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The New ‘New Normal’

Regardless of when a vaccine is found or how we get our societies back to normal, millions of people around the world have been forced to take part in an unprecedented experiment, and there is no going back. The social experiment that we find ourselves part of will change not only how we live and interact with one and other, but also how we work. Whether you’re in a Fortune 500 company, as part of a big team or a consultant that works project to project, change is coming quickly.

Overnight, all of us have been embracing ubiquitous online platforms for everything from kids’ karate lessons to multimillion-dollar financing meetings. To the casual observer it could appear that video conferencing took over the world overnight, but this is a technology that has been waiting in the wings for a long time! Did you know that the first video conference technology dates to the audio wires of the 1870s and Bell Lab’s ‘video phone’ from 1927? From the Jetsons to Dick Tracy, popular culture tried for decades to visualize what video calls would look like and what efficiencies they would bring to our communication methodologies.

But is this the new normal? Are we going to spend endless hours in front of our screens and exist completely in remote and virtual environments forever? How will businesses and work evolve to cope with the challenges we face today? What will be the new, new normal?

But first, why didn’t conference calls take over the world decades ago?

The Old Normal

Even though video conferencing tech has existed for a long time in one form or another, we never really embraced it. We never felt in our bones that remote conference calls were productive; more importantly, we never thought that remote team members dialing into a meeting had the same value as those at in-person events, or contributed equally. Also, there were a lot of technology, connectivity and bandwidth issues that made it difficult for them to contribute, but our shared belief was that we had to travel and be in the same room together to have our voices heard. People who attended meetings physically were assigned higher priority; others were just passive observers.

So the only option was to travel, travel, travel: whether to make the customer happy, help a supplier feel confident, or ensure that your design team was aligned.

The New Normal

Suddenly the world changed, and we've been forced to adapt. Everything is done by conference call now. Restrictions on travel made us all remote workers, and value distinctions between physical and remote presence have been discarded. All attending are on the same level; we democratized the meeting.

There are a lot of advantages to this new normal.

Reduced travel. The idea that we must travel for a day just to meet a customer for an hour seems so 2019 now. Not only can we dramatically reduce our stress and our air pollution and associated respiratory problems, but what could the average American - who drives 54 hours per week for work while stuck in traffic - do with this time?

A cleaner environment. According to some estimates, if everyone in the United States worked remotely half of the time, it would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by more than 51 million metric tons a year. It is fascinating to see pictures of cities around the world – the canals of Venice, the absence of smog over Delhi, and clearer skies over cities like Los Angeles and Beijing – due to the reduction of traffic. Of course when people return to work, the roads may fill up again, especially if there's a fear of getting the virus on public transit. But why return to the old ways when the new ways work better?

Greater productivity. Study after study has shown that remote workers are on the average more productive. Anywhere from 4% to over 18% increase in productivity can be attained. In addition, remote employees tend to spend more time on core work and fewer hours on communication compared to their office-based peers.

Money saved. Not only will consumers save due to reduction in travel and lower energy costs, but many enterprises will also save money due not only to a reduction in real estate costs but to increases in employee satisfaction and lower churn of staff. Global giants and small enterprises alike are daily announcing major reductions in corporate real estate and changes to their remote work policies.

Better work-life balance. As a globe-trotting executive, will it be easier to find that elusive work-life balance as a remote worker? The idea of getting on important work calls with the senior leadership whilst overseeing the online classroom portal of your kids, who are also working in your home, does not seem that far-fetched anymore. During one particularly tense leadership call, my ten-year-old daughter interrupted me to ask, 'What is gross margin.... And why is it so gross??' This is not something I would have imagined a few months ago – but it seems perfectly normal now!

Less sickness. Letting employees work from home can help keep them safe from communicable diseases (and not just Covid-19). This can also reduce overall costs and healthcare expenses and lead to greater job satisfaction.

But there are a lot of problems as well! Can we survive and thrive in this new normal?

Is it really a video call if no one is sharing their video? My experiences are that we all get on a call just to turn off video and talk over one another. I get it, we don't need to share our cluttered home offices, annoyed spouses complaining in the background and pets trying to get attention. But at the same time, video calling is offering us the promise of being connected eye to eye with individuals, which won't occur if we revert to the dial-in number scenarios of the past. So, we have to ask the question: if no one wants to turn on their video, has anything changed? Do we really care about the video part of video conferencing?

Video calls are more tiring than real life. Is it just me or am I more drained after a day of staring at the screen, jumping from one call to another? Turns out that according to published research, on a video call your brain must work harder to interpret non-verbal cues like body language and tone of voice. We need to pay more attention to get the same result, which means that we burn more energy. Add in the strange type of dissonance that most people feel when trying to communicate on these calls, the awkward pauses and difficulty in expressing your idea visually – these lead to greater exhaustion and a feeling of separation.

Hard to focus. It's not just me! It appears that focusing and giving attention on a video conference is more difficult than at in-person meetings. The latest research shows that talking hands-free on a cell phone impairs driving, whereas talking to a physical person in a car does not. University of Utah professors found that conference calls slowed driver's reaction times and increased their risk of crashing due to an effect known as inattention blindness. Does this mean that we are all just 'drunk driving' through our video conference calls?

Is it really a new medium, or more of the same? Are we really getting our point across or are we struggling more and more to do the same thing? If you were to solve a complex problem, would you rather meet on a conference call or meet face to face? The simple answer to many is that we need to meet face to face. Forget the social interaction, the relationship building and the evolution of our species that demands face to face interaction – but the multi-dimensional nature of face to face conversations are not going to be replaced by clunky video conference technology that really hasn't changed much in decades.

One commentator says: "For context, like many, I'm about two months into #WFH. I don't know about you, but something is missing, even though I've loved my experience working remotely and finding that my coworkers and I are collaborating quite nicely with our good ol' instant-messaging platform and Zoom. So, what's lacking? I want to say I'm missing the collaboration "experience." What do we want "an experience" to be? How do we bring a community element and human nature to all these tech innovations?" – Leah McCann at rAVe pubs.

The Next Normal

The reality is that the 'new normal' is not sustainable for a lot of people and for a lot of tasks that we professionals face on a daily basis. Not every conversation and problem can be parceled into a video conference call and not all complex problems can be solved in the allotted hour so we can jump into something else. Many researchers are already warning us that problem-solving and creativity will

suffer when teams are isolated from one another. How do we ensure that the 'anywhere team' can be as effective as the face-to-face team of old? How do we make sure that everyone continues to have the ability and opportunity to equally contribute their voice?

In order for us to reap the rewards of transitioning to remote work without suffering from the consequences we need to find a new balance. This balance must take into account the need for social interactions, create an environment where engagement between remote workers is cultivated, and use a whole new set of hardware and software solutions that allows remote teams not only to engage with each other but to be as creative as if they were in the same room.

What will the office environment look like in this new future? Ideally we want to transition away from long commutes and pointless travel and work from home as much as possible. In physical office locations we're going to have to deal with staggered opening hours, where only a percentage of the workforce can be on the premises at any given time and social distancing is maintained. We will want flexible spaces that can be used for many different purposes and can be re-configured easily. A lot of companies will reduce their real estate footprint, or maybe create more, smaller satellite spaces. Satellite spaces that could be used in the 'office as a hotel' model, where remote teams can come in ad-hoc and use the space when necessary. Small core teams will connect with a larger remote group and be able to work efficiently. Implementing easy to use Interactive Whiteboards that allow users to connect to their content and act as a hub for other in-room peripherals like conference phones and projectors will allow teams to easily re-configure space as required.

Forget the home office, we need to transition to the 'Home Boardroom'. Home offices have as many negative connotations as positive. Essential for some, impossible and 'overrated' for others. Recently, a CEO of a small business expressed concerns that every sales manager was attending important customer calls wearing the same jersey and using lack of travel as a convenient excuse for not closing business deals. Maintaining professionalism and figuring out ways to communicate will be critical for the home office worker. What new furniture is required for this Home Boardroom? Implementing small interactive white boards and third person room cameras that allow one to stand up in front of the virtual audience and do formal presentations to create the same engagement as if they were face to face will be critical.

We also need to reinvent our concept of a remote meeting. Our existing video conferencing tools have not changed in decades. Every platform is identical in capabilities, with maybe a tweak here and there for usability. None of them offers anything more than simple screen sharing and camera sharing.

If we are going to foster remote team culture that results in efficiencies, we will need software that allows anyone to express their visions, visualize and share their ideas, and revise them during the meeting as input comes from others. This will allow them to be as creative remotely as if they were face to face in the same room.