

How Covid-19 Is Shaping Digital Transformation

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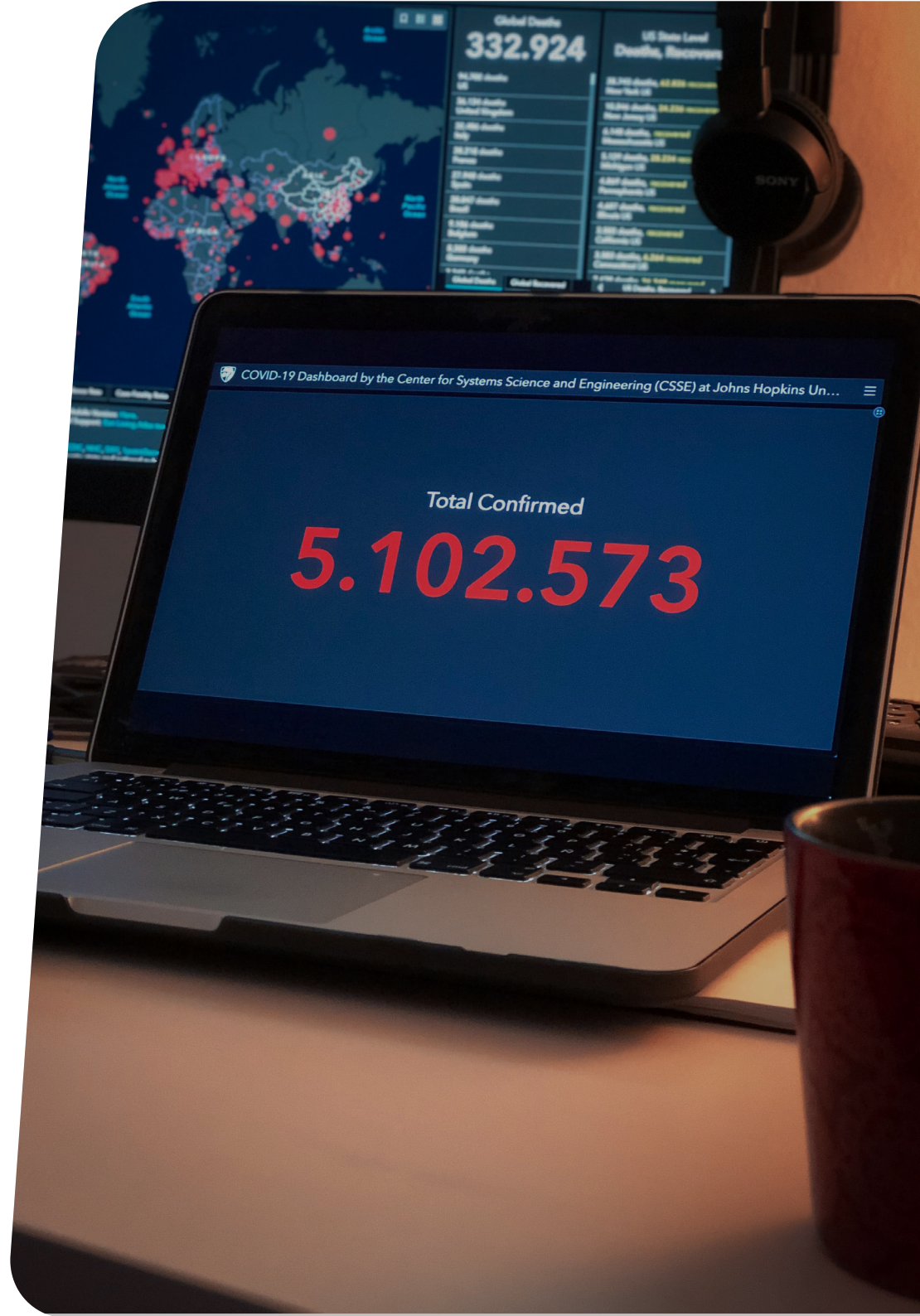


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Do you remember 1992? It was Queen Elizabeth's annus horribilis, with death, conflict and destruction surrounding the Royal Family and capturing the UK's attention throughout the year. What about 2016, when social media was awash with comments about so many well-loved celebrities dying, along with the Zika epidemic of North and South America that threatened the 2016 Rio Olympics and Paralympics? Well, so far 2020 has been orders of magnitude worse - like it has looked at 1992 and 2016 and said "hold my beer"!

The coronavirus pandemic has been the single biggest cause of global societal change since the Second World War. Its impact on daily life has even surpassed that of the tragic events of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Covid-19 threatens to shut the world down, grinding business, transport, trade and leisure to a halt through the necessities of quarantine, lockdown and self-isolation. The only thing that has stopped it from fully succeeding in this shutdown has been **Digital Transformation**. We fight to maintain our vital supply chains, connections and a semblance of normality through digital systems that would not be possible without internet technologies. Sir Tim Berners-Lee must never again be allowed to buy his own drinks or restaurant dinners, such is the gratitude we as a species owe him and his team!

In this article, we reflect on Digital Transformation pre-coronavirus, take a look at Covid-19's impact on Digital Transformation, and offer a few thoughts as to what this might mean for the future.



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Digital Transformation Before The Virus



Digital Transformation Before The Virus

Before the advent of the new coronavirus, digital transformation was already a major area of investment for companies around the world. It was very important to many business models across many sectors, and could roughly be divided into two categories: new, digital native disruptive businesses (such as Google, Facebook, Uber, etc.) - and every other type of business that had to defend against such disruption.

Since the 1990s, the internet has expanded its ability to connect people and services, and to enable disruption of traditional products and services with digital alternatives. But with the 2010s' expansion of mobile and social media, digital connectivity exploded. If you weren't considering a digital version of your product, service, company, brand or even self - then you were in the small minority.

However, that didn't always translate into a fast-paced move into digital technologies. For many companies, a digital transformation started with a new website, and maybe ended with some SEO, social media channels and digital marketing. Some companies examined their legacy processes and systems, and saw an opportunity to upgrade and get a competitive edge from an internal transformation, as well as a customer-facing one.

Such investments however always cost money, particularly when they raise questions around your business processes, systems and culture. These can be difficult, time-consuming things to change, and while the potential rewards were clear to see, they were accompanied by cost and risk. While "things were going OK as they were", this put some companies off. Other companies saw "digital transformation" as a fad.



In other words, there was always a pull to digital transformation - but there wasn't always a major simultaneous push in that direction.

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The Impact Of COVID-19 On Digital Transformation



The Impact Of COVID-19 On Digital Transformation



MBA-ish - Workplace Satire
 @MBA-ish

Who led the digital transformation of your company?

- A) CEO
- B) CTO
- C) COVID-19

Source: [@MBA-ish](#)

The above, much-shared joke is sad because it has been true in many cases. In early 2020, as coronavirus spread throughout the world, it also ripped through our traditional working practices. Unless you were providing a key public service, you could only do business through digital routes. And the only way your staff could support your customers was online, while remote from the office and each other.

This was not a handful of team members working from home every Friday, with management secretly wondering exactly how productive they were being. This was not just having a team working remotely from others in the business, or members of that team working remotely from each other. This was the entire business being dispersed without much time to prepare or

adapt, while in the middle of a global crisis. Every team suddenly became remote. With the added features of management having no choice but to trust the entire future of their business to their digital systems, and employees figuring out how to be productive while managing their own emotional wellbeing and home situations.

Some organisations were ready for this. Others were emphatically not. Some managers were left to rue their risk aversion when considering their organisation's digital transformation, and to conclude that risk aversion was itself an undetected risk. Oh to turn back the clock by twelve months or so.

The coronavirus has thrown a harsh light on the varying speeds with which organisations have embraced digital transformation. What was once written off by some as just another piece of tech jargon or business fad has shown itself invaluable in the survival of countless businesses that would otherwise fail. At the time of writing, many businesses are "muddling through", leaning on accelerated implementations of communications apps such as Zoom, Slack or Teams. Some organisations may have hurriedly moved from desktop systems to online equivalents, such as payroll and accounting, HR systems and the like. We are navigating significant supply chain disruption brought on by lockdowns and social distancing. We are still adapting to the crazy amount of change we have faced in a short time.

2020 will be remembered in many ways; one of those could be as "The Great Forced Digital Transformation". Admittedly it's not very catchy. But we've all been forced to make the leap across the [chasm of innovation](#) - what happens next?

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What Might The Future “New Normal” Look Like?



What Might The Future “New Normal” Look Like?

This is the \$64,000 question. Well, it’s likely to be the multi-billion dollar question; size aside, it is a question where the answer is not known but upon which a great deal depends.

For your staff - digital transformation is here to stay

A core message during lockdown has been “work from home if you can”, and while there are plenty of professions and people for which this is not possible, we have seen many office and service-based jobs transition to remote working during the lockdown. At the time of writing, lockdown measures are starting to be eased in some areas of the UK and Europe, but social distancing is still at the forefront of people’s minds as no effective vaccine or treatment has yet been found.

So many areas have been through an “emergency” period, where we all have had to adapt and muddle through as best we can due to an unforeseen crisis. That emergency period cannot last forever, and the transition out of that into the much-discussed “new normal” will look different at different levels. What is clear though is that digital communication will remain a major contributor to all aspects of a business: maintaining projects, functional groups, teamworking, personal connections and so on.

Ultimately, national economies will depend on digital transformations and technology to keep going.

Remote working at an individual level

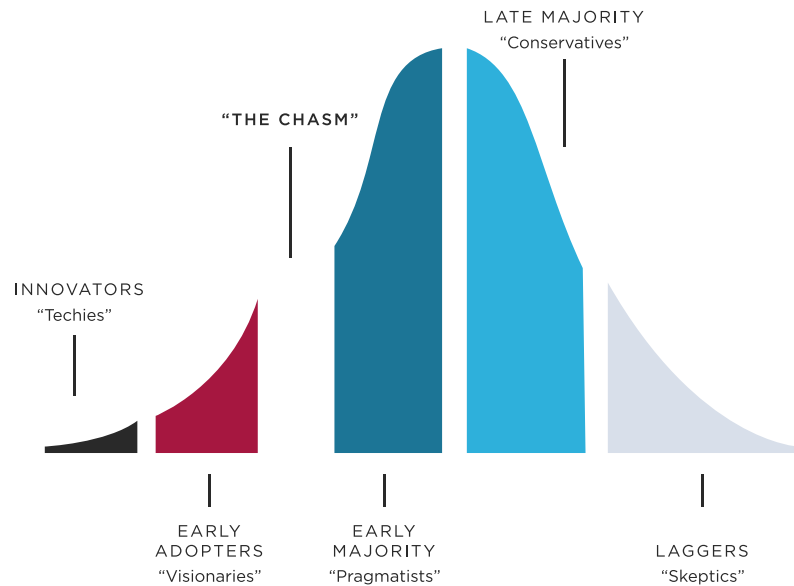
It is worth saying at the start that while the terms “working from home” and “remote working” are often used interchangeably, they can be very different. [Jason Aten wrote on inc.com](#) that working from home can be seen as a temporary or part-time activity, whereas remote working has more connotations of a full-time and/or permanent situation. For the purposes of this piece, I’ll be concentrating on remote working. It is likely that any transition back to pre-Covid office working will be phased over a significant amount of time, if it is even possible at all.

In the short-term, many people will have adapted to remote working in some form. They may be feeling benefits from the removal of a commute to spending more time at home with family. Some workers may feel more freedom in their work because they cannot be as closely supervised; managers will need to trust their colleagues more than previously.

As we move out of government-mandated remote working, staff will reasonably expect to continue to be able to work from home when it is convenient for them. Indeed, a [May 2020 study by IBM](#) of 25,000 adults in the US indicated that 75% would like to continue remote working occasionally, and 54% would like that to be their primary way of working. Given how organisations all across the world have had to adapt to this, and the short-term success in adapting shown by many, it will be incredibly hard to say no to these requests.

Some staff may feel more disconnected, where social distancing has a literal and metaphorical effect. But many more people will still not be used to long-term digital communication and co-working. At some point

“muddling through” will need to be improved into a slick, productive and natural process where people can feel comfortable that they are contributing as they were prior to the pandemic. Not everyone in an organisation will move towards this at the same rate; referring back to the [chasm of innovation](#), there will be laggards who find it very difficult to transition.



Individuals will need support to achieve a move into sustainable, efficient, effective and satisfying long-term remote working. This support will inevitably have a long tail, so it is important that businesses plan for this. Useful steps include:

- Keep up one-to-ones with line managers; these become even more important when people are physically separated

- Give staff the ability and opportunity to chat and socialise as best you can
- Provide flexibility in working patterns
- Regular and frequent check-ins or company meetings to keep people communicating and somewhat connected
- Coaching or training in key technologies or apps to enable people to stay in touch

Remote working before the pandemic also needed excellent self-motivation and attention management skills. This will not change as a result of the pandemic, but be amplified by the increase in people having to work remotely. Colleagues who need more supervision or direction will need long-term support to be effective when working remotely.

Remote working as a team

Project and product teams are much more than a collection of individuals; this was well known prior to the pandemic and will continue to be the case. So a core aim of remote team working will need to be to retain that teamwork and other aspects that make a team greater than the sum of their parts.

[Tuckman's stages of group development](#) are relevant here; a team will form, storm, norm, then perform. What needs to be remembered is that existing teams, even those well into the perform stage, can and will fall back into the earlier stages of development given a big enough change. A global pandemic and rush to remote working would almost certainly qualify as “a big enough change”.

So on top of everything else, for a business to see their gold-star project team (or any others for that matter) fall back into a norming or even storming stage, would be a jolt to confidence. Stick with it though, acknowledge that there has been a significant change and that the team needs to adapt, and support them through that adaptation.

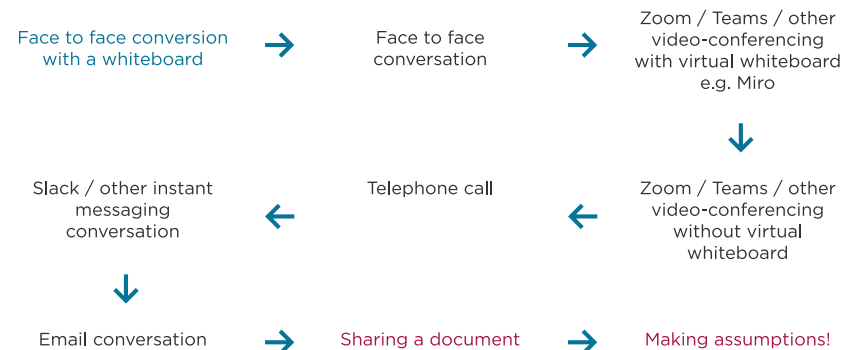
In addition to those outlined earlier for remote individuals, useful steps here include:

- Allowing more time for online team meetings and/or agile ceremonies such as daily stand-ups
- Frequent retrospectives, coupled with effective prioritisation and actioning of the outcomes. Note that:
 - In the early- to mid-phases of remote working, a portion of the retrospective should be specifically dedicated to how well the team has adapted
 - Retrospectives should not be thought of as an overhead, but as an investment into upskilling your teams in the areas that matter most
- Specific support (e.g. training, coaching etc.) to team members in softer skills, for example active listening and workshop facilitation
- Reinforcing the need for team collaboration and enabling this through specific online collaboration sessions and channels that allow ad-hoc conversations, e.g. Slack with Zoom interaction
- Measuring progress e.g. velocity - not as a stick to beat the teams with, but as a way of visualising the improvements being made. Of course, this will be even more important than usual when teams are asking for extra time to collaborate online and learn lessons during retrospectives

Post-pandemic collaboration

Again, until there is an effective vaccine or other treatment, the post-lockdown office will need to look very different from the 2019 version. Much is being written and discussed about physical aspects such as social distancing and screening so we won't cover that here. But unless your company [chooses not to return to the office](#), or your office manager is willing and able to take an [innovative approach to having people on site](#), a significant shift will be in having a mix of online and in-person staff presence.

The in-person workshop is usually held up as the gold standard for collaboration:



Historically Box UK have always believed this, acted on it and [coached it](#), but the Covid-reality is that this will be more difficult to achieve for the foreseeable future (and we have written previously [about our experiences](#) in making remote workshops as effective as their traditional in-person counterparts).

Your approach to post-Covid collaboration, then, could go in one of two broad directions: fully-online or hybrid.

Staying fully online

In this model even those participants in the office could be asked to join an online meeting and participate over, say, a virtual whiteboard.

The main benefit to this approach is the level playing field and equality of participation; there is far less likelihood of a group of participants taking over a session, or of a group alienating individuals by unconsciously excluding them from conversations.

However, not using the existing physical collaboration facilities available may waste the opportunity to make some gains from in-person collaboration. Additionally, those who are in the office may get frustrated at the situation; what is the point of coming into an office when the benefits of in-person collaboration have been removed?

Hybrid sessions

An alternative approach is to mix in-person and online collaboration into a hybrid session. This model can deliver benefits associated with face-

to-face working, such as increased efficiency and better understanding enabled by clearer communication (picking up on both verbal and non-verbal nuances).

Take care here however: a [survey by Construx](#) in May 2020 indicated that amongst software professionals, fully-online meetings would likely be preferable to a hybrid session. This could be because of challenges such as the difference in pace between in-person meetings and their online equivalents, availability of collaboration tools such as whiteboards and user story maps, or the concern that online contributors may not be as easily able to participate in active discussion.

These risks can be mitigated with effective facilitation that regulates the session's pace, oversees access to shared artefacts, and balances contributions from both physical and online spaces, as well as through the use of [good technology](#) to ensure strong, reliable remote connections. It is still unknown though whether this facilitation can be optimised to bring engagement back to full in-person levels, and if so whether we can reap the same benefits of in-person collaboration that we knew before.

Messaging around remote working

Whatever your chosen approach, the messaging of it to staff will be very important. For example, if you want to fully involve those working from home into collaborative sessions, maybe you shouldn't start off by labelling them as remote workers. This could reinforce the differences across the team and start a slightly disengaged mindset for those who are not in the office. Instead, referring to those not co-located as "mobile teammates" might help with an initial feeling of inclusion, and to remind any co-located participants to keep their colleagues involved.

Inspect and adapt

There is always pressure to get these interactions right as quickly as possible. You will need a clear plan that is well-communicated and understood, but that is ready to pivot to changing circumstances. However, as lockdowns and the return to work will likely be phased around the world, there will be opportunities to experiment with different approaches to see which works best for your business. As is usually good practice (and as has already been mentioned in this piece): plan, experiment, inspect, adapt and repeat - communicating every aspect of what you are doing clearly and often as you go.



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For Your Customers -

Digital Transformation Is Here To Stay



For Your Customers - Digital Transformation Is Here To Stay

During the lockdown, a huge number and variety of activities went online. From video-calling your mum on Zoom to letting Sainsbury's groceries come to you (if you were lucky enough to secure a delivery slot), online communication and transactions are now firmly entrenched in the nation's psyche. In most aspects of daily life, digital equivalents were already eroding into traditional approaches, but the forced transformation has accelerated this.

While there isn't yet a real digital substitute for meeting your mates at the pub or going on a dinner-date at a restaurant, in some areas customers may not want to go back to the pre-virus ways. This will lead to:

- Changes in user journeys
- Increased online demand
- Increased competition for these changed activities in a smaller economy

The lockdown also spawned some UX compromises as organisations scrambled to keep their businesses running in the new online environment, which will undoubtedly need to be addressed as we begin to emerge from lockdown into this 'new normal'.

For example, when DIY stores such as B&Q and Wickes were ordered to shut their physical stores, they implemented queuing systems for their websites to control customer numbers, and also shut the sites down

overnight to allow for restocking. These measures were put in place to maintain the ability to fulfil orders placed; as a house-bound public ramped up demand for DIY products, warehouses and delivery chains were hit with social distancing restrictions that reduced their throughput.

The online result was a very odd and sometimes frustrating user experience across those websites, compounded by open-ended and vague messaging. For example Ocado users have reported being kicked out of their website with no idea of when or if they will be let back in to claim a slot. Both cases highlight extraordinary measures to mitigate an extraordinary situation, but also highlight significant shortcomings in communication to users.

Despite this, users persevered, continuing to place orders and book deliveries. So people will put up with a lot in the short-term, especially in emergency circumstances. But as the situation eases and/or goes on for longer, such tolerance will be reduced. As we move into the next phase of Covid response, working to give your customers and users their genuine best experience will still be a good decision; probably one of the best ones you could make.

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For Your Business Strategy -
**Digital Transformation Is
Here To Stay**



For Your Business Strategy - Digital Transformation Is Here To Stay

The above examples highlight how organisations across all industries have had to adapt to a massive change in a very short amount of time. However, the path away from Covid-19 may be long and tricky to navigate. Social distancing measures are likely to remain in place, to varying extents, until either an effective vaccine is widely available or herd immunity has been achieved; neither of these are short-term effects.

The businesses that survive and thrive will be those that correctly assess and respond to these social changes. It is likely that these changes will evolve as the coronavirus situation evolves, so it will also be important that your business strategy is flexible enough to follow a moving target over the coming months and years.

After the forced transformation comes reconciliation

There can be little doubt that the worldwide lockdowns have radically accelerated digital transformations. In April 2020, Microsoft's CEO Satya Nadella commented that "[we've seen two years worth of digital transformation in two months](#)".

However this acceleration has really been seen in a few key areas, notably around working from home, that establish a short-term ability to conduct business as usual. They have been mostly reactive, not fully encompassing all aspects of a digital transformation. As Michael Wade of the IMD Business School notes, [digital transformations do not usually go](#)

[as smoothly as this](#), and the next stage of transformation is not likely to be as easy as this one.

It is hard to find similar circumstances, particularly in terms of the speed and scale of the changes. However there are some situations from which we can draw parallels. One of these is the British Army during the late 2000s.

Earlier in the decade, following the tragic events of 9/11 and the rise of global terrorist threats, the British Army fought in two wars: Afghanistan and Iraq. While the British Army was and is one of the best equipped in the world, its strategy had been guided more by the threat of war in Europe and the need for security in Northern Ireland. The challenges posed by Al Qaeda and the Taliban were in some key ways larger and different to those that the British Army had equipped itself for. For example, the Snatch Land Rovers that had been used for troop patrols in Northern Ireland were not effective against the roadside Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) used by Al Qaeda and the Taliban; sadly, this led to the death of British troops in an already controversial war. This placed the Army and the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) in a difficult situation.

Their response was to issue a series of Urgent Operational Requirements (UORs) for new equipment to counter these new threats and better safeguard their troops. This was outside the established strategy and procurement programme, but was needed to solve significant short-term problems. UORs were largely successful in their stated aims, but those aims were by definition short-term. When involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan scaled down, the MOD had to decide how to integrate these assets procured in a hurry into the strategic, planned, ongoing equipment

programme; some of which had a significant overlap with the UORs, for example in uninhabited air vehicles.

It is important to recognise that the British Army's situation does not approach the scale or speed of the changes due to the coronavirus, but we can draw some parallels from this.

In the short-term, you do what you need to do

We have already seen that many organisations can scramble to go digital in certain areas at relatively short notice. At this point, long-term strategies and trade-offs can take something of a back seat; in exceptional circumstances, you must secure the short-term to give the long-term a chance to exist. That doesn't mean that long-term aims are ignored, but the priority is to get through the short-term.

Quick assessments of the current situation and immediate future are needed, with the ability and appetite to make the best decisions that you can, as quickly as you can, with incomplete information. Given all those caveats, it is very easy to get one or more decisions wrong, so it is important to assess the effects and outcomes of the changes that have been made; to inspect and adapt as you go along. This is essential across all phases of a large-scale change, but in a situation that needs a rapid response it is easy to overlook.

[Good quality technical leadership](#) is invaluable at this stage, where knowledge of the digital products and services available (the art of the possible) can shorten the decision process and bring in good solutions quicker than otherwise.

As your situation starts to stabilise, re-evaluate where you are and what you want to achieve

The decisions and actions needed to secure the short-term future of your organisation may have led to compromises or unplanned accelerations in your digital strategy. You may well come out of this initial period with a mixture of systems that may or may not work with each other. Just as importantly, the processes and behaviours associated with using these systems are likely to have been somewhat hurried. But hopefully it has been enough to see you through the initial stage of the crisis and start to level off into a steady state (or at least a known state).

Yes, due to that hurried change some processes may be sub-optimal. But there may also be opportunities. The huge disruption has meant that in some cases, process guidelines may have had to be tweaked, modified or even thrown away, just to get the job done. There will likely have been a process of self-organisation as teams get to grips with a radically new situation, and this may have identified new and better ways of working, or highlighted inefficiencies in the old processes. These lessons must not be left behind as you come out of lockdown; it will be important for your teams and business to reflect on whether opportunities for improvement have emerged in this time, and then act on them.

Like the British Army, you may have acquired new systems or applications to fulfil a necessary role during the lockdown. There may be overlaps with current systems. Or an application was acquired during lockdown that partially (but not fully) achieves a longer-term goal. What should you do with these investments? The key to answering this question lies in your

digital strategy, which is fed by your overall business strategy - and where your applications and systems sit within both of these.

In this stabilising or steady state, you can start to look up and around at the state of your markets, customers, competitors and yourself. This may even be a good time to re-evaluate your company ambitions and assess whether the previous vision still holds up during and after a major event.

Review your strategy based not just on your aims, but on those of your customers too

It is highly likely that your customers will also have felt large changes during the lockdown, and these may well have repercussions coming out of it. For example, while some people will have missed a physical shopping experience, others may have been forced into online shopping and have been pleasantly surprised by that experience. There will be a balance between wanting to reclaim some of the old pleasures of life BC (Before Coronavirus), and the need to do this safely with social distancing and enhanced hygiene.

It is more important than ever to know your customers, to listen to them, to observe what they actually decide and do. What do your customers need and want right now? How can you best provide for this in the short-term, and in the potentially unclear long-term?

It will be more important than ever to continue to ask these questions - the exit from lockdown will continue to be phased, with relatively rapid changes in freedoms and constraints that will affect customer behaviour. You will also need to balance these changing needs with

your organisation's strengths. Your business strategy will need to find the overlaps between your strengths and your customers' needs and desires, and address them. From that, your digital strategy will focus on the digital and technology aspects of that overlap, in terms not only of products, but also services, delivery, and messaging.

Inspect and adapt

The activities and areas of focus covered here are not new, and many organisations may have been following a similar process to their digital and business strategies before the pandemic struck. However, the current turbulent circumstances have pushed the need for flexibility and responsiveness to the foreground, and placed a greater emphasis on short feedback loops and the ability to pivot if needed.

Rather than betting the house on a single long-term strategic vision as before, your business may have to pivot to making smaller bets, spread across a wider range of scenarios. It is then critical that you measure and follow the progress of those bets. You may be faced with a dilemma of failing and learning early, versus giving up too soon in a certain area. This is why gathering data and customer insight - and continually inspecting and adapting in response to this insight - is so important.

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In Conclusion



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For now, it is important to realise that large scale change has likely not stopped with the lockdown; it has probably only just started. The post-lockdown landscape is certain to look different to our accepted norms before the virus. This will be true for customers and staff, online and offline. Digital methods of business will be more important than previously. There will be changed expectations for customer journeys and staff practices, and these will be ever-shifting as lockdown constraints themselves evolve.

In other words: aspects of your business strategy are likely to need to change, and you will need to be able to follow a fast-moving target.

One thing is clear: if digital transformation was not high on your agenda before, then it should be now. The measures and technology you have put in place may be working satisfactorily (or even well) during the lockdown, but are they sustainable for consistent use into the future? If they are not, then you will need to prioritise a deliberate, swift, user-centric digital transformation to make the best of any opportunities on the way out of this pandemic.

This is the time that digital transformation comes of age, and eventually moves into digital evolution as businesses mature. It has been well-recognised that digital can form extra revenue streams for your business. What we have seen is that it is much more than that; it is now the lifeline for many businesses and deserves to be taken universally seriously.





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