Adapting to the Pandemic: How organizations adapt by going virtual

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ABSTRACT

In the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic many organizations have been faced with considering a partial or total transition to virtualized work environments to stay afloat in circumstances where traditional workplaces are impossible to maintain. But as the pandemic continues, there is increasing pressure for organizations that were not intending to stay virtualized to remain so. This whitepaper examines how adapting to virtualized workplace practices could be beneficial to an organization's growth or survival.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

This whitepaper is intended for owners, management, and other high level decision makers in organizations that currently operate in primarily in-person collaborative environments that are considering adopting a move to partial or fully virtualized organizational environment. Potential reasons may include seeing remote work as a strategy for competing in rapidly evolving industries, assessing whether remote work environments may provide cost-cutting benefits in terms of office space, improve quality of life and flexibility for current employees, and or to use as a potential selling point for recruiting and maintaining future talent where relocation is not an option.

PROBLEM SATEMENT

As a result of the 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations across many industries have had to rapidly adapt to a situation that has forced work collaboration to be done at a distance. Traditional forms of managing businesses through face-to-face meetings and chances interactions in the office gave way to communicating through video-conferencing and various forms of computer mediated communication. But as the pandemic drags on and organizations are attempting to push employees to return to the office and, many employees are rejecting this pressure from their management teams in what is being referred to in the media as the "Great resignation". This push to "business as usual" is often rooted in ideas about organizations being enclosed entities within a physical space. But if the "new

normal" of remote work in the pandemic has kept many businesses afloat, then what is the traditional management perspectives are missing and what can be learned from this forward-thinking companies that can help their own organizations survive and thrive?

BACKGROUND

To begin to understand what separates traditional organizations operating in physical spaces versus organizations operating in a virtual space, it is important to understand the elements of how organizations and communication relate to each other. Early perspectives in organizational communication identify communication as a process within a container, whereas more contemporary perspectives see that communication and organizing as a perpetual cycle where one creates and sustains the other (Taylor). From a traditional viewpoint the idea of communication happening within a container is a literal one: the office space is where the work and communication happens. In virtualized workplace environments however is where contemporary views of organizing communication can be easily seen at work.

Karl Weick (1979) was one of the early theorists of what would become to be known as communication as constructive to organizing (CCO) with his perspective of organizations being created out of communication and not vice versa. It is through the process of communication with others through messages that create roles, tasks, and manage relationships and resources that the structure of an organization takes shape; and then that organization structure then impacts the members of the organization through job functions that are assigned by the organization. This continuous process of organizations and members influencing each other is described by sociologist Anthony Giddens as a "duality of structure". Giddens' structuration theory identifies that a workplace is a structural reality created by its participants, and the rules crated to manage resources also create structures that can define the behaviors each member is permitted to do; and by participating as a member in a certain role doing those roles duties daily creates, recreates, and supports the organization (Taylor).

One model of understanding of how communication and organizations create and recreate each other is the Four Flows model (McPhee & Zaug, 2020). This model demonstrates that organizations have four continually active processes or "flows": Members of an organization negotiate their identities with their roles and interactions with others; Then the organization's considerations of its position in their environments alongside other organizations; The organizations then attempt to build an understanding of all these internal and external factors; and then the organization engages in activity coordination to strategize and execute tasks that fulfill the mission of the organization. All these processes occur in concert and "create" what an organization is, and the organizations identity in return shapes values, goals, and strategies.

With this perspective, it can be easier to understand how virtualized office environments can continue to be effective even with greatly reduced in-person interaction within a physical space. It is not the space itself that creates the environment for work and enables communication, but rather it has been one way in the past to facilitate the organizing and communicating process. Without the office environment these processes of organizing and communication can remain mostly intact, with current and advancing technology providing solutions to bridge the gap of shortcomings of working from home. While there may be concern with productivity drops in work from home environments, adaptation has occurred rapidly in this area with remote work productivity in mid-2021 rising 46% since the start of the pandemic in early 2020 (Davis, Ghent & Gregory, 2021).

Contemporary perspectives on management are highly focused on building and maintaining positive relationships between employees and with workplace environments. Human resource management perspectives were born out of a challenge to management styles that saw employees as interchangeable replaceable cogs in a machine and viewed that employee participation and feeling valued and contributors to be a preferred strategy in managing organizations and having better productivity outcomes (Hang, 2005). As such, it is important that organizations should be considering how a partial or total move to virtualized office spaces if its employees are requesting it. The benefits of a transition could

provide employers benefits such as more labor flexibility, access to new talent, and reduced office space costs; employees could benefit with increased flexibility, reduced commute costs, and more time to focus on work without interruptions. So how are ways that an organization can ease itself into transitioning to a more flexible work environment?

SOLUTIONS

Creation of virtual workplace collaborative environments

The most important question to start with when creating a virtual workspace is how the bulk of the communication within the organization is handled. Over the past decade there have been numerous commercial products aimed at helping organizations develop communication workflows for their day-to-day functions. Most notable among these software solutions are Slack and Microsoft word. Both collaborative tools provide environments where members in an organization can communicate via text or video and share resources such as files and projects. A benefit of these tools is that they can be utilized to help create, support, and reinforce organizational structures.

Members can be assigned roles and responsibilities that can be clearly identified through the organization and these assigned roles on the system can privilege or deny individuals from certain resources or tasks. This feature can be made to mirror existing hierarchies in the organization or create newer more flexible organizational structures that are organically arise out of loose organizations of interdependency (Taylor). Without the limitations of physical office spaces, many special collaborate spaces can be made for teams of employees with certain specialties to collaborate independently on specific projects.

Another benefit of having a collaboration platform with a variety of spaces for collaboration is the ability to allow for a more casual space for employees to converse and build relationships at "the water cooler". Building positive personal relationships can have a positive impact on employee morale (LMXs, Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), so it is important for organizations to allow spaces for members to

interact with each other on non-work levels to build those relationships that allow for stronger collaboration. An incidental benefit to allowing for interpersonal non-work-related interactions between members is that all interactions can be audited for review if there are accusations of improper behavior between members.

Creation of shared knowledge spaces

A benefit of leveraging technology in organizations is the capacity to store and access large amounts of data that can be easily accessed. This can be a boon for organizations that deal with large amounts of data like client databases, research, and other collaborate works. While many collaborative work tools already can share and collaborate on documents such as Microsoft Office and Google's Gsuite, there is a new and developing field of collaborate data management and building knowledge "centers" such as Notion or Microsoft Loop. Organizations that take the time to build out centers for organizational knowledge that are continuously maintained would greatly benefit by giving teams access to useful information needed to perform tasks or to help identify problems that could be solved. Established knowledge bases can take the rich experience and expertise of senior members and make that knowledge available to all, mitigating losses that key communicators provide in organizations (Taylor). In addition, knowledge bases would be a font of knowledge that onboarding employees could draw on to acclimate themselves to roles and culture of their organization. New members who experience more support in their onboarding process are more likely to remain within the organization (Taylor), thus a robust online knowledge base should be integrated into the education and onboarding process.

MEETING AGENDA

For a meeting to discuss this topic it should ideally take place in a virtualized environment to demonstrate an experience of how a virtualized work environment works in practice and should be no more than 30 minutes. This meeting would also explain and set expectations on what is expected in a virtualized work

environment with being brief and concise and leaning more towards conversation rather than listening to a one direction message that would have been best communicated in email.

Topics would include:

- Being mindful of what needs to be communicated and how to communicate it.
  - In a virtualized environment it may be tempting to have a hammer looking for a nail mindset in communicating to others; some messages are best communicated through collaborative platforms such as Slack or Microsoft Teams, and others with email.
  - Meetings should be conducted with identifying and solving situations collaboratively in mind. It becomes frustrating and demoralizing for employees when meetings do not feel collaborative, or decisive. (Boesch, 2017)
- Discussion of maintaining professionalism in a casual environment.
  - A more relaxed environment could lead some employees to become laxer in their attitudes about their work and potentially their workplace relationships. It is important to stress that while the environment is relaxed, professionalism and decorum must be always maintained to the same degree as in the office.
  - Strategies could be offered and discussed on how to stay in a "ready to work" mindset, such as maintaining getting ready for work rituals. This includes ensuring one's equipment is ready and functional, especially before events like meetings where a technological disruption could cause productivity and relationship issues (DeWine, p. 223, 2001)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this whitepaper examines some of the theoretical concepts in organizational communication that demonstrate contemporary understanding of how and why organizations that transition to virtualized work environments are able to sustain and thrive under extraordinary

circumstances by the concept that organizations and communication are interwoven processes and do not require a physical space to function at its fullest; but to be the most effective, there are strategies that can be utilized such as creating online collaborate spaces and organizational knowledge databases for members to draw on. Over time workplaces will continue negotiating what a "workplace" should be, but as the pandemic demonstrates, it is vital that organizations need be constantly aware and adaptive to the environment and current trends and technologies to survive and thrive.

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