

SUMMARY REPORT

Innovation@Work Insight Hour

Evolving leadership, work models and technology
to support an agile augmented workforce



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In a business environment defined by rapid change, successful organisations need to shift resources and focus as needs evolve. Technology is reinventing almost every job, and the workplace itself is being augmented by software, machines and artificial intelligence.

On November 4th 2020, leaders in enabling and implementing agile organisations and augmented workforces gathered in a discussion sponsored by Citrix to share experiences and examine key questions around the evolution of work. How can we transform leadership and work to make the most of technology? What is the best way to marry AI and agile? And what are the pitfalls to avoid?

Moderator Kenneth Cukier, a senior editor at The Economist and host of its Babbage podcast on science and technology, kicked off the conversation by asking panellists whether the workplace of the future would be more virtual or physical. Deepti Saraf, chief transformation officer at Roche Thailand, Safi Obeidullah, field CTO at Citrix, and Miao Song, global CIO, petcare, at Mars, were unanimous in saying it would be more virtual.

Building hybrid workplaces

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Before covid began, we were working on digitalising all the human interaction. During covid, we spend a lot of time humanising all the digital interaction.

Deepti Saraf, chief transformation officer, Roche Thailand

Mr Cukier challenged participants with disbelief. If before covid-19, workforces were still hybrid but with a 90-10 split favouring physical presence, could it really now settle at 51-49 or 60-40 in favour of remote work? Why wouldn't we return to something more like the old ways?

One reason is that the crisis gave remote work a chance to shine, Ms Song observed. The technology is there now, it “really works”, and the need for it is ongoing. For the next 12 to 18 months, she expects to see a lot of virtual work in her organisation. Mr Obeidullah, too, gives the crisis as the reason for the shift. If “it happened for a couple of weeks, we locked down and all went back to work...I think we would have just gone back to our old ways,” he says. But we have gotten used to the new paradigm, which has exploded perceptions that remote work wasn't practical or that people couldn't be trusted to do it. We now know work is not a place, but a thing we do, and from anywhere with the right technology. Managers' focus has shifted from employees' presence to their output, and some companies have made remote working permanent.

Anticipating some eventual return to normality, how do we build the hybrid workplace or organisation that will accommodate both physical and remote presence? Mr Cukier first called on Ms Saraf of Roche Thailand, which implemented agile ways of working a year before the covid-19 crisis. “Our whole structure was working in smaller groups, self-empowered and self-organised teams,” she said. “There was already this mindset of working in an agile way and coming together as a group as needed.”

A range of collaboration tools already connected the members of these small teams, including Zoom, the G Suite, Jamboard and Miro. The challenge was to increase connections across the organisation so that communication could happen at a larger scale. How to keep coming together and how to keep track of people's mental and physical well-being were big questions.

Mars had already mastered these issues. Ms Song points out that the company operates in more than 60 countries, and already made use of cloud technologies. Safety and wellness were already “the highest priority of the organisation.” While many workers in factories and pet hospitals must keep working on location, the switch to virtual for those in offices was fast and seamless. “Without cloud-based technology, we'd never be able to get there,” says Ms Song. Informal check-ins,

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Work is not a place, but a thing that we can do. And with the right technology, we can do it from anywhere.

Safi Obeidullah, field CTO, Citrix

virtual coffees and cocktails, and fun events around fitness have helped people feel connected across the globe, even if they aren't physically together.

Within an organisation, who should take responsibility for mental health? asked Mr Cukier. The chief technology officer? Or should they focus on technology and leave human concerns to an organisational psychologist? Could it even be everyone's job?

Mr Obeidullah believes technology can provide tools that foster an outcome like well-being. An increasing focus on delivering an exceptional “employee experience” in recent years has gotten multiple departments working together. Now, it's an experience of working at home. But companies must still ask if employees have the right tools and equipment, if they are safe and if they can connect with their peers. It's a challenging situation, Mr Obeidullah recognises. If you are starting a new job, for example, how do you get to know your peers?

Technology is not the limitation, says Ms Saraf. Everyone has to look at the social angle. Within Roche's agile workplace, teams have direct responsibility for each other's well-being. Virtual lunches and the like have been team initiatives. But the leadership team still has a role in showing empathy, especially for the challenging home conditions some people are working in, and creating company-wide activities like wellness weeks and trust-building exercises. Leadership must also communicate a strong sense of shared purpose.

Netflixing the workforce

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If the environment is inclusive, people feel at home with each other. They can call the boss and say, ‘Hey, I have an urgent issue.’...Why do I have to wait for a meeting to be set up?

Miao Song, global CIO, petcare, Mars

The creative exchanges that happen in chance workplace meetings, and quick conversations with leadership to resolve minor but important issues, are difficult to recreate virtually. This problem can disappear in a sufficiently inclusive environment, says Ms Song. People who “feel at home with each other...can call the boss and say, ‘Hey, I have an urgent issue...can I just spend five minutes with you?’” without having to schedule a meeting. That kind of culture can also help people share their feelings openly to overcome the sense of loneliness that accompanies remote work for some people.

Technology could help reinstitute behaviours that have gone missing in the era of remote work. To deal with a lack of unscheduled connections, Mr Cukier playfully imagined a system that would randomly drop workers into ten-minute video calls with colleagues they hadn’t yet met. This recalled Ms Saraf’s description of how Roche Thailand uses technology to block out people’s lunch hours so they can’t book appointments instead of having a break, and Ms Song’s of how calendaring in her organisation sets meetings to leave ten minutes free in every hour.

With or without human intervention, technology could do even more to encourage good habits at work. Systems could find out, for instance, whether having a packed calendar correlated with better or worse performance. If worse, a system could alert supervisors to suggest juniors free up their time, or caution staff that scheduling too many meetings is likely to hurt their productivity.

While much talk about “AI nudges”, as Mr Obeidullah called them, centres on fostering wellness by discouraging workers from becoming overwhelmed, “You could flip it and make it about productivity,” he says. Information about calendaring, how much time people spend in particular applications and what they do there could be mined to identify best practices and suggest improvements. Discussion of this led up to the idea of “Netflixing the workforce”, as Mr Cukier described it. It was Mr Obeidullah who raised the possibility. “Think about how Netflix or Spotify understands what you listen to or watch, and provides recommendations or suggestions,” he says. “How do we bring that experience into the workplace?” Systems could recommend reading new policy documents that colleagues have been looking at, or watching a relevant video. The analysis involved could be very deep, looking at all the measurable behaviours of, say, a company’s most successful salespeople, and nudging others to emulate their habits.

Creating agile organisations

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Safi Obeidullah, field CTO, Citrix

In closing, Mr Cukier posed a question from the audience: what is the most critical factor to overcome in creating a truly agile workforce?

“The real answer is leadership,” Ms Saraf said, drawing on the experience of implementing agile across Roche Thailand from 2019. “Only.. when leaders have the power to empower, and are willing to let go of decision-making, can agile get implemented.” There’s the danger that one can implement a kind of “fake” agile where all the characteristic team structures, processes and terminology are in place but leadership still has a monopoly on decision-making. Roche Thailand has aimed for a deeper transformation, and accordingly has replaced job titles like director and controller with others—visionary, architect, coach and catalyst—that reflect leaders’ enabling role in the agile organisation.

Roche also “removed hierarchical silos and functions”, says Ms Saraf, so that workers can “swarm” to where they are needed, across projects where they have the necessary interest and expertise. At Mars, Ms Song also found it important to let horizontally organised, cross-functional teams work on projects to “drive speed”. Her top requirements for the agile organisation are the right kind of leadership and culture, ensuring everyone shares an understanding of what agile is and how it works, and thinking about internal processes in terms of customer needs.

Finally, Mr Obeidullah found flexibility the key aspect of the agile workforce. This is important for organisations and individuals to adapt to change coming from external forces like a pandemic or internal ones like a shift in ways of working. “The agile human is paramount,” he says, “and giving them the space to succeed however they’re working”.

Key takeaways

“ Authentic leaders really care in their words and communication. They are on the ground working and caring with their organisation.

Miao Song, global CIO, petcare, Mars

The workplace of the future may be more virtual than physical.

Covid-19 has been a long crisis, giving adaptations to it time to stick. Technologically enabled remote work has proven that work isn't a place, but a thing you do. Managers' focus has shifted from employee presence to output.

Workforces must be empowered and inclusive.

In the paradigms of agile and remote work, employees and teams need to be empowered not just by technology, but by leadership. Small teams need latitude to make decisions, and horizontal collaboration has to be possible at scale. At the same time, employees need to be connected to each other, to leadership and to the organisation on a human level.

Everyone is responsible.

Leaders, IT departments, teams and individuals all need to contribute to fostering well-being and to reinforcing a shared sense of purpose that is aligned with organisational goals and customer needs.

Machine recommendations could encourage best practice.

IT systems and cloud applications can be configured to discourage behaviours that damage focus and well-being. But they could do even more. As Netflix and Spotify mine data on user preferences to recommend shows and music, tech could examine the behaviours of top performers and nudge others to emulate their habits.

Leadership is the key to enabling agile organisations.

Truly agile companies need leaders that are ready to decentralise decision-making and enable the work of small teams. This can help the organisation reach full speed. Leaders must also build a shared culture and work to humanise digital interactions.



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