintain relationships and encourage staff morale, especially when an organisation's future might be up in the air.

Companies reported success in developing client relationships, without the cost, time and carbon footprint of travelling to meetings. A CEO of a Fintech company who circled the globe 3.5 times in 2019 made just a few short hops in 2020, discovering that physically being in the room to 'close a deal' became nonessential.

However, when it came to hands-on problem solving, the process slowed down and video-conference was no substitute for in-person interaction. Increasingly, demanding in-person meetings will be seen as unnecessarily formal and environmentally questionable. We expect to see organisations use to travel more prudently, especially to support development over sales, changing how they work with customers and clients.

Within organisations, person-to-person communication has adapted in surprising ways. Video conferencing has reduced formality, lowering barriers between departments and hierarchies. Employees have moved away from traditional bureaucracy and now communicate daily with departments that, pre-COVID, they would never have conversed with, smoothing both formal and informal information flow. Junior members of an organization now find it easier to secure time with senior members, who are now just a few clicks away. Employees are embracing the new un-normal and creating opportunities for collaboration that will undoubtedly improve their collective ability to problem solve and innovate.

In the public sector, a member of the Irish Prison Service shared how they have expanded video conferencing for prisoners, especially facilitating visits with dying family members. This avoids the costs of out-of-prison visits and actually enables more frequent contact.

A participant from the Gardaí commented how offering digital meetings had increased their outreach to the migrant community, who are understandably reluctant to meet in person, as part of a greater digital engagement strategy.

We observed that through the crisis government departments have learned to work together because they had to. This example should continue to thrive and evolve as we all face other existential threats, such as climate change. Furthermore, one of our leaders noted that accepted norms are being torn up. For example, the "south is teaching the north" as we plan for COVID vaccine distribution, with small African NGO streets ahead in the knowledge, experience and skills required for widespread, effective and efficient vaccine distribution on the ground in communities.

As we reflected on our general adaptability during this crisis, notes of caution were sounded that for a significant proportion of our population this was not possible. Those with a disability, limited access to technology or low digital literacy are especially at risk. We must ensure that, through the inevitable lasting changes, we do not leave these people behind or end up inadvertently further marginalising marginalized communities.

There are pressing opportunities to develop tools to improve access and, for example, one participant has spearheaded the Covid19 World Service, gathering doctors of international heritage working in Ireland to make COVID safety videos for parents in 30 languages. We hope that digital accessibility and reducing the "risk of invisibility" will become a public and private priority.

Flexibility in the workplace has become a must in every organisation's tool belt and, as employees explore the benefits and shortcomings of working from home. Organisations are learning how to transfer these learnings into actionable changes that will better support their employees, as non-traditional working environments become a permanent option.

Hidden challenges are now visible: We must accept employees balancing minding children with meetings, that not everyone has an "ideal" home office and that it's important to take time out of the workday for breaks and "check-ins." Nearly all participants indicated an increased awareness in their organisations to the importance of work/life balance.

In specific, on top of pandemic-induced anxiety, the workplace's intrusion into personal spaces has increased the stress of an "always-on" culture. Fortunately, the Oireachtas has taken note and is discussing a "Working from Home (Covid-19) Bill 2020" that, paralleling the German labour custom, would allow employees working remotely the right to switch off electronic communications outside work hours. A leader in the Department of Defense echoed the need for this bill when stating, "We must be mindful that remote working does not become living at work instead of working from home."

 "Mental health cannot be an afterthought!" declared a senior leader at a multinational finance organisation. While organizations have drawn upon individuals' hidden reserves of strength, they have also realized the importance of reaching out to their staff and actively supporting them through this period of turbulence. These efforts need not be contained within organizations and one social media expert had even started hosting ad hoc "positivity meetings" with her clients.

Although we largely focus on the positives of how people are adapting and living through the pandemic, Common Purpose Ireland participants were candid and emphasised that we must overtly recognise that not everyone is thriving.

Routines have been shattered, personal lives are upended, traumas from loss, illness and anxiety are real. Zoom, Teams and Webex can't substitute for gathering around the kettle. Talking as a group was cathartic and served as an important reminder to ourselves that it's OK to not be OK. And we need to talk about this.

Going forward, all thirty-four organisations agreed that they had a renewed trust in the ability to work remotely. They agreed that their organisations will continue to prioritize the mental and physical wellbeing of employees, as well as maintain the newly formed open communication across their organisation departments. Everyone also agreed that meetings which previously necessitated an employee travelling across the world can now be done online, with cost and environmental benefits. Keeping the country running despite COVID has not been easy, but it certainly has been one big learning experience for all of us. Common Purpose Ireland's leaders' findings show us that, even during this most difficult time, we are largely resilient, trying to make the most out of a bad situation and willing to learn from our shared experience and apply these learnings to business post-COVID, when life will be a little more normal.