How the "New" New Normal Working Life Post COVID-19 Could Work to Trigger Creative Solutions of Future Work

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Before the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, physical work and education on site on the university campus were considered superior to equivalent activities conducted digitally or remotely. Despite being significantly digitally mature, many organizations did not consider or even permit digital or hybrid participation in meetings and education. In March 2020, the lockdown following the pandemic caused the transition of many organizations and most universities to online-only operation in record time. Often, this occurred while maintaining quality and production, even if some aspects relating to the user experience were lost. But after that something else happened…

Related research

The workplace changed substantially as an effect of the pandemic. Prior to the COVID-19, pandemic, according to a study by Bloom (2020), no more than 5% of Americans worked from home more than three days per week, whereas it is estimated that by April 2020 as many as 37% of Americans were working from home full-time.

In the USA it has been estimated that the pandemic led to 60 million fewer commuting hours per day (Barrero, Bloom & Davis, 2020), resulting in a saving of 9 billion working hours during the first 7-month period of the pandemic. In their survey on how Americans use time saved by working from home, Americans devote approximately 35% of the time savings to their primary jobs and about 60% to work activities of all sorts, including household chores and child care. The effects of remote work on collaboration among information workers and what effects working remotely would have on work patterns once the COVID-19 pandemic was over, has also recently been studied by Yang et al (2022) by analyzing data describing the work patterns of Microsoft employees both before and after Microsoft's firm-wide work from home mandate in March 2020. They concluded that the shift to remote work caused the formal business groups and informal communities within Microsoft to become less interconnected and more siloed. Further, the remote work caused the cross-group collaboration time to drop by about 25% of the pre-pandemic level. The shift to firm-wide remote work increased unscheduled call hours but decreased total meetings and call hours by 5% of their pre-pandemic level. It also increased asynchronous communication, like email and IM and the shift to less 'rich' communication media may have made it more difficult for workers to convey and process complex information (Yang et al, 2022).

Microsoft (2021) has drawn their own conclusions from the research, among other things claiming that, "Flexible work is here to stay." Employees want the best of both worlds: over 70 percent of workers want flexible remote work options to continue, while over 65 percent are craving more in-person time with their teams. To prepare, 66 percent of business decision makers are considering redesigning physical spaces to better accommodate hybrid work environments. The data is clear: extreme flexibility and hybrid work will define the post-pandemic workplace. In the survey Microsoft (2021), self-assessed productivity remained the

same or higher for many employees (82 percent) over the past year, but at a human cost. One in five global survey respondents said their employer doesn't care about their work-life balance, fifty-four percent felt overworked, thirty-nine percent felt exhausted, and trillions of productivity signals from Microsoft 365 quantify the precise digital exhaustion workers are feeling. The detailed data is also interesting:

- Time spent in Microsoft Teams meetings has more than doubled (2.5x) globally and, aside from a holiday dip in December, continues to climb.
- The average meeting is 10 minutes longer, increasing from 35 to 45 minutes.
- The average Teams user is sending 45 percent more chats per week and 42 percent more chats per person after hours, with chats per week still on the rise.
- The number of emails delivered to commercial and education customers in February, when compared to the same month the previous year, is up by 40.6 billion.

In addition, we have seen a 66 percent increase in the number of people working on documents.

As an effect of this, "We discovered that excessive cooperation, lack of uninterrupted focus, fewer breaks during the working day and skipping breaks were the main driving forces behind the reduced balance between work and leisure," said Dawn Klinghoffer in Harvard Business Review as a comment on these results (Klinghoffer, 2021).

Multitasking has become even more important as a consequence of the pandemic. In one of the most comprehensive studies of remote meeting multitasking behavior through an analysis of a large-scale telemetry dataset collected from February to May 2020 of U.S. Microsoft employees and a 715-person diary study (Cao et al., 2021) the results demonstrate that intrinsic meeting characteristics such as size, length, time, and type, significantly correlate with the extent to which people multitask, and multitasking can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. The findings suggest important best-practice guidelines for remote meetings (e.g., avoid important meetings in the morning) and design implications for productivity tools (e.g., support positive remote multitasking).

The pandemic, and particularly the situation of working from home, has had an enormous effect on how work has transformed and puts a particular strain on work environment issues. There are few studies analyzing the effects on the development of the IT-systems on the work environment (Sandblad et al. 2003), on how the digitalization is affecting the work environment (Sandblad et al, 2018) and how to conduct inspections of the digital work environment (Gulliksen, 2021).

The framework
We have in on-going research [Gulliksen, Lilliesköld & Stenbom, forthcoming] distinguished different phases of digital work and education before, during and after the pandemic:
1. **The Pre-Pandemic Phase**, in general a work environment based on physical offices and meetings, rarely making efficient use of digital meetings.
2. **The Emergency Remote Phase**, representing the acute adaptation to the conditions required by the COVID-19 pandemic where all activities, as far as possible was to be conducted on-line where the physical meetings were cancelled.
3. **The New Normal**, represents the situation when the emergency adaptations were seen to become the standard ways of working, where the working days were completely filled with digital meetings, even replacing the activities previously handled by a telephone call or just by bumping into each other at work.
4. **The Slow Acceptance Phase**, where people were starting to realize that they could no longer postpone activities to after the pandemic and realized the need to start developing new ways of working where the digital format was given, but with new collaboration philosophies using new online collaboration tools and methods.

5. **The Dividing Phase**, or what we refer to as **The "New" New Normal**. In this phase it looks like it will be a battle between three perspectives;
   a. those who are looking to get back to the pre-pandemic conditions,
   b. those living in The New Normal, and
   c. those actively analyzing the lessons learned and aiming for The Thoughtful Blended Phase.

When the COVID-19 pandemic has stopped being labelled as a dangerous pandemic for the society and companies and businesses start going back to normal ways of working, we can see many different strategies. Some companies have realized that they no longer need their facilities and are totally able to handle their business with only digital meeting rooms for all work and when needing to gather staff physically (on rare occasions) commercial conference sites are being used. Other organizations have suffered during the pandemic and desperately wants to get back to how it was before the pandemic and has thus decided on company policies that means that everybody needs to be physically present at the job site the majority of the time. The thoughtful blended phase means realizing that hybrid ways of working will be the new normal. Hybrid meetings have been criticized by many because of the lack of equality and participant engagement in the meetings. However, there are examples where they have managed to get good hybrid meetings to work well, but it requires a dedicated leadership, bullet-proof technology and internet connections and physical rooms designed for and furnished and equipped for the hybrid work situation.

Solutions
There are several areas that needs to be further researched and explored to understand what the future of work in the digitalized era will be like after the pandemic has lost its grip. Here are a few initial ideas that I think we would benefit by further exploring:

- **Digital skills –** Competence development to better understand and know the capabilities of the digital and hybrid environments is definitely needed. The question is how this should be done and what knowledge the workers need to have in the future? It would be interesting to further explore how to develop more advanced digital skills (Wiggberg et al. 2022)
- **Innovating in hybrid environments –** There is a need to more carefully design the hybrid meetings and collaboration environments. This includes the design of the facilities, designing the tool for managing hybrid, installation of software and hardware and not the least, management aspects.
- **Digital collaboration tools for co-creation –** Using on-line collaboration tools such as Miro, Padlet, Lucidspark, etc. to develop initial concepts, support brainstorming and workshops and creating new designs can be powerful ways of making everybody involved in ideation and creation with ease and with a low learning threshold to start to use.
- **Leadership –** Digital meetings and hybrid meetings require a new approach to how to be an effective leader in meetings. There is a huge need to develop the leadership to better support and facilitate hybrid meetings.
- **Work out loud –** Work out loud is a new approach to collaborative creative work in which you open collaborative spaces for joint ideation and writing and not spending too much time on preparatory work (Stepper 2016).
- **Avoiding sedentary work –** Most of today's work situations require sitting still in front of a stationary computer without needing to move around. Consequently, this

leads to several health-related problems and physical and ergonomic consequences (Tobiasson, 2015). There is a need to develop new ways of supporting mobile work and technologies to be able to store, document and retrieve the outcomes of meetings when moving around

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