

Humanizing Work for Digital Workplace of the Future

Companies should humanize their
work tools and workplaces to drive
best business outcomes



Executive Summary

The sudden changes brought about by COVID-19 have blurred the boundary between work and home. The increased efficiencies and cost advantage have made companies rethink the operating model for their organization. In most cases, the best option is looking to be hybrid where a certain percentage of employees will work from office at any given time. So, while technology will power remote working and collaboration, the winners will be ones who take a humane approach to work and workplace by putting employee experience as the core in their transformation journey. Companies taking the human-centered design approach to work and workplace will not just survive but thrive in the new business landscape.

When the year 2020 started, no one ever imagined that it will be the tipping point in the history of work, workplace and workforce. Work as we know it will be transformed and reimagined to not just adjust but fundamentally transform the way businesses are run. The pandemic made companies rethink the way work was delivered in confined office spaces.

Due to the advances in technologies, remote work has been gaining traction in the past few years. But pandemic forced everyone to adopt the remote working culture in the white-collar fields. According to a recent Gartner CFO Survey¹, it looks like that many workers will be working from home on a permanent basis. In fact, many companies such as Facebook, Twitter, Box and Slack² have plans to make working from home the new normal. This drastic change of work delivery is powered by the use of different digital workplace and unified collaboration solutions that allowed the knowledge workers to connect to enterprise systems and deliver work using a laptop with internet connectivity.

Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft has said that, "We've seen two years' worth of digital transformation in two months."³ It is a lot of digital transformation that happened in just two months, but it was the burning need of the hour to ensure business continuity for many organizations which included not just deployment of unified collaboration tools like Microsoft Teams, Slack, Zoom, Webex, etc. but even moving enterprise data to the cloud.

However, on the flip side, the remote work model is beginning to show some gap areas. While the current model has shown huge productivity gains as per various surveys, but it might not be a scalable, sustainable and efficient model due to multiple reasons:

- Back-to-back calls means less time for focused work
- Employee burnout trying to focus with earphones for many hours
- No work-life balance with no practical work cut off time
- Remote working is not best to brainstorm or ideate and so on.

The overdose of remote work technology to stay connected and to deliver from home is exhausting employees and will be impacting employee wellbeing in the long run. This is the reason why, as per Wall Street Journal⁴, CIOs are spearheading well-being initiatives to make remote work less remote. But they are still addressing the symptom not the core problem.

The remote working and digital workplace solutions need to be relooked at and redesigned from a humanized point of view on how the future should be envisioned for the work, workplace and workforce.





Working Out a Human-centric Solution

The long-term solution for a successful 'digital workplace' transformation will include humanizing the technology by leveraging human-centered design approach. That is, developing solutions to remote work problems by taking the human perspective at every step. The future work model needs to put the employee in the center and then design for efficiency and creativity for them. Technology should be the hidden enabler without being a visible distractor.

A good technology solution should not need any training and should increase efficiency multi-fold. That is the ideal scenario. A good product should be intuitive enough for anybody to easily use it without hassle. While designing it for each individual is time consuming and not cost efficient, doing it for identified personas will go a long way in ensuring that the digital workplace technologies that the enterprises deploy for its employees to connect, collaborate and deliver work remotely are not just best-in-class from the features standpoint, but from the ease-of-use standpoint too.

Companies need to redesign and humanize technologies to make them less strenuous and to ensure work seamlessly flows without increasing the cost of productivity for employees or causing employee fatigue. Seven focus areas can make all the difference.

Persona-based digital workspaces

While all companies have implemented cloud-hosted digital workplace solutions for remote working, it needs to be redesigned by looking at how employees work daily and what is the most efficient way to get work done with in the least amount of time. The work should seamlessly flow with technology being hidden and powering the intelligence to ensure high productivity for employees. For example, the intranet should be personalized to ensure least number of clicks for employees to get to their frequent visited applications or weblinks. This can be done by looking at different personas and identifying the best intranet design basis the results of the design thinking exercise.

Digital workspaces should also enable focused creative time for employees to work without any distraction. It should also take care of the employee wellbeing by giving the right digital nudges to take a break or do some ergonomic exercises to relax the body by analyzing the continuous time spent on the devices and employee applications.

Learning while working

Upskilling and reskilling digitally while working within the collaboration tools will be the way how talent will be nurtured in the future. With employees working remotely, learning should happen as part of the work. Josh Bersin calls it learning in the flow of work⁵, and digital workspace solutions should bring this concept to life. The learning should happen within unified collaboration tools or as part of the business applications to ensure that for short micro-learning contents, dedicated learning time is not required from the employees. Also, the learning module should appear when it is needed for a specific task, so that employees can utilize that learning immediately.

Integrated business applications

Unified collaboration tools such as Microsoft Teams and Slack have been at the center of enabling remote work from employee collaboration and communication standpoint. But the last thing that all employees want is one more application in addition to other siloed work applications. Hence, all business work applications need to be integrated ideally within the unified collaboration tool so that employees don't have to keep navigating between multiple different applications to get work done. For example, a project management application or any other business application should flow seamlessly through a single interface and the required action can be taken within the single integrated workspace.

Contextual knowledge experiences

Enabling intelligent knowledge capture and dissemination using predictive knowledge assistance will be a key factor in driving productivity for remote workers. The current bot-assisted knowledge dissemination in unified collaboration tools is the start, but needs to evolve where it can predictively show relevant knowledge base articles and information to assist employees in their work. For example, bots should analyze the current work that the employee is doing and predictively suggest relevant existing artifacts for perusal but seamlessly disappear if user takes no action.

This human-machine collaboration will enhance the employee productivity manifold by allowing employees to capitalize on the power of machine intelligence to search and find the best possible results to their queries without spending their time doing it themselves. This will allow them to focus on creative and innovative work while the more mundane and time-consuming tasks are delegated to their machine colleague.

Humanized automation

Automating business processes is a key part of the digital transformation, and in workplace automation such features should be persona-based. Blanket automation of processes can lead to overengineered solutions for some user personas and add to the time taken for work. Automated solutions need to ensure that they are best fit from cost-benefit perspective and significantly reduce the time to get the work done. For example, automating a CRM report is a good solution, but if it needs to be modified by few of the users by taking data from this and create another report in a different format, this automation is an overengineered solution.

Humanized unified collaborative tools

This is an area where innovation is currently happening to ensure that employees can creatively collaborate remotely on new ideas and innovation. While digital whiteboarding solutions exist today in tools like MS Teams, it still is not at par with the emotional connect and experience that in-person brainstorming sessions can do. The fluidness of being able to bring the data and information from different systems into the whiteboarding tool for creative brainstorming is where it needs to evolve. Microsoft's Fluid Framework⁶ is a step in that direction and hopefully it will address the issue of creative brainstorming remotely in a more efficient way.

Future is always difficult to predict, but keeping the end employees in the center for charting user journeys for all employee transformation initiatives can help work out best solutions for enterprise employees to be most productive and efficient. The digital workplaces of the future should be reimaged by humanizing them.

Transforming offices into brainstorming and ideation centers

The time saved by employees in commuting is best utilized if they work from home remotely but there is some great value in seeing your colleagues in person and doing ideation and creative discussions. As per the Harris Poll Survey⁷ commissioned by Microsoft on May 26-30, 2020, 71% of the employees and managers reported a desire to continue working from home at least part-time. But the research also found that nearly 60% of people felt less connected to their colleagues since working remotely more often. Hence, in-person social interactions definitely help connect better with other stakeholders and it is not going to end completely. So, while few employees whose work is completely independent may continue to work from home permanently, most employees work in teams and may come into offices for ideation and brainstorming for few days and then work from home till their independent task finishes. Hence, one of the ways to reimagine the workplaces will be to transform few more cubicles areas into creative brainstorming and ideation centers for employees to come in, discuss, deliberate and ideate.

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