



CIONET

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

**CREATIVITY AND
COLLABORATION IN
A POST-COVID
WORLD**

This article was written by Roger Camrass, director of CIONET UK and a visiting professor of the University of Surrey, and is based on the conversations during an event on how to improve creativity and collaboration in a post-COVID world

In 2020 the global workforce had to adjust to an entirely different style of working as the pandemic swept through Asia, Europe and the Americas. For most organisations this happened in days rather than weeks or months. We are still getting used to a new way of working that has distanced us from a social office environment. According to delegates participating in this fascinating discussion evening, the move to distributed working has introduced many challenges as well as some surprising benefits. What is certain now is that a return to business-as-usual pre-COVID is no longer an option. Instead, we will need to plan for a different post-COVID reality. IT will be a key partner in ensuring a smooth transition to the New Normal.

More productive work styles

The fact that most of us will continue to spend much of our worktime at home rather than commuting to an office suggests that many hours per week will be saved in travel. Recent surveys suggest that up to 60% of our week will be spent at home with just one or two days in the office. The way we work and interact with our colleagues has already evolved rapidly over the past twelve months during the pandemic. Delegates suggested the following challenges and opportunities ahead of us in 2021:

- Shorter and more regular meetings through Teams, Zoom and other video links. This has led to improved communication up and down the management chain as well as increases in productivity (as much as 40%)
- Noticeable increases in working hours, with the prospect of 'always-on' becoming the new practice (as per Law firms). This is creating undue pressure on home-bound workers and needs careful moderation and supervision
- Challenges for onboarding new staff, with little opportunity to immerse them in the prevailing corporate culture and social networks. New forms of social networking will need to be engineered into tomorrow's work environment

These fundamental changes suggest several critical actions to ensure the health and well-being of tomorrow's hybrid workforce.

Introducing a new social dimension to work

Much discussion took place on how best to introduce a more balanced work-life balance into distributed working. IBM is holding 'social Fridays' to help soften the workload, ADOBE is emphasising personal fitness through a programme of sports, others are introducing weekly quizzes to involve all members of staff. The net effect is that companies recognise the need to balance the growing pressure of work with a more humanistic agenda.

Several delegates also mentioned the need to involve family members in home working. The CEO of one company actively encouraged a board member to introduce a young child who had entered the study to his peers. Cats and dogs made brief appearances during our virtual event to the amusement of all attending the discussion. The traditional divide between work and domestic activities is fading fast, encouraging a more informal atmosphere and better work/life balance.

Introducing a new social dimension to work

One delegate described how, prior to the pandemic, he was spending 200 nights a year travelling the globe to meet with local IT staff. The transition to home working has been a particular challenge given the need to interact with different cultures and styles around the world. His view was that video calls could cope with regular operational matters but did not compensate for informal human interactions. BAE Systems mentioned the current difficulties of relocating families to countries such as Saudi Arabia to carry out contract work.

TT Electronics suggested that everyone should phone a friend to keep their networks fresh. Royal London questioned how best to keep in touch with IT vendors who in this case exceeded 400 companies.

All delegates agreed that travel is likely to decrease by 50% post the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic norms. Both Santander and Deutsche Bank estimated that they would need fewer offices given the long-term preference for home working amongst most of staff (except for traders). This will have benefits for the environment but will continue to emphasise the need for some social contact.

Acceleration in decision making

One positive aspect of distributed working appears to be the increasing speed of

decision making within larger companies. This was confirmed by Santander and DEFRA. Meetings can be convened more quickly via video platforms, with all critical parties being involved at the same time. This is leading to faster and more democratic decisions in areas such as healthcare and pharmaceuticals.

One outcome has been the reduced time to make commercial deals, especially in capital raising and IPO areas. 2021 is likely to see an explosion in initial public offerings in the UK and elsewhere. Legal firms such as Keystones point to cost savings as a consequence of shorter deal times, favouring investors and clients.

What about strategic planning?

Although distributed working can help speed up decisions and mobilise workforces in day-to-day operational matters, it may present complications in the way that strategic planning is conducted. The FCA commented that strategic planning requires a more continuous and deeper process of team interaction to develop and test new ideas. This does not fit easily into a distributed work environment which tends to be more transactional.

Much work is being directed towards developing remote techniques for design thinking and idea generation. Virtual whiteboards and ideation sessions are beginning to produce solid results. However, there is an imperative to increase the time and attention to such activities if companies wish to move their businesses forward in coming years.

Preparing for the post-covid era

According to the delegates, much has been learnt already about how to optimise distributed working. This will need to be expanded and further customised for the post-COVID era in areas such as:

Maintaining a realistic balance between work and family life, where current pressures can often lead to 12-hour days. HR will need to keep a careful watch on how staff preserve this balance

Introducing a social element into the working week, such as quizzes and fitness sessions, to ensure that teams remain healthy, engaged and that cultures are preserved

Ensuring that all members of staff are happy as well as productive. Video sessions can reveal those members of staff who have difficulty coping with work pressures.

The sponsor of the event, ADOBE, is gained much internal experience in coping with distributed working as offers to share its experience with interested parties.



About CIONET

CIONET is the leading community of more than 10,000 digital leaders in 20+ countries across Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Through this global presence CIONET orchestrates peer-to-peer interactions focused on the most important business and technology issues of the day. CIONET members join over a thousand international and regional live and virtual events annually, ranging from roundtables, programs for peer-to-peer exchange of expertise, community networking events, to large international gatherings. Its members testify that CIONET is an impartial and value adding platform that helps them use the wisdom of the (IT) crowd, to acquire expertise, advance their professional development, analyse and solve IT issues, and accelerate beneficial outcomes within their organisation.

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