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emergence



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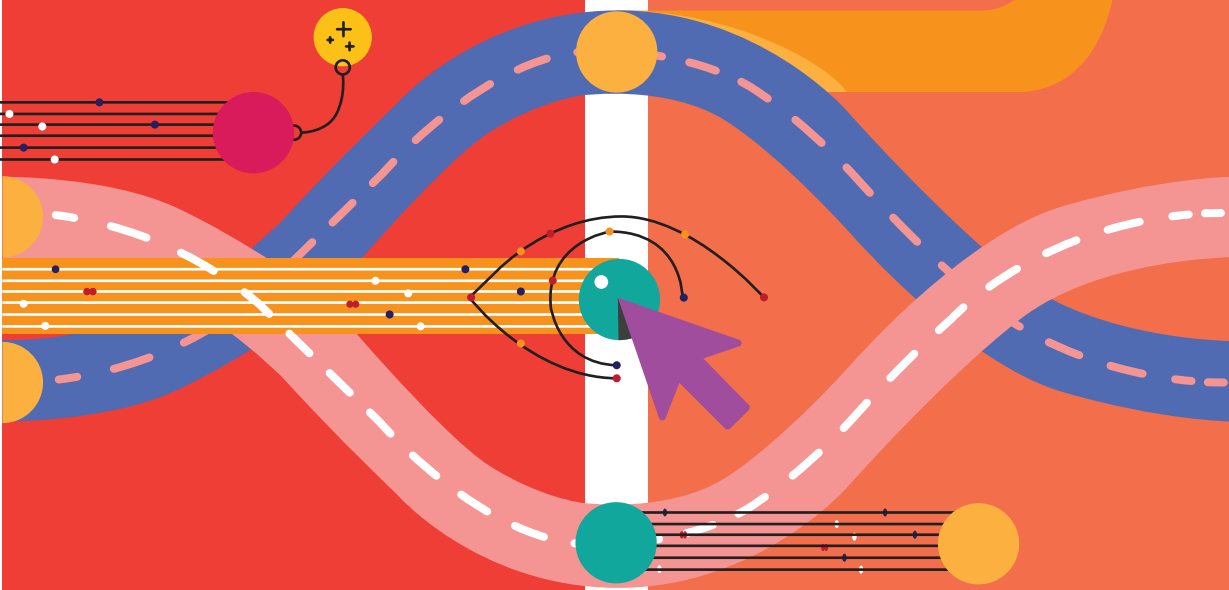
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MANAGING EDITOR & PUBLISHER

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GUEST EDITOR

Kevin Empey

DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT & EDITING TEAM

BAI Editorial Team:
N.T. Fawal
Nyssa Zelman

CONTENT EDITOR

Christopher Hayes-Kossmann

DIGITAL PRODUCER

Christopher Morales

LEAD DESIGNER

Milena Stankovic

COVER DESIGN

Milena Stankovic

TYPESET, PRINTING & PUBLISHING

QLEVIO

ADVERTISING & SALES

Business Agility Institute

MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS

QLEVIO

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New York, NY 10011

email

hello@qlevio.com

web

qlevio.com

businessagility.institute/emergence

issue theme

rethinking work and the workplace

In his book, *The Second Machine Age*, MIT professor Erik Brynjolfsson describes a future in which machines are becoming increasingly capable of performing many tasks that have traditionally been done by human beings. This trend is already well underway, and it is transforming the nature of work and the workplace.

In the past, work was often physical and repetitive, and it could be done by people with little education or training. But as machines have become more sophisticated, they have increasingly replaced humans in performing these tasks. Today, many jobs require higher levels of education and training, and they are often more creative and challenging.

The workplace is also changing. In the past, work was often done in factories or offices, but today it is increasingly being done remotely, through telecommuting and other forms of flexible work arrangements.

These changes have profound implications for individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. They are raising important questions about the future of work and the workplace. What will work be like in the future? What will the workplace of the future look like? How can we best prepare for these changes?

These are just some of the questions that we will be exploring in this issue of *Emergence*. We hope that you will find it to be an interesting and thought-provoking read.

We hope you enjoy this issue of *Emergence*!

Manoj Khanna
Managing Editor & Publisher

Forget the New Normal, Find the New Awesome

Matias Nino

For years, we've heard the warnings: Volatility, Uncertainty, Change, and Ambiguity are pervading the world of work and all business landscapes! Technology has made domains that were once either simple or complicated into either complex or chaotic! The long-term sustainability of everything is uncertain! We must transform from the traditional ways of working to new Agile ways! "Change or Die" must become the mantra of businesses, schools, governments, militaries, or practically any organization involving humans needing to coordinate effective action!

These warnings all culminated in the "Great Coronavirus Pandemic", where every facet of the world was disrupted, and everyone was forced to find new ways to live, work, love, and interact.

Technology, once the great driver of disruption, suddenly became the great enabler of continuity, connection, and opportunity. Digital Transformation—the movement to

adopt digital technology in order to replace the physical with the virtual—saw an exponential increase in demand across all sectors and walks of life. A record number of people began leaving their jobs to seek better careers and places to work¹. No one could deny that this great disruption was a golden opportunity to reimagine and rethink the world of work for the better. The boundaries of time, location, and space could finally be broken down en masse. Remotely adapted individuals could now choose the best job and workplace that matched their purpose and preferences, and businesses could in turn tap into better talent to suit their values and mission. It's a win-win!

However, the shift in knowledge work from an in-person, location-based experience to a remote digital experience was largely a wash². While we gained productivity by eliminating procedures such as long commutes, excessive in-person meetings, and

physical constraints, we lost as much from workforce disengagement, supply-chain disruption, and remote work fatigue. How is it possible that such a universal movement to embrace and use technology did not definitively lead us to a panacea for a fitter, happier, more productive workplace?

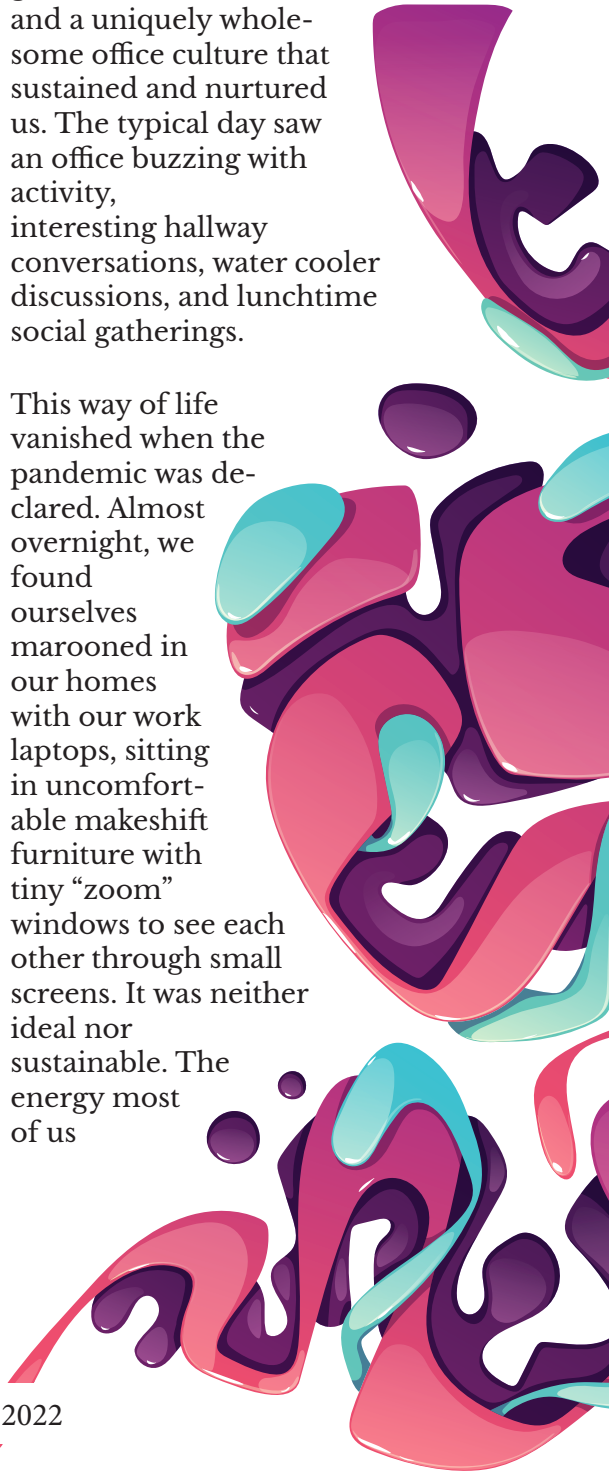
The harsh reality is that new technology is messy, highly prone to failure, and rarely fit for purpose in its early stages. It takes an extensive amount of time and feedback to work out the kinks, and even more time to incorporate it into habitual usage. In addition, by the time a specific technology becomes widely adopted, it usually gets replaced by something better and altogether different. The “New Normal” of the pandemic gave us, if anything, a rare chance to experience this cycle firsthand from sprint zero. Technology and human behavior were on a date with destiny. And our destiny was the workplace of the future.


The story of this article is the story of how my colleagues and I, all employees of a typical mid-sized gov-tech business in Washington DC, embarked on a journey to not just establish the “New Normal” but to also discover the “New Awesome” and inevitably struggle with the “New Failure”.

Prior to the pandemic, we worked in what could be considered a thriving collaborative workplace. Rated a “Top Workplace” in the DC Area by the Washington Post³, each employee enjoyed daily

in-person interactions, collaborative problem solving on whiteboards, a caves-and-commons⁴ office environment filled with information radiators⁵, team conference rooms, game rooms, cafeterias, and a uniquely wholesome office culture that sustained and nurtured us. The typical day saw an office buzzing with activity, interesting hallway conversations, water cooler discussions, and lunchtime social gatherings.

This way of life vanished when the pandemic was declared. Almost overnight, we found ourselves marooned in our homes with our work laptops, sitting in uncomfortable makeshift furniture with tiny “zoom” windows to see each other through small screens. It was neither ideal nor sustainable. The energy most of us





gained from eliminating the average 90 minute commute was very easily consumed by the struggles of learning how to metaphorically walk again with our new virtual work legs. Something had to give.

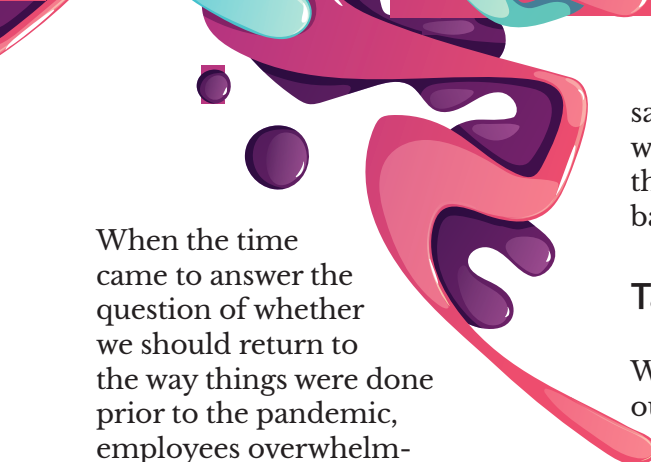
Thankfully, our working culture had one saving grace that translated unscathed from in-person to remote: the habit of relentlessly experimenting with new and better ways of working across the company. This was espoused by company leadership for years as a core value, and practiced both at the individual and organizational level by running experiments, proving their effectiveness, and championing their adoption—be it a new technology, policy, tool, process, habit, practice, or workplace ritual. If it made a difference in the lives of individuals, teams, or our customers, it was worth pursuing.

As the shock of the lockdown settled into a steady state, our journey of workplace transformation began to take shape by applying these experiments to our new remote working environment. The first things to emerge were the platforms, technologies, tools, and accoutrements that worked best in this new mode of working: ergonomic home office configurations, team collaboration tools, personal productivity gadgets, group chat platforms, high-definition webcams, and condenser microphones⁶. Some folks even sprung for backdrop whiteboards on wheels. These were followed by new workplace practices,

habits, activities, ceremonies, and even traditions that wove themselves into the fabric of our new remote working culture.

This journey of transformation, however, was not without its share of casualties. We lost many longtime employees, and many of the people hired to replace them also ended up leaving within 90 days. We nearly lost entire contracts whose requirements and expectations were never adjusted to accommodate for this new mode of working. As we struggled to overcome these challenges, a great deal of our experiments just didn't work out. But the perseverance of our learning culture combined with leadership top-cover from failure, led us towards instituting important lessons and approaches that proved to be enduringly effective.

As the pandemic ran its course, improvements slowly began making their way into the habits and practices of our remote workplace environment and culture. Our net promoter scores for workplace happiness slowly began regaining some semblance of their pre-pandemic levels, and eventually we regained that culture of work that made us feel connected, engaged, nurtured, sustained, and in control of our destiny. When the eventual in-person events began to take place, the overwhelming sentiment was one of relief, but not without the realization that things would never be quite the same.



When the time came to answer the question of whether we should return to the way things were done prior to the pandemic, employees overwhelmingly opted for a hybrid mode of operation. Most work activities would occur virtually in remote settings, but some key activities and events would be in-person. For example, activities such as creating work-product, building software, daily coordination, and collaborative screen-sharing were suggested as better suited for remote work while activities such as team kick-starts, retrospectives, post-mortems, and social mixers were recommended for in-person.

As we now prepare to embark on this new phase of our journey, I leave you with a few of the lessons we learned. These were vetted through frequent retrospective reflection and collectively shared across teams to serve as guidance and ideas for further experimentation. I hope they may be of value to you as we reimagine the workplace of the future:

Overreacting and Overcompensating

When we encountered undesirable outcomes, the inclination was to overcompensate. Working in a newly stressful and draining environment often tends to cause decisions and actions to be more rash than neces-

sary. Acknowledging this tendency was an important “ah-ha!” moment that allowed us to build measures to balance it.

Take More Time With Hiring

When we are stressed and drained, our judgment becomes poor and rushed. In a workplace that strives to protect and promote its healthy working culture, the hiring process is perhaps the most important aspect to get right. This area received a great deal of care and attention, and saw several mechanisms added to ensure due process and comprehensive observation by a diverse audience.

There Is No One-Size-Fits-All

What worked here may not necessarily work there. Teams are as diverse as the biomes on Earth. Don't assume that because you have invented a new form of transportation that effectively traverses a desert it will be as effective traversing a muddy swamp. Never discount the need to re-prove and re-validate practices through feedback, even if it has already worked in a prior context.

Avoid Meeting Overkill

The incredible ease with which we were suddenly able to create remote meeting invitations with automatic built-in video conferencing led to an epidemic of unworthwhile

meetings. These meetings weren't just low-value, they did actual harm by draining energy, promoting a mindset of mediocrity, and taking time away from more valuable activities. This topic is an article in and of itself so I will leave you with one tip: Give people permission to excuse themselves from or decline any meeting without any justification.

Sharing Video in Conference Call Sessions:

Avoid setting blanket rules like “everyone must always share video no matter what”. Instead, give people guidelines and tips on how to effectively share their video situationally during sessions. In cases where it is not specifically required, invite people to share video anyway to give the activity an added depth of interaction. Research shows that people are more likely to retain information gained from face-to-face interactions than from voice-only interactions⁷.

Frequent 30-minute 1-on-1's

We call these “Connect” calls, where individuals schedule regular weekly or bi-weekly face-to-face video calls with their peers, managers, or even random work colleagues. No specific agendas are required other than to talk about anything that is pressing, interesting, or enjoyable. These proved to be reliable catalysts for desired outcomes.

Periodic In-Person Workshops

Getting teams together in-person for half-day workshops or outings resulted in higher morale, improved communication, and more appetite for change. These workshops were typically centered around kick-starting a new team, inspecting and adapting, conducting a retrospective exercise on a recent project outcome, running a learning session, or even a team outing like a social mixer to help people better know one another.

Welcomes and Send-Offs

These originally started as “virtual happy hours” where everyone would hop on a video call to welcome a newly hired colleague or say their farewells to a long-time colleague who was departing for a new job. They gave people a sense of connection to their colleagues as well as some much-needed lighthearted time spent recalling memories or getting to know one another better. As soon as pandemic protocols allowed for in-person gatherings, these were some of the first activities that switched to in-person meetings at local restaurants, pubs, or gathering halls.

Incorporating Trivia Games in Long Informational Meetings

Maintaining attention and focus during long information meetings

with no group interactions was even more draining remotely than in person. One of our scrum masters came up with a practice that spread like wildfire: Incorporate Trivia games into online meetings. With the simple sharing of a link, you can inject interactive engagement into any meeting by turning it into a game of knowledge retention.

Asynchronous Surveys, Polls, and Pulse Checks

Surveys became critical for us during the pandemic, allowing for the continuous gathering of a group's desires and feelings. Gauging sentiment, consensus, and preference has a slew of benefits for both large and small groups alike: they can bring focus to what needs attention, save time by eliminating the need for verbal inquiry, and promote a shared understanding. Be careful to avoid desensitization from overuse and always ensure there is action being taken from the feedback.


Raise Awareness Through All Channels


Multi-channel communications proved to be amazingly more sticky than the standard email announcement. For any announcement or group communication, employ a multiple of the following: Email it, post to a group chat, make a blog entry, send a tweet, make up and include a meme, or even record a quick selfie video about it.


As I ponder over these learnings and the amount of time, effort, and struggle that went into realizing them, I cannot help but think: what would I do differently if I could experience the pandemic all over again? For me, the answer is simple: focus on things that generate connections and real conversations, shifting consciousness from the mundane to the emergent on a daily basis. These things fine tune us for adaptation, and make us best suited for dealing with that most inescapable of phenomena: change.





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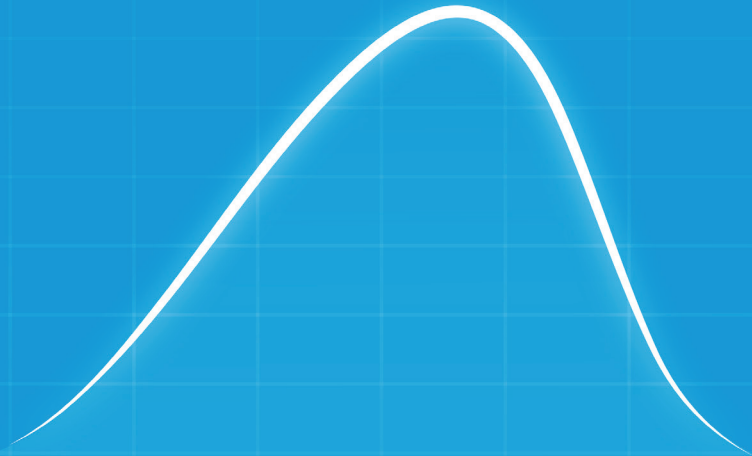
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