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NEW HYBRID WORKPLACE: HOW DO WE EXPECT TO WORK POST THE PANDEMIC

This article was written by Roger Camrass, of CIONET UK and is based on the conversations that took place during a virtual wine tasting event in November 2021 sponsored by Citrix on the topic of 'how can we innovate effectively in the hybrid workplace?'.

In March 2020 IT organisations across Europe achieved remarkable outcomes when they helped millions of workers to transition from physical offices to their homes in days due to the onslaught of COVID-19. In the case of UBS, over 150,000 such workers were sent home in under a week. Cloud-based virtualisation tools such as Citrix DaaS, a remote access tool, that had been implemented well before the crisis, thus helping to smooth the transition.

The question that now faces CIOs is how best to support employees in an increasingly hybrid world where workers have far more choice about where and how they work. Hybrid is no longer a choice between office and home. It implies anywhere, anytime working. This shows a greater emphasis on enhancing the employee experience alongside that of the customer.

In the words of Gerard Lavin, CTO of Citrix in EMEA, many IT organisations must come to terms with a new hybrid working regime that will evolve continuously in time. The pace of evolution will differ between sectors and will throw up new challenges such as security, socialising and knowledge sharing. Like many tech companies, Citrix has the advantage of having adopted hybrid working decades earlier and can offer valuable advice to others who are now coming to terms with this new environment.

What will the hybrid workplace look like?

With so many people working only part time in the office, organisations need to establish a level playing field between the home and appropriate physical workplaces. Such spaces may be corporate offices or temporary accommodation such as WeWork. This will require the application of new technologies and much increased security measures. Some of the techniques mentioned in discussion included:

- Robotic process automation to remove many of today's repetitive tasks and to help focus workers on more creative tasks
- Immersive technologies such as augmented and virtual reality to bring dispersed people closer together whether at home of in dispersed offices (the mega-verse)

- Concierge services that could help coordinate meetings between different locations to ensure synchronicity between teams and appropriate space allocations
- Improved knowledge sharing and security measures to encourage team-based collaboration.
- Electronic signatures to reduce the need for paper documents especially in areas such as brokerage and wealth management

In the case of Santander, traditional branches are being converted into cafes where customers can find temporary work space. In the case of the London Stock Exchange, offices become 'touch-down' points to enable people to come together on a regular basis. Many organisations are considering temporary workspace such as WeWork to enable people to leave their homes and find local office accommodation.

Young people are keen to return to physical offices as the need to learn from more experienced colleagues and to network amongst themselves. But they are also used to virtual working and socialising having grown up in a social media universe. In contrast, more seasoned workers are accepting roles where home is the sole place of employment. Most people find themselves in the middle of this spectrum.

Changing cultures and work patterns

One observable development over the last 18 months has been the change in attitude of workers towards their employers. With the opportunity to work remotely, loyalty to organisations has become eroded as we have witnessed within the NHS. In response, senior teams needed to become more active in communicating with staff and arranging social events.

A more fundamental change is taking place in organisational cultures and topologies. Traditional models are being challenged, especially in banks such as Metro. Control cultures are being replaced with more agile and outcome-based ways of managing dispersed workforces. The challenge today is how to provide a creative and purposeful environment to attract and retain new generations of digital workers, either at home, in the office or elsewhere.

Patterns of employment are also changing rapidly. Organisations are experiencing record numbers of resignations as workers begin to play a fluid employment markets. Today's work behaviour is often more similar to a contractor than a permanent member of staff. In this respect, organisations will need to work harder to nurture their talent and sustain loyalty.

The leadership challenges

In the post COVID world, the workplace for many sectors such as finance and manufacture will be very different to previous decades. Staff will be more mobile. Ways of working will be more flexible in time and space. Cultures will need to emphasise purpose rather than exercise control. This will call for changes in the IT and broader 'C' suite agendas.

The delegates at the event agreed that traditional leadership styles need to evolve rapidly to sustain organisational performance in a hybrid world. In the case of IT, the move to team working and agile development is already in place but subject to many challenges.

Senior executives need to be more visible within their organisations to constantly reinforce corporate goals and cultures. They need to enable rather than control teams. The move to digital business will also need greater integration between business and technology skills.

In many respects, the pandemic has done us a favour in accelerating the journey to digital business models that are team and outcome based.

A new IT agenda for hybrid working

Having been the heroes of 2020 IT needs to recognise that its task is only half finished. The next stage of redefining the hybrid workplace is only just beginning. The delegates have implemented several actions to update their IT agendas to suit hybrid working. These include:

- Bring IT and HR closer together to enhance the employee experience and to reduce staff churn
- Test out new techniques such as augmenting tasks to improve productivity and support innovation
- Emphasise topics of importance to employees such as sustainability, climate change and diversity
- Examine how global talent sourcing can help fill the current skill gaps especially in areas such as data sciences

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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