

How is The Future of Work Accelerating

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In light of the growing COVID-19 pandemic, millions of workers around the world are about to have their first prolonged experience with working at home. It's a workplace experiment that will test the fibre of relationships between employees and their employers. A sudden increase in remote work will be difficult to manage for any organization that has not previously allowed a significant number of employees to work at home. As well, there will be a lot of anxiety as managers wonder whether their people are getting the job done.

Those concerns are largely unfounded. Numerous studies of remote work programs show that people generally are more productive than they are in an office setting. A two-year Stanford University study of workers at a Chinese travel agency, released in 2018, found that remote employees worked longer and were more productive than those who were required to come to the office. The study also found significant decreases in attrition and sick days among the remote workers.

The coronavirus outbreak may speed up the evolution of work and ultimately retool multiple industries as everything from conferences to collaboration to sales and commercial real estate are rethought. In the grand scheme of things, the coronavirus scare may just accelerate changes in work already in play. Travel bans may retool company practices as companies realize maybe those cross-country flights for drinks and dinner do not deliver economic returns. If most of the workforce can work from home without productivity loss, it's going to be hard to justify travel costs. The coronavirus scare may just show us a better way to work. How enterprises navigate the coronavirus and changes to work will be telling. One thing is certain: The coronavirus is likely to mean the definition of business, as usual, will change.

At the Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence conference in New York in early February, Chinese researchers mostly delivered their talks via video conferencing or canned presentations due to travel bans. The AAAI conference was lucky in that it was able to convene. Facebook's F8 and Mobile World Congress are two high-profile conferences that have been cut. Perhaps video conferences are the future.

Consumer behaviour in China has already been altered and may not revert. The rest of the world may see similar inflexion points. Alibaba CEO Yong Zhang noted:

"Seventeen years ago, the e-commerce business experienced tremendous growth after SARS. We believe that adversity will be followed by a change in behaviour among consumers and enterprises and bring ensuing opportunities. We have observed more and more consumers getting comfortable with taking care of their daily living needs and working requirements through digital means. We are confident in the ongoing digitization of China's economy and society and are ready to see the opportunity to build the foundation for the long-term growth of Alibaba's digital economy."

Remote work is being considered by a wider group of people. Today if anyone is seeing symptoms that may be coronavirus related, they should stay home. Worker health is being brought to the forefront. Multiple executive comments have noted that employee health is a paramount concern and things like cleaning and sterilization are being prioritized.

Some of the changes may include:

- Travel expenses will be less- Once enterprises realize you can survive with a lot fewer face-to-face interactions, travel expenses will be questioned more.
- The use of automation will be accelerated to augment the workforce.
- Commercial real estate costs fall- Once remote work becomes more of the norm, the need for hulking corporate complexes diminishes. This move toward more adaptable commercial real estate has been underway for a while, but coronavirus may accelerate the trend.
- HR practices will change- Fewer humans in one confined space may mean fewer human resource issues and investigations. Already stretched HR departments could allocate their time better.

There was a growing trend towards remote working arrangements even before COVID-19 made it an inescapable reality. For those organizations that had been considering a more comprehensive remote work program, the current crisis will serve as an important testing ground. There may be some trial and error as leaders struggle to forge new relationships with their employees through virtual or remote applications. But if they keep an open mind, and communicate effectively, it could be the dawning of a brave new age.

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