The Office of the (Near) Future: Remote-First Work

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Leaders have been surprised at how productive employees have been working from home, many are considering how to accelerate a transition already occurring to a remote-first work environment.

What lessons can we learn from businesses that were intentionally built to be remote-first or are planning a shift to an office culture focused on virtual work?

Reimagining the Office

"If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses."

— Henry Ford

As human beings, it is difficult for us to think about the future without viewing it as an incremental improvement over the present. As Henry Ford pointed out, busting our biases is hard and we're seeing this as companies have been forced to transition into virtual work environments. Employees have resorted to simply recreating everything that was happening in an office and doing it online. This isn't an uncommon problem and we've seen it many times before, in fact there have been many such step changes in history, take films for example:

1. When movies were first created, they were essentially

plays on a screen with the video camera remaining static similar to an audience member watching a play—moviemaking only came about as mental models shifted and filmmakers explored new ideas such as moving the camera[1]

2. In 1928, Joseph Schenck, the President of United Artists told the New York Times, "talking doesn't belong in pictures…I don't think people will want talking pictures long". The common wisdom at the time (since they had never experienced films with dialogue) was that talkies (as talking-films were called) were simply a gimmick. Only after audiences adjusted and audio-recording technology improved, was dialogue in movies embraced as we see today.[2]

If you are a leader considering a shift to a remote-first workplace, you have to embrace two types of disruption. The first is reactionary, reacting to a disruption like COVID-19 that happens to you and your business. The second type of disruption is proactive, often referred to as creative destruction[3] — deliberately breaking down existing ways of working to make space for innovation. Most leaders are often good at managing reactionary disruptions or "fire drills" (with COVID-19 fire being a five-alarm type). They are adept at processing data and bring decades of experience in making the hard decisions that are required in these periods. However, proactive disruption is typically more challenging. Leaders have to look past their own well-formed experiences and consider unconventional approaches that are going to feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

Our present environment offers an opportunity for you as a leader to lead disruption. Fortunately, the principles are simple and stem from the world of design thinking.

1. Define the problem to be solved, build empathy of users (in this case employees),
2. Ideate on potential solutions,

3. Refine these ideas into those you wish to pursue and then
4. Take an agile approach to experimenting with the implementation of these ideas (testing the ideas fast and cheap).

However, this isn't an article on design thinking so for now let's focus on common questions that arise when shifting to remote-first work and build on ideas from other companies who were built to be or are transitioning to be remote-first.

What should we do with the Latte Machine in our Corporate HQ?

Employers have invested significant sums of money in corporate campuses that create spontaneous collisions between employees who do not work in the same department. Steve Jobs famously designed Pixar's campus and later Apple's campus with the intent to create these interactions. Open offices have also come into vogue made famous by tech startups out of Silicon Valley, where CEOs like Mark Zuckerberg ditched their office to sit with team members and other traditional firms have opted for "hoteling" to create more informal, flexible work environment. As companies have invested more in keeping people engaged at the office via gyms, cafeterias, expresso machines and endless snacks — leaders are left wondering how to walk away from these major investments and what takes their place?

There are two approaches we have seen with remote-first companies, and you'll notice we say remote-*first* not remote-only. The first approach is for companies to repurpose their office environment as a co-working space for employees to collaborate with each other when an in-person meeting is required. This requires some thoughtful consideration on what

One of these things is not like the others.

	Monthly Uniques (US)	Employees
Google.com	260M	118,899
Facebook.com	221M	44,942
Amazon.com	215M	798,000
Twitter.com	157M	4,900
WordPress.com	**127M**	**1,210**
eBay.com	100M	13,300

Monthly Uniques from comScore and Automattic.

types of interaction make more sense to occur in person and which interactions can happen asynchronously, over the phone or over a video chat. A great example to look at is Automattic — a distributed company with over 1200 *Automatticians* spread across 77 countries (and 93 different languages. They are behind popular publishing and internet platforms like Tumblr and WordPress and are incredibly productive.

"People are surprised when I say this, but I think in-person is really key. And so we just flip it, so instead of saying you have to be around your colleagues 48 weeks of the year and do whatever you want for a month, we say be wherever you want for 48 weeks out of the year and for three or four weeks a year we're going to bring you together." -Matt Mullenweg (Automattic CEO)

The leadership lesson here for remote-first companies is simply to set clear expectations and guidelines for when teams should come together (in a corporate co-working space, coffee shop or elsewhere) and limit those interactions to those that are absolutely necessary — flipping the old co-location ratio like Automattic has done. COVID-19 has challenged our biases of *where* work can be done most productively and you'll find that teams (equipped with the right tools and resources at home) can be surprisingly productive without being co-located.

And who says you can't have office perks while at home? It could be as simple as repurposing the money invested in your latte machine and providing a stipend for a green screen, dual monitors, microphone and a high-quality web camera (and an UberEats subscription for some snacks when desired).

How will I know who is working and get facetime with leaders?

"In most companies, it is a significant career advantage to work from the headquarters rather than to work remotely. People in positions of power have a tendency to bias toward giving out opportunities to those whom they are familiar with. Employees in headquarters often don't keep remote workers front of mind." — Adam D'Angelo (CEO of Quora)

Face time with senior leaders is often considered an important right of passage for corporate cultures, the more time a leader spends communicating with you the better chance you have of being noticed for a promotion or a high-impact project. In a remote-first organization you have the opportunity to create a level playing field for a distributed workforce that rewards outcomes and not being the first one in, last one out or sending emails at all times of the day.

The first leadership step in a remote-first organization is to change your work pattern to be remote-first. You can't be in the office while the rest of your company is remote — otherwise high achievers will follow suit to get facetime with you. Quora's CEO, Adam D'Angelo has clearly stated in their

remote-first announcement that he and his leadership teams will not be located in the office. By being remote yourself, it allows you to shift your talent evaluation and work process to balance towards evaluating the outcomes of a remote workforce.

The second leadership step is to build a new *asynchronous* rhythm of doing business. Instead of emails and calls (which in a distributed workforce are tough to schedule across time zones) — consider a blogging system like what Automattic uses called P2s to document progress on projects. P2s are posts written every day by employees to summarize what they have been working on, the problems that they might have encountered and the discussions that they had that day. If you think about the purpose of our in-person meetings, whether in person or on Zoom, this is typically what we are doing — unearthing hidden information from our organization to see what folks are working on, reach group decisions and find ways to collaborate. By documenting what is happening on P2s, it has become a cultural norm at Automattic for all employees to read P2s and uncover what is happening around the company. This communication method creates a transparent organization where you don't have FOMO (fear of missing out) for not being included in a meeting or not being copied on an email chain. Using their internal search index you can look up P2s and follow certain topics (like Google Reader) to stay informed on progress.

The two leadership lessons to take away from this are that if you are going remote-first, your leadership team must model the way and be remote yourselves and that you need to build new communication habits in your organization to allow for asynchronous collaboration and updates.

What about the corporate culture our employees know and love?

If we were to do a thought experiment and ask you as a leader, what makes your culture great, we would likely get a range of responses from company to company. Some companies value a strong safety and compliance culture that enables them to de-risk their work environment, others value an entrepreneurial environment where they are afforded creativity to take on challenges — it varies but when you check Glassdoor for what makes a company great the office perks are rarely at the top of the list. It's about the people, work environment and opportunities provided.

Those same interactions can be reimagined (not recreated) in a remote-first environment. It could be as simple as creating space on employees calendars for "making time"[4] — consider the first half of each day (up to 12:30 PM) as a time where meetings are not allowed and employees have time to do deep project work. If you reduce the need for emails and check-in calls, it creates more dedicated work time for employees to creatively solve challenges. You can also support small team or 1:1 interactions amongst employees by providing gift cards for lunch or coffee so employees located near each other can meet and network. Another option is for leaders to participate in targeted, fun interactions across the company — for example at BTS we just did a virtual trivia night, a virtual scavenger hunt and invited kids onto a company-wide Zoom call. Anything to create a familial environment — which luckily being stuck

in our new "home offices" surrounded by new barking co-workers has already allowed us to do. Remote-first work allows you to memorialize and celebrate what made your office culture great, and re-invest time and resources to progress that culture forward in a distributed work environment.

Keep in mind that many employees will be shifting to working in a home office for the first time and might not have a separate space available dedicated exclusively for work. As a leader, it is important to promote a separation of "church and state", allowing employees to turn off notifications and step away from their desks. For example in Slack, the default setting is for notifications to be turned on at 8:00 AM and turned off at 6:00 PM based on the time zone — this should be encouraged across all communication channels during core working hours. This is something that organizations and teams must discuss to create formalized working agreements and establish new norms.

Practical Next Steps

As you plan your work environment of the future, consider a few of the practical steps we shared above.

1. **Reimagine don't recreate**: List out the assumptions you have about in-person work and provoke each one of them, reimagine what those tasks and activities might look like in a virtual work environment.
2. **Lead the change**: If leaders are still in the office, the rest of the company will aim to come into the office — if you want to be remote-first, leaders must commit to being remote themselves
3. **Flip the ratio of in-person to virtual interactions**: In-person interactions don't go away in a remote-first world, they are more targeted and thoughtful. Provide stipends to employees for team meetings, 1:1s and other interactions and set guidelines on when in-person

interactions should happen and when they are not needed.

4. **Create a new rhythm of communication** – asynchronous communication involves a new communication rhythm, repurpose emails/check-ins and other meetings and create new norms for how information is communicated and how others can contribute to building on ideas from other parts of the company

5. **Memorialize and progress your culture**: Continue to honor what makes your culture great, remote-first doesn't mean you have to lose it – it offers new opportunities to build your culture and invite more talent into your organization that you previously may not have had access to.

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[1] Source: Stratechery, Ben Thompson Interview with Matt Mullenweg

[2] Source: Vox, https://www.vox.com/2015/2/9/8004661/fads-inventions-changed-world

[3] Source: The Library of Economics and Liberty, https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/CreativeDestruction.html

[4] http://www.paulgraham.com/makersschedule.html

How to let Agile thrive in a Virtual Environment

One of the principles of the Agile Manifesto emphasizes the

importance of co-located teams collaborating actively. Collaboration is still as valuable as ever but 2020 is forcing us to revisit how to achieve the benefits of co-location without the co-location. The good news is that much has changed since the Manifesto was written which has created some answers to how to enable the benefits of being Agile. Here's what you can do to allow [Agile to Thrive in a Virtual Environment.](#)

How to Allow Agile to Thrive in a Virtual Environment

by Bryan Campbell and Bhavik Modi

Flashback to our digital lives in 2001 – Netflix was still mailing DvDs, Google was just getting started and Twitter, YouTube and Facebook didn't exist.   At the same time, only 50%[1] of people in the United States had cell phones and the iPhone was 6 years away. It was during these times that 17 software developers came together in Snowbird, Utah and created what they called the [Agile Manifesto](#), a set of values and principles that would drive a revolution in how organizations and teams worked together to deliver business solutions.

Since the advent of the Agile Manifesto in 2001, practitioners have emphasized the importance of teams working together, side-by-side delivering valuable products for their customers. This is typically referred to as co-location and the benefits of teams working in the same location are numerous, from developing trust as they learn more about each other, to

learning from "osmosis" as they hear colleagues collaborating to seeing shared goals and progress metrics through highly visible information radiators.

Collaboration is still as valuable as ever but 2020 is forcing us to revisit how to achieve the benefits of co-location without the co-location. The good news is that much has changed since the Manifesto was written which has created some answers to how to enable the benefits of being Agile. Here's what you can do to allow Agile to Thrive in a Virtual Environment.

How to Enable Virtual Co-Located Teams

The first value of the Agile Manifesto states "Individuals and Interactions over Processes and Tools", however, remote Agile teams are going to need effective technology or tools to emulate a co-located experience. Fortunately, technology and accessibility have improved significantly since the Agile Manifesto was developed and a number of options available today are free or low cost. As a leader, it is important to check to ensure that your team has access to core enabling tools to facilitate work management, brainstorming and ideation.

It's likely your team interactions in a virtual environment are going to need some enhancements particularly during this extended time of remote work. Here are some areas that you should focus on and some starting technologies to consider:

Team Enablement Area	Intent	Technology Options
Planning Tools allow for better communication, visibility and progress	Agile emphasizes bringing the entire team together to understand and estimate the work that needs to be completed. This includes standard work management products like Jira, Rally and AzureDevOps (ADO) but also includes considering ideation tools like Mural, Conceptboard and Stormboard.	Conceptboard, Stormboard Mural Jira Rally ADO
Daily Stand-ups and Team Communication Tools promote asynchronous collaboration and ad-hoc interaction	Ensuring the team is actively communicating and collaborating is the cornerstone of a high performing Agile team. Remember one significant shift for many teams will be adjusting to more "asynchronous" communication so look for tools that keep a record for those that weren't able to actively participate.	Discord Slack Notion Getfeedback
Reviews and Demos Tools showcase working products – allowing customers to "see" the solution and experience it to provide feedback	It's important to step beyond basic phone calls to create a robust co-located experience. Video enabled conferencing solutions helps teams see one another as they collaborate which is an important dimension of human connection. However, don't forget to give teams permission to take a break from their video use. Some studies have shown that using Zoom for extended periods contributes to fatigue, the intense focus on words and sustained eye contact is exhausting not to mention seeing your own video heightens awareness of our facial expressions which is mentally taxing.	Zoom WebEx Skype BlueJeans
Retrospectives Tools encourage a safe environment to reflect, learn and improve	Teams should be actively considering what's working for them and what do they want to improve. This will be particularly important as they adapt to working remotely.	Retrium Scatterspoke

Clickable Links at end of article

Create Your Agile Working Agreements

As teams shift to remote work, team members and companies will need to reconsider many of their working agreements. Team members will need to discuss how they want to engage using Zoom and other tools including what their expectations are in regards to responding to messages and video conferences. This might mean considering whether to invest in high speed internet, efficient and ergonomically appropriate work spaces and considering how to minimize distractions (including your chatty Macaw) from affecting your productivity. It might also be necessary to create some working agreements in your household on how to manage noise levels and interruptions and possibly some personal working agreements on stretching and the frequency of your visits to the pantry. Companies should reconsider how to their onsite gyms and offer memberships to Peloton or Steezy, instead of onsite cafeterias look to DoorDash or UberEats and start tracking the benefits to the environment of not having your employees driving to work.

Are We Having Fun Yet?

Agile also emphasizes creating a work environment that included having fun as a way to keep teams engaged. Ice cream retrospectives, jigsaw puzzle areas and plushy talking sticks are signals that this is an Agile team, so how do you insert fun into a virtual team setting? Once again there are some interesting options that have emerged that teams can consider. Try using one of the Jackbox.tv games that are easy to learn, team-oriented games accessible from phones, tablets and computers. Consider a virtual happy hour with the team and encourage everyone to share what they brought to the party. Another idea is a multi-player jigsaw game or maybe even create a Guild in an online game like World of Warcraft. You can even invite a llama to a team meeting through Goat-to-Meeting and support a community farm. Encourage the team to offer their own ideas too.

Three Moves You Can Make Tomorrow

It's time to accept that Agile can and will work in a virtually distributed environment, so now you need to decide how to get the most out of it.

1. **Create Your Agile Technology Stack:** Start with engaging your team and check to see if they have all the tools necessary to work effectively remotely.
2. **Enable Your Team's Working Agreements**: Create Working agreements with the team on how to engage with these tools and expectations on when and how frequently they should be used. Also teams need to check how they are setup in their home both from a technology and an ergonomics perspective. Small investments in keyboards, chairs and lighting can have big returns in productivity for companies and ergonomics for people.
3. Lastly and most importantly **Don't Forget the Fun**!

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Sources:

[1]
https://www.infoplease.com/science-health/cellphone-use/cell-phone-subscribers-us-1985-2010

Team Enablement Area	Technology Options
Planning _Tools allow for better communication, visibility and progress_	Conceptboard Stormboard Mural Jira Rally ADO
Daily Stand-ups and Team Communication _Tools promote asynchronous collaboration and ad-hoc interaction_	Discord Slack Notion Getfeedback
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Retrospectives _Tools encourage a safe environment to reflect, learn and improve_	Retrium Scatterspoke

Remote First: Creating Resilient Organizations

One by-product of an increasingly global and interconnected world is the exponential increase speed of change and the feeling of constantly being in a state of crisis. How can companies thrive during in an environment of continual crisis? The answer is developing resilience and one important step is developing a Remote First organization structure. Learn more about this idea by reading: [Remote First: Creating Resilient Organizations](#) with my co-author Bhavik Modi.