Dunstan Thomas

Adapting To The New Office

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Just before Christmas I reflected on what a strange year 2020 was. In so many ways we were thrown in at the deep end when it came to remote working, with mixed results. Some industries were better placed to adapt, many had to contend with getting their workers connected and able to continue through lengthy lockdowns and restrictions.

2021 finds us still in a state of uncertainty. The future of the traditional office is therefore under existential threat. While the emergence of vaccines gives a sense of some normality being restored the need for remote working is only reinforced. The move to more of a hybrid part home / part office model is inevitable.

For those companies and industry types (consulting for example) with an inherent flexible working structure, this is less of an issue and one that can be adapted to readily. Some organizations found they were able to cope without expensive city offices, and even gained productivity in some areas without commute-weary staff having to expend energy travelling each day. Inevitably though some areas

that traditionally demanded office based activity were impacted, contact servicing as a primary example for many.

While some staff would have thrived in a home working environment, many have not and there is concern that the mental toll of isolated workers is yet to be fully appreciated. Family and home life, house or apartment size and connectivity all play a part in how remote working is experienced, but as with anything else, each person is different in how they need to interact with others on a daily basis. The sense of isolation and potential for cabin fever is significant.

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How we adapt to and embrace a more flexible "any where / any time" approach, will differentiate firms. This does pose some interesting challenges:

- **Collaboration:** While Teams / Zooms etc. allow the transactional connection and information sharing between people, and the likes of Atlassian, Azure, Clickup etc. aid collaboration there is more that can be done around real collaboration and empowering team effectiveness.

- **Creativity:** Few could argue that the "together while remote" model does impact on creativity and the spark of innovation. Empowerment and autonomy remain as crucial in our new virtual world as it has ever been. How we encourage and drive creativity / innovation amongst remote teams while not a new challenge, is becoming more material.

- **Connectivity / pastoral care:** The coffee machine chats etc. are a key missing facet of our new working model. Maintaining the interpersonal relationships will require some changes in both approach and methods.

There are limitations on what technology can currently achieve. The need for flexible, safe locations to work from collectively for specific purposes or projects remains important - and thus the concept of Hybrid Working has gained significant focus in the last nine months.

How this will manifest itself will depend on the business and its circumstance - hot desking will likely resume but will need to account for a more even split of office vs home. This has practical considerations around equipment - users will have a laptop and headset, but dependent on work activity, access to bigger/multiple screens is a reasonable expectation as an obvious example. Will companies look to include some form of equipment allowance for users, to purchase screens, desks and proper office chairs to comply with health and safety obligations? If a user is now expected to work from home more, does the same concept of an allowance apply to internet provision, allowing staff to upgrade their wifi to a minimum level for video and screen sharing?

At Dunstan Thomas we have been "virtual" from our inception, spending most of our time either on Client site, working from virtual offices etc. We have been able to share our experiences and techniques with a number of our Clients to help them drive innovative, light touch options to optimise delivery teams and increase collaboration, creativity and ultimately delivery cadence.

Over the next few weeks, we will share some of our experiences and areas you should consider in terms of approach and tooling. We'd love to hear your experiences too.