

Transforming the virtual employee experience

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We are just past the halfway point of the year, and already businesses around Australia and New Zealand have had to deal with several significant disruptions, challenging the resilience of many organisations' business and operating models, leadership teams and company cultures.

During what has been dubbed 'the world's largest work from home experiment', nearly every organisation (98%) has responded to these disruptions by investing in technology, according to the **DXC Beyond Disruption 2020 Business Pulse**, which examined shifts in local business leaders' perspectives on technology this year.

And just like in any other experiment, assumptions and hypotheses have been challenged. Many businesses that just last year may have believed they were digitally mature and provided flexible working options, have found there is more to true digitally-enabled business flexibility than having a handful of popular apps installed.

Executives around Australia and New Zealand have rated organisational flexibility as the top contributor to business resilience during this time, with many digital transformation efforts focused on ensuring employees were able to remain as productive as possible while working remotely.

Successful transformations have looked different for businesses across the board – from a nimble wine retailer whose size enabled them to quickly pivot to a more digital way of working, to a Big Four bank that benefited from a swift response by an executive team prioritising employee experience. In testing-and-learning our way through a disruptive period, we have found there are no inherently right or wrong methods in transformation, and that the only true cause of failure is inaction.

While each business' success in achieving flexibility has taken a different shape, there are some common learnings we can take from this experience:

People-first approach

Prior to the disruptions of 2020, only 7% of ANZ organisations allowed the majority of their staff to work from home, compared to 44% at present.

With organisations now trying to manage a distributed workforce, the majority (67%) have admitted the focus of their transformation efforts will be on employees. This marks a significant swing from 2019, when 61% of organisations claimed digitalisation efforts were focused on customers.

But while technology solutions are important in managing disruption, an organisation must have the right culture in place for the investment to be maximised. Having conducted numerous **virtual** engagements with ANZ-based customers recently, we found many have the smarts to ideate suitable solutions, but that successful implementation requires a cultural shift.

Often, this is due to a fear of the unknown, and the anxiety that comes with trialling something new- will we accidentally set something on fire or make a mess?

For the first time in on working memories, there is no longer an ability to see and hear how 'busy' the workplace is or gauge emotional states by reading body language. A fear of lost employee productivity or a lack of understanding of the technologies involved may arouse reservations or resistance from leadership, which can hinder attempts to re-imagine ways to facilitate an engaged and connected remote workforce.

Whilst there may not be catch-all formula for creating the desired cultural or mindset shifts, businesses can start by ensuring the right conversations, tools and data points are in place to better understand, and accurately assess, their business' health. For some, this disruption may well be the stimulus needed to create a transparent organisational culture powered by two-way communication.

Empower your teams to understand the story behind the data - for example, trends in employee engagement scores - and remove any identified cultural roadblocks in small increments. Small changes, such as adjusting the cadence of team meetings and having regular check-ins, can go a long way to building and embedding new organisation-wide, people focused habits.

Technology paving an actionable roadmap

For the vast majority (82%) of businesses, technology has been a key enabler to managing disruption. In particular we've seen organisations make significant investments in cloud services, which ensure their teams are able to work productively from wherever they are.

From our experience this year, the most successful business transformations have occurred when organisations have made a conscious decision to select one single enterprise collaboration platform that can work across the business. This ensures enterprise-wide consistency and ensures staff can be trained on the platform as efficiently as possible.

Additionally, while many novel applications have garnered public attention over the last few months, none are as critical as the foundational layer of technology that makes the business go. Businesses should **assess their digital operating model** to ensure a clear link between strategy and day-to-day operations, with a prioritised roadmap that aligns to business objectives.

Experimenting with new technologies and virtual ways of working may be an enjoyable change of pace but organisations should not overlook the serious matter of cybersecurity. At a time of increased susceptibility to cyber-attacks, organisations must prioritise how they secure their employees' home working environments to reduce the risk to the business. With a secure environment, businesses can more freely deploy more creative solutions like mobile applications to engage with customers and staff, remote learning platforms, and virtual staff, such as chatbots and digital assistants.

Processes and Policies for the Virtual Employee Experience

This rapid shift in the way organisations conduct their business has tested not only their agility, but also the processes they had in place. Although sometimes viewed as mundane, processes and policies are as important as the protective goggles and gloves needed in a science lab, providing much-needed guardrails and risk mitigations for our experiments. Most organisations' processes and policies are documented at a point in time to support a physical workplace location. Businesses

need to establish a framework to continually test, learn and re-learn what is required to enable a great virtual employee experience and determine which processes and policies have been working and which are redundant or stifling.

Recently, we have used a **Virtual Employee Experience Framework** with our customers to help assess their organisation's current maturity level, and provide coaching, toolkits and organisational change management to support the business' journey in transforming their culture and transitioning towards their target digital state.

Constant changes in the external environment mean organisations need to become comfortable with the 80/20 rule of implementation – at a time like this it's more important to get a process 80% right, with a provision for a regular feedback loop to assess its success and tweak the remaining 20% as required.

Employers should review all relevant policies – from technology to occupational health & safety – and ensure strategies and policies are supportive of the increased dependency on technology at this point in time, with the provision to re-assess when circumstances change.

Looking forward

While many pundits may have posited their thoughts on what the new normal will look like, nobody can truly be sure. We have already seen many organisations move away from physical offices and allow their employees to work from home permanently. Perhaps this experimentation may lead us down the path to an entirely digital nomad workforce that supports new business operating models. It may present an opportunity for people leaders to re-evaluate the skills and capabilities they need to empower, communicate, and lead teams and do business.

From a technology standpoint, executives in Australia and New Zealand have suggested they are likely to continue with policies such as enhanced cybersecurity and fraud prevention policies (90%), flexible working hours (82%), advocacy of alternatives to in-person business meetings (82%) and using onshore alternatives for currently offshored IT services (79%).

Beyond technology solutions, executives should look at the speed with which virtually the whole world managed to pivot and understand the key success factors behind that, in their business and others. Boards and executives should ensure these lessons are not only built into business continuity plans but etched into the fabric of the organisation.

All businesses are likely to face another disruption in the future – even if only within the context of their specific market environment. The wonderful thing about experiments is that after the initial sense of apprehension comes excitement and curiosity and the sense of freedom to create something new. Leaders must ensure they learn from the disruptions experienced this year, and use it as an opportunity to re-imagine the employee experience for a more agile and resilient business in the long term.

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