

THE SURPRISE SILVER LINING

What we can learn from professional service teams that managed to perform well during the crisis

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As the first wave of CoViD-19 infections took off, many organizations worried about business continuity. While jobs requiring physical presence were hit the hardest, professional service firms expressed concerns whether and how they would be able to work too. Before the crisis, much of their work tended to be done 'on-site,' from experts in corporate roles such as HR or finance to consultants working with their clients or university professors giving lectures. Naturally, all this work seemed jeopardized once offices became "no go zones."

To study this unexpected shift, we talked to a variety of people from different professional service organizations. Initially, many interviewees expressed concerns; some because of missing technical infrastructure, others worried that employees would now be Netflix-ing at home all day. But as the dust settled, an increasing number of respondents—both employees and executives—expressed positive surprise that some things not only worked, but worked better.

So why did some teams not only continue their work, but perform better? And which insights can we draw from their experiences?

Enablers and facilitators

To structure our observations, we use a model to understand how technology and behaviors are connected. The model has four components: *technology*, *tasks*, *actors*, and *structure*.

Technology

Not surprisingly, many organizations have found that a key enabler to handle the crisis was IT.

This involved **laptops** with large enough screens and essential **peripherals** such as webcams and headsets. Similarly, workforce that was equipped with **smartphones** and **internet access at home** found it much easier to stay connected.

But remote access is not only a hardware issue. Privacy concerns required **virtual private network (VPN)** capability in many organizations and tried-and-tested solutions for remote **authentication and authorization** became essential. Clearly, teams that were able to draw on approved solutions for **video conferencing** or **voice-over-IP telephony** in line with their company's security guidelines were able to switch their tasks online much easier.

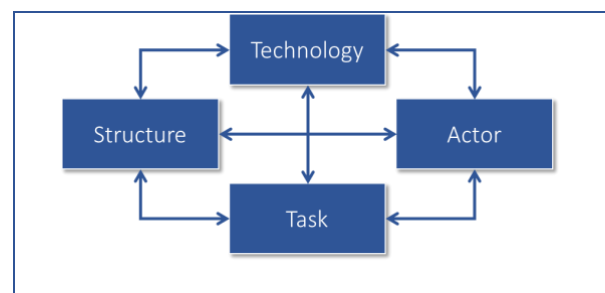


Figure 1. A socio-technical model

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Beyond these connectivity basics, keeping “the office” going depended on people’s ability to collaborate. Here, **collaboration and coordination tools** such as virtual whiteboards, file sharing, or co-editing tools were key. These tools enabled simultaneous, distributed work on documents. Also, **enterprise social media** (e.g., Slack or Yammer) became central to formal communication within teams as well as for informal discussions and chance encounters (water-cooler moments).

A particularly interesting case is Facebook’s reaction to their employees’ need to stay connected at home. The company “reinvented” their Portal product, a fully integrated audio-visual device that was targeted to allow its customers to enrich their social networking experience. But Facebook realized that the product would also allow its employees to stay in touch and sent it to everyone’s home. Rather than consumers’ social networking, the device now integrates all components necessary for a virtual office, from calendaring to task management and messaging. It even allows Facebook employees to maintain a telepresence in their team’s virtual office.

Tasks

With a new IT infrastructure in place, how did organizations change the tasks to maintain delivery of professional services?

Firstly, the pandemic accelerated the adoption of **management by objectives**. In a large insurance company, time keeping was a hurdle to working from home. But teams that worked well focused more on their goals and afforded greater freedom regarding the means. One managing principal at a consulting company highlighted that focusing on objectives changed the nature of his team’s tasks, leading to an increased “drive for results.”

Going paperless is quintessential for remote work. When things remain physical, it’s the flow of physical artifacts that determines throughput and not the actual value added. In our own work as teachers, deliverables that were still physical hand-ins had to be replaced by digital submissions. But this did not simply keep the process going, it supported the distribution of work and accelerated the processing of content greatly. At the same time, new forms of providing feedback emerged and allowed us to enrich students’ learning experience by keeping the conversation going beyond just submission.

Complementarily, teams also improved their coordination by employing **workflow management** techniques. A bank’s software developers highlighted how they rely on a repurposed ticketing system to coordinate tasks. This allowed them to maintain their **agile approach** to service delivery.

Some teams also realized that **unplanned interactions** were vital to their performance, especially for unstructured tasks. With the physical distance separating team members, new ways of communicating synchronously were necessary. For instance, some teams creatively modified the whiteboard feature found in online meeting applications such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom by leaving the board open for comments throughout the day.

Actors

With tools and complementary changes in tasks in place, how did people need to change to make the most of the situation?

First, **empowerment of individuals** was important. One communications expert working for a leading Medtech company shared her appreciation of being allowed to manage herself, set her own priorities, and escape the usually tighter onsite management regime.

Because this required that people managed themselves more, **time and boundary management** became key. It was easier to “get lost in work” as one university researcher put it. She found herself still at her desk at surprisingly late hours on multiple occasions. Work tended to lose its boundary and overshadowed other aspects of life. This issue was dealt with mostly at the individual level, by pacing and limiting work sessions (e.g., using gimmicks like a kitchen timer).

Learning new skills was especially important for people who hadn’t worked online before. Remote support structures were needed because the help you could previously receive by chatting up colleagues in the office was no longer available. The teams we talked to found best-practice-diaries and regular exchange sessions (sometimes facilitated by a trainer) helpful.

One surprising finding: People **felt more appreciated as a person**. Prior to the lockdown, obligations like childcare had to be “managed away” before going to the office. It was easy for managers to assume that they needn’t worry about these things because they were team members’ individual responsibility. But this “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach fell apart quickly, torn down by legions of dancing children drawing on wallpaper in the back of video calls. Managers were perceived as being more empathetic, also because they often found themselves in the same situation. Overall, many professionals shared that their constraints are better understood and feel that they are able to deal with these constraints more holistically (also thanks to the more flexible working hours; see below). In effect, they feel more motivated to get work done while at it.

Structure

As the most abstract of the four elements, structure allows us to pull together the elements we discussed thus far and weave them into a coherent whole.

The teams that managed to perform really well underwent a deep **cultural change**. Managers could no longer rely on physical presence to micro-manage, a broader set of tools was available to choose from to support service production and delivery, and employees gained greater freedom to organize work and family life ... all these changes complement each other. This prompted organizations to rethink **role descriptions** and **incentive schemes** in support of these emerging structures.

Above all, organizations had to reconsider how resilient they were to exogeneous shocks. Many people felt unsecure not knowing how their employers would cope with the situation and felt that they were left to their own device. Once actions were announced, they often came into effect overnight. To prevent this, conducting a thorough **post-crisis review** will be essential to build **future contingency** plans. These will help to communicate better and build up routines for the next crisis—announced and trialed before things become acute.

At a glance: The key lessons learned from well-functioning teams	
<p>Technology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laptops and peripherals • Smartphones with connectivity data plans • Broadband internet at employees’ homes • Virtual private network (VPN) infrastructure • Authentication and authorization solutions • Video-conferencing / VoIP telephony • Collaboration and coordination tools • Shared calendaring within and across teams • Enterprise social media tools <p>Task</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managed by objectives • Going paperless • Workflow management • Agile service delivery method • Unplanned interactions for unstructured tasks 	<p>Actor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual empowerment • Time and boundary management • Learning new skills • Appreciation of personal constraints <p>Structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive change in culture • New role descriptions • Updated incentive schemes • Post-crisis review • Future contingency plans

Discussion and outlook

As challenging as the past couple of months have been, they also provide an exciting opportunity to gain insights into very different ways of doing things. In our own reflections, we were surprised how much the way we teach had been scaffolded by a physical environment and how little we had experimented with digital infrastructures.

Overall, many teams were pushed to fight the crisis and even excelled at their work. This demonstrates that any generic and general critique towards working from home must be off the table when organizations strive for genuine digital innovations that shape the future of work.

About Enterprise for Society (E4S)

Conscious of their responsibility in the face of the unprecedented challenges confronting society, the University of Lausanne through its faculty of Business and Economics (UNIL-HEC), the Institute for Management Development (IMD) and the EPFL under the stewardship of the College of Management of Technology have joined forces in Enterprise for Society (E4S). E4S aims to be the laboratory where its founding institutions jointly explore new ways of fulfilling their mission in the fields of economics and management.

E4S is dedicated to helping society overcome its challenges and to spearheading the transition towards a more resilient, environmentally responsible and inclusive economy.

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