Work from anywhere
How to manage remote teams

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Abstract: Since the last pandemic which started in March 2020, a change in work environment, approach and style can be observed. From the moment of first responses to the COVID-19 virus to address the challenge, mitigate impact to the later management of organizations down to individuals and effective management and leadership, there has been a transformation across the board which was unpredicted. This paper aims to consolidate through literature research in the fields of change management, leadership and the hybrid office motion, the information that supported this transformation from an onsite to a remote interaction and highlight challenges, best practices, and potential future research opportunities.

Introduction

Working from anywhere and especially work from home has received a lot of attention during the past years and refers to work accomplished at a remote location (Allen et al., 2015) and is certainly not a new idea. The first transition to work away from an office started already in the early 1970s with the adoption of work-from home policies as a result of rising gasoline prices due to the OPEC oil embargo, which made commuting more expensive (Mitchell, 2010). Workers were given self-control of their schedules and were expected to come to the office only from time to time.

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So, it may not be seen only as an impact due to the pandemic, but can be initiated also through wars, national catastrophes, etc. This paper aims to review past and current scientific literature in the fields of change management, leadership and the hybrid office motion and highlight challenges, best practices, and potential future research opportunities.

When in the early 2000s internet access, broadband connectivity, cloud computing, etc. first supported out of the office productivity and increased the adoption of the work from anywhere model, we were also able to observe an increase in productivity. Choudhury (2020:4) reflects "that people should probably determine for themselves the situation (home or office) that fits them best".

When trying to understand the question: why working from home – several scholars explain that working from home increases and supports a better quality of life (Chattopadhyay, 2021; Choudhury, 2020; Felstead–Henseke, 2017; Gajendran–Harrison, 2007; Kelliher–Anderson, 2008) for the following reasons:

- Boosting job satisfaction, due to reduced travel time to an office and resulting in decreasing personal expenses on mobility.
- It can reduce turnover and absenteeism due to sickness.
- From a diversity point of view, women whose careers were previously limited by family duties or religious restrictions to travel can pursue their careers working from home.
- It supports employees dealing with immigration issues and other restrictions on their ability to secure good jobs, they can still work from their location until country specific requirements are met to relocate.

From an organizational point of view there are potential monetary benefits, because if there is a smaller number of in-office employees which then asks for less office space requirements. This leads to reduced real estate, energy costs or insurance fees (Choudhury, 2020), enabling companies to further invest such savings into hybrid work scenarios for their employees or as in present difficult economic times be able to hold their talent and not reduce their workforce.

Work from anywhere drives a global identity and expands the range of inclusiveness, allowing multiple individuals to see beyond their national differences and work together remotely as a team, but not in an office. Jackowska and Lauring (2021) state that the present workplace includes workers of different origins and with such potential cultural back-

ground can indubitably become an important role when it comes to attitudes towards colleagues and that such various cultural elements, substantially affect individual overall perceptions and cognition.

Pandemic impact and response

The only constant in life is change as "for everything flows" or πάντα ῥεῖ (panta rhei), based on a saying from the Greek philosopher Heraclitus circa 535–475 BC.

First reports of SARS-CoV-2 in December 2019 were of a new respiratory virus with only local impact, however the "ease of transmission, combined with a buoyant global economy and unparalleled mobility of the population escalated the virus to a significant threat" (Phillips, 2020:130). Almost 2 ½ years later November 2022, the WHO lists 6.5 million deaths and approximately 626 billion confirmed cases of COVID-19 (note: one person can have more than one infection) and highlights its significance.
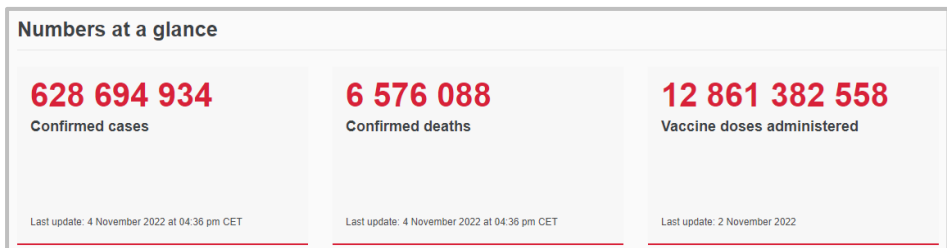
Numbers at a glance

628 694 934	**6 576 088**	**12 861 382 558**
Confirmed cases	Confirmed deaths	Vaccine doses administered
Last update: 4 November 2022 at 04:36 pm CET	Last update: 4 November 2022 at 04:36 pm CET	Last update: 2 November 2022

Figure 1: COVID-19 numbers

Source: World Health Organization, 2022

The unexpected rise of the pandemic resulted in multiple economic aftereffects, such as causing significant increase in people unemployment, large-scale changes to organizational operations, and substantial adjustments to work and management styles (Li et al., 2021). However, these aftereffects did not stop with the discovery of vaccinations, they pursue driving high inflation and reduction in workforce across industries.

As the crisis is still of concern, leaders require to continuously accelerate implementing change initiatives to respond to public safety and social needs, but also safety measures of employees in their workplaces, while also selling products and services to survive the time. The world collectively faced a global challenge as never seen before and can be defined as a "transdisciplinary societal challenge that requires coordinated systemic thinking and actions in the context of uncertainty" (Lawrence, 2020:583).

From a response perspective, in such a situation, multilevel governance is a fundamental requirement to be in place to address such a pandemic. However, progress was mainly illustrated by the incapacity of governments to listen and learn from scientific knowledge in the perspective of uncertainty and vulnerability (Lawrence, 2020). A coordinated alignment of interdisciplinary professional information, knowledge and understandings was maybe highly required, but many European countries reacted by following the spread of this virus rather than taking a proactive approach to prevention as warnings made by experts (Antia et al., 2003; Ferguson et al., 2001; Galvani, 2004) and this certainly did impact lives.
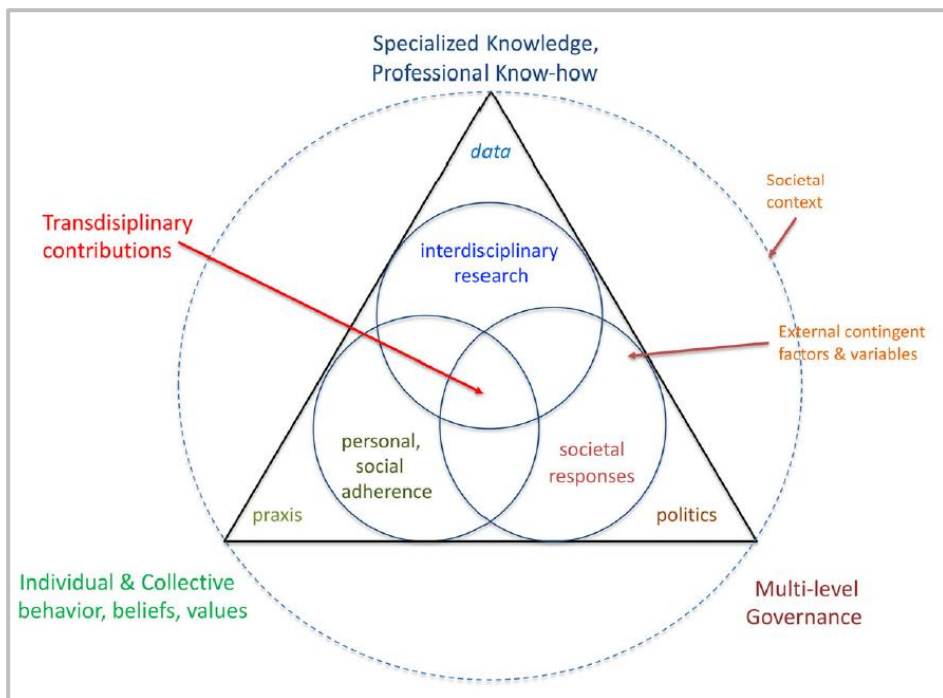

Figure 2: Effective responses to complexity and uncertainty of COVID-19

Source: Lawrence (2020:584)

There were several types of resources available for coordinated action Lawrence (2020) argues to address a systemic reactive response plan mobilizing administrative, behavioral, financial, health care, legal and medical resources. These necessary actions at numerous geo-political levels, unfortunately did land in an uncoordinated approach. Although, some

guidance was endorsed by the WHO such as isolation, quarantine, social distancing, testing or simply washing hands, whereas others were not (e.g., wearing masks in public spaces). Only such coordinated combinations of interdisciplinary and professional information and knowledge sharing (*figure 2*), as well as individual and social perceptions and understandings were necessary to consolidate understandings to be applied into a plan to allocate necessary resources to activate effective responses (Lawrence, 2020; Tandon, 2020; Zarocostas, 2020).

A coordinated mixture of interdisciplinary information and knowledge, professional know-how and individual and social perceptions and understandings have always been necessary. Only when a broad understanding of implications or effects are evident, they can be applied to support and define another requirement to respond to such a pandemic: the appropriate allocation of many types of resources (e.g., administrative, financial, human, material, medical, pharmaceutical and scientific) necessary to implement effective responses (Lawrence, 2020). This confirms also another critical necessity: access to as many types of resources when and where required.

Various researchers list another important requirement to endure such a situation: the adherence to updated and new behavioral norms and regulations introduced by national and local governments (Lawrence, 2020; Pisano et al., 2020). These regulations certainly represented compromises and trade-offs between personal responsibility and freedom, as well as an important collective choice made in how to respond to threads to health, social and economic existence in context of uncertainty and vulnerability (Maital–Barzani, 2020), but proven to be necessary.

So far it confirms that our existence and health are severely influenced by the biological, ecological, financial, political and cultural environment in which we live. By responding to the pandemic outbreak and the resilience of many countries and cities to counteract global threats was another phenomenon observed, just because they "lost their capacity to act autonomously after becoming subservient to global production processes and trade with foreign countries in international markets (e.g., dependent on imported face masks, pharmaceutical products and ventilators from abroad to meet national demand)" as stated by Lawrence (2020:585). Therefore, any individual expressions of nationalism and autonomy become rapidly redundant in a global pandemic as it is not held back by

closed national borders. Even so, this pandemic had even more conse-quences for people while adjusting to lockdowns and enforced working from home. It created a new, but particularly challenging work environ-ment, and disrupted the way most people used to work and connect (Jackowska–Lauring, 2021).

Leading change in difficult times

The pandemic and associated challenges caused business to lessen their capacity (Craven et al., 2020) and accelerated the work from home model. It also stressed organizational operations, roles and responsibilities, val-ues, culture and modus operandi involving leadership style and practice.

Looking at leadership it can be characterized as a process of commu-nication, motivating, influencing and encouraging individuals to act with the aim of achieving collective shared aspirations and objectives (Bennis–Nanus, 1985; Kotter, 1990; Kouzes–Posner, 1993).

This highlights a dichotomy between management and leadership. Management is premised on planning and controlling, as well as achiev-ing targets versus leadership building inspiration, motivation and espe-cially a vision (Kotter, 1990; Northouse, 2021). Additionally, we can dif-ferentiate, transformational leadership with capacity building, inspiration, motivation and shared goal accomplishment, versus transactional leader-ship focusing on leader-team exchange and commodification of relations (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978).

It is alleged that effective leadership enables managing change suc-cessfully in critical times, which can result in a successful organizational transformation (Kotter, 1996). Therefore, effective or transformational leaders are vital for any change process (Ainscow, 2007; Burns, 1978; Northouse, 2021), but also need to have the important capacity of time and resources available to them. As a leader driving change management through motivating employees to go the extra mile, investing organiza-tional effectiveness, evolving stakeholder commitment in order to address challenges of the pandemic (Bass–Avolio, 1994; Rees, 2018), is best driven by all those impacted working collaboratively and creating a cul-ture of collaboration, trust, motivation, and effective leadership.

Uncertainty and rising intensity drive any leadership decision to have a major impact on leader-employee dynamics (Craven et al., 2020) and is

often taken to be an essentially disputed notion (Northouse, 2021). Therefore, leadership resonates with building trust, loyalty, collegiality and motivation with employees and stakeholders to achieve the collective vision and objectives (Yukl, 2012) and suggests the ability to influence others to push change through the leader's personal example, qualities and contributions towards the change goal (Bennis–Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978; Northouse, 2021).

Covey (2013) argues that an effective leader is seen as an integral part of the collective success, while the overall organization develops through effectiveness and change process, as well as leader-employee dynamics or stakeholder trust and commitment (Rees, 2018).

Summarizing one can state, "effective leadership is correlative of transformational leadership", (Ibeawuchi et al., 2021:14). Achieving such things in a remote and virtual organizational environment is challenging, but effective leadership can take a greater effort in connecting people and acting without self-interest and to rise above any challenges (Kotter, 1990). Additionally, effective leadership must at the same time focus on result-oriented leadership methods and practices rather than attention on role, functions and structure (Rees, 2018).

Kouzes and Posner (1993) argue that organizational culture and values represent a moral compass which leads decision making processes and (leadership) actions; they are as Ibeawuchi writes (2021:15) "ineluctably the bases that provide equilibrium during crisis, chaos and transformation".

The significance of values and/or culture can also not be neglected and can be facilitated through effective leadership as some scholars highlight correctly in their publications (Hofstede, 1984; Kotter, 1996; Schein, 2010).

Based on an analysis on leadership undertaken by Ibeawuchi et al. (2021) leaders share three main principles and frameworks to succeed in uncertain times:

- Leading compassionately refers to a deep conscious recognition of difficulties and challenges that employees face in an anxiety-laden context.
- Leading authentically makes it the core component of leading effectively, advocating relational transparency, openness and genuine actions.

- Leading adaptively and democratically. "The crop of leaders needed at the moment are those who have the humility to understand and appreciate that they do have possess all the answers to deal with the current state of affairs engendered by the pandemic. This also entails that both leaders and followers (partners) have to work collaboratively to share the responsibility of finding imperfect solutions, while recognizing that it may well take a long time, with some process of trial and error to find "best" solutions", (Ibeawuchi et al., 2021:18). Democratizing by empowering people, engagement and debate and dialog to get rid of mistrust and suspicion.

McKinsey and Company (Craven et al., 2020) published a paper just three months into the pandemic to provide guidance on what leadership should focus on to sustain their businesses through the pandemic. They list the following things which remain relevant:

- Protecting employees as business as usual is not an option. Development of execution plans to support employees which are consistent with local policies and communicating clearly and frequently.
- Set-up of cross-functional response teams where individuals step out of their day-to-day roles and dedicate their time to pandemic response scenarios.
- Ensuring liquidity is sufficient to weather the storm and have financial models in place to react to sparks that might significantly impair liquidity.
- Stabilizing the supply chain and managing supplements for products that can see unusual spikes in demand due to public hoarding until supply comes back.
- Staying close to customers by investing in core customer segments and anticipating their behaviors.
- Practicing the plan: many leadership teams do not invest enough or any time in understanding what it takes to plan for disruptions until they happen.
- Businesses demonstrate purpose as their strength resembles the communities of which they are a part of.

Collaboration and communication

There is no doubt the pandemic accelerated digital transformation of organizations, the adoption of remote working and led to a critical need for frequent and quality communication between organizational management and employees (Connley et al., 2020). Such crucial situations necessitate exceptional tasks and organizations need to adjust and improve external and internal operations to manage their workforce. Shin et al. (2012) mention that in order to successfully execute and especially implement changes while reducing negative pushback a profound understanding of employee's thinking and behavior is necessary. Unplanned change can cause issues and lead to uncertainties for employees, including resistance, resentment, and disengagement (Oreg et al., 2018).

The right tone and plan in communications during change in general, has long been acknowledged by many researchers (Barrett, 2002; Hiatt, 2006; Johansson–Heide, 2008; Kotter, 1996; Kotter et al., 2021) as a fundamental determinant of how change is understood, interpreted, and managed by employees and especially its role in strategic internal vision making (Yue et al., 2019). To overcome resistance, decrease uncertainty, and support employees to embrace change, Elving (2005) suggested that organizations must communicate about the need, the process of and the subsequent impacts of the change, similar to Kotter (1996).

But when employees are working remotely, synchronous communication becomes more challenging, and organizations therefore need to get comfortable with an asynchronous communication approach (Choudhury, 2020).

On one hand communication on the other hand collaboration, not to forget that distributed colleagues cannot tap one another on the shoulder to ask questions or get help, Hobsbawm (2021:25) argues "in a world dominated more and more as it will be by teleworking and intermittent physical presence, technology is definitely shifting from just being productivity-focused to collaboration-focused... and the ability to network without travel has enabled connections which would never have happened in an offline world".

Management approaches

Managing a chance project is never a vanilla strategy (Kim–Mauborgne, 2014) approach, because already assessing the status quo of her you start will provide multiple viewpoints of people involved, requirements, etc. nor will there be an immediate agreement on objectives of stakeholders involved. Adding on this, lack of adequate time for planning and operations, flexibility and it's agility to pursue towards a specific goal and then added the prerequisite for communication skills, all form hurdles to overcome when changes and already existing threats face an organization (Meaney–Pung, 2008).

Change also requires adjustment of an organization's central operations cohort, it triggers a series of different novel events with then a possibility of the exposure of weaknesses and uncertainty and treats (Rafferty–Griffin, 2006). Strebel (1992) mentions that change is in general neither wanted nor welcomed. It upsets through disruption the overall equilibrium of an environment.

When trying to justify the necessity for change (before it starts) modern change management literature shares the following areas of interest to consider

- to legitimize the need for change (Burnes, 2004; Eccles, 1994; Kotter, 1996, 2019; Kotter et al., 2021; Paton–McCalman, 2008; Pugh, 1993)
- to create a shared vision (Kotter, 1996; Kotter et al., 2006)
- to activating a change team (Goss–Pascale, 1993; Kotter, 1996; Schech-Storz, 2013)
- wide communication of the change (Eccles, 1994; Hiatt, 2006; Lowery, 2010)

Each of the above perspectives can be found in any practical real-life change management activity and the importance in them is to not neglect their significance of impact when beginning a chance project or process.

However, although there is much disagreement in approach, models and considerations before a change actually begins, but there is one significant agreement across many researchers – that change comes with resistance (Eccles, 1994; Kanter, 2003), but which makes management commitment also essential. In regards of commitment, Kotter (1996) highlights the importance to create a sense of urgency to support the development of a guiding coalition within top management. This does require strong support through leadership actions i.e., behavior, communication

and guiding policies (Duck, 1993; Kotter, 2019). Also raising quick wins and sharing these broadly for supporting the change transformation (Eccles, 1994; Holland, 2000) is as important as managing the usual casualties as part of the process. Encouraging impacted individuals to encouraging to express their objections throughout the process (Pugh, 1993) before and avoiding them going underground through effective content management (Goss–Pascale, 1993) can help in avoiding resistance. Hence throughout the process, change needs to be monitored, evaluated and once completed and implemented performance and progress needs to be followed and tracked to ensure there is no fall back into old habits impacting the organization in a negative way (Burnes, 2004; Cameron–Green, 2019; Pugh, 1993).

"Prescriptive management processes for introducing change are designed to create a strong coalition around a shared view of the future and dissatisfaction with the current status of the organization. This is sometimes combined with actions to reduce the resistance to change, although many of the techniques focus on communicating the reason why the change is necessary" (Bourne et al., 2003:252).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of working from anywhere, including work from home, has gained significant attention in recent years. While it is not a new idea, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated its adoption and highlighted its potential benefits and challenges. Prior to the pandemic, advancements in technology, such as internet access and cloud computing, had already enabled increased productivity and flexibility in remote work settings.

Working from home has been found to enhance job satisfaction, reduce turnover and absenteeism, promote diversity and inclusion, and support individuals facing immigration or other restrictions. From an organizational perspective, it can lead to cost savings by reducing office space requirements. Moreover, remote work allows for global collaboration and inclusiveness, transcending national boundaries and cultural differences.

The pandemic has had a profound impact on the world, causing significant economic disruptions and changes to work and management styles. Governments and organizations have faced the challenge of re-

sponding effectively to the crisis, with varying degrees of success. Coordinated and interdisciplinary approaches, along with the allocation of necessary resources, have been crucial in combating the virus and minimizing its effects.

Effective leadership has played a critical role in navigating these difficult times. Leaders who demonstrate compassion, authenticity, adaptability, and democratic decision-making have been better equipped to lead their organizations through uncertainty. Unfortunately, most organizations do not have much leadership, because of the approach and thinking to "manage change". The importance of organizational culture and values cannot be underestimated, as they provide a moral compass and guide decision-making processes.

Communication and collaboration have also been essential during times of change. Clear and frequent communication between leaders and employees has helped in managing the workforce and reducing resistance to change. Understanding employee perspectives and behavior has been crucial in successfully implementing and executing changes.

The pandemic has accelerated digital transformation and emphasized the need for effective communication and collaboration in remote work settings. Organizations have had to adapt their operations and find ways to engage and support their employees in this new work environment.

In conclusion, the research highlights the significance of working from anywhere, the impact of the pandemic on work dynamics, the role of leadership in times of crisis, and the importance of communication and collaboration during change. Future research can further explore these topics and identify best practices and strategies for managing remote work and organizational change effectively.

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