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REMOTE LEADERSHIP REQUIRES A NEW CLOSENESS

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For the last 12 months, CXOs have had a crash course in remote leadership. The distributed enterprise has been vaunted for a number of years, but COVID-19 forced theory into reality. Beyond the pandemic, remote leadership will remain a key part of business and technology leadership, but as the pandemic demonstrated, it is far from easy, and some new challenges are on the horizon.

Working at home became a necessity across the globe as governments struggled to contain the COVID-19 virus. Even after the virus recedes due to vaccination programs, the trend to work from home will remain. In a recent study technology analysts IDC found that home-based office workers increased by 17.7 times compared to 2019, as a result of the pandemic. IDC states that office occupancy will not reach the same levels as before the pandemic. Workers and their employees have seen the benefit, with productivity remaining, healthy, work and life balance improvements, and for the corporation, reduced office overhead. "The number of office-based professions is expected to continue to grow over the next five years, but this increase will not be sufficient to compensate for the decrease in office occupancy, which started with the COVID-19 pandemic," IDC said. "We are not going back to the way we worked before", said Mick Heys, Vice President, Future of Workplace, at IDC. "The role of the office will change to more of a collaborative and creative space, with employees working from home at least one day per week. This has implications for the technologies used — it will be important to maintain a digital equivalence for employees irrespective of the location to maintain employee experience."

International technology recruiters Harvey Nash Group finds that technologists, in particular, have benefited from working remotely, with 63% of respondents to their major study reporting being happier in their role. The same study found though that technology workers have reported working longer hours and coping with increased stress as a result of the importance of technology during the pandemic. Three-quarters (75%) of tech workers globally want to continue working the majority of the week (3-5 days) from home after the pandemic, with almost a quarter (23%) wanting to work from home five days a week, and 93% want to work 2-5 days a week from home. This compares with only 45% of tech professionals globally working 2-5 days a week from home prior to the pandemic.

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New Leadership for a New Dawn

Remote leadership is just another facet of the business world that is being changed by external events, and therefore leadership capacity will have to adapt. Business advisors from Boston Consulting Group (BCG) recently published a book on the challenges of leadership in the near future, as it believes technological, social, and economic trends are changing the context of leadership rapidly. "Leaders need not just new strategies, but new ways of thinking about strategy," said Martin Reeves, Chairman of the BCG Henderson Institute. BCG created the book as it believes one-third of large businesses are experiencing a multi-year decline in the ability to create shareholder value.

"Business strategy is ultimately about defying the average, but what it takes to outperform the average is changing faster than ever," says Reeves of BCG. In his book A seat at the table, former CIO Mark Schwartz says business technology leaders will need to move away from plan-driven approaches and instead lead from a position of learning and adapting. This is essential for CIOs and CTOs because: "IT is now central to competitive strategies, product strategies, and all parts of the value stream; it must support change at the speed of business change."

2020 wasn't just the year of the pandemic; the lockdowns demonstrated to many the worrying state of the global environment, building momentum behind movements from the likes of Greta Thunberg. The killing of George Floyd in the USA also sparked a renewed focus on diversity and inclusion by all corners of society. The World Economic Forum carried out a study with survey firm Ipsos in 27 countries and found that 65% of all adults believe that race, ethnicity or national origin will influence employment opportunities. Of particular interest in this study is that 46% state that the last year, despite the high-profile protests behind particular movements, have increased the difference in opportunities available in terms of employment, education, and housing.

The arrival of a COVID-19 vaccine could also lead to heightened tension in the workplace that leaders will have to contend with. Technology analyst house Forrester advises CXOs that vaccine passports could raise privacy, ethical, legal, and compliance issues for leaders. In the report, The Opportunity, The Unknowns, and the Risks of Vaccine Passports in the Workplace, Forrester identifies several risks that employers must address when deploying digital vaccine passports, including sensitive data mishandling, discrimination, labor union mobilization, diminished cybersecurity, and negative impact on customer experience.

As a result, CXOs clearly face the challenge of delivering great customer service and digital business change against a backdrop of post-Covid-19 fear and social unrest.

Although concerned by these major global trends, employees at all levels are motivated to seek out new opportunities. Phaidon International, a recruitment services provider, finds that mid- and top-level executives are "more susceptible to moving on to new job opportunities".

The global recruitment business advises CXOs that want to retain talent to not think about salary levels, but instead focus on cultivating strong networks and developing interpersonal relationships in the workplace, adding that immersive technology to support the virtual office will play a key role in developing the culture and relationships.

BCG says, following a report into how digital technology will create new opportunities, that CXOs should anticipate the skills and capabilities the business will require and "improve their recruiting and retention programs, and build a culture of lifelong learning". In terms of remote leadership, Harvey Nash, the recruitment business, says remote working and a strong culture with strong leadership will be essential to CXOs looking to secure the technologists the organization requires for its future. "Leaders will therefore need to rethink how they attract and engage their employees in a world where physical location is no longer a prime asset," Harvey Nash says in a statement.

Mental leadership

The events of 2020 put mental health and well-being high on the leadership agenda of CXOs. With their teams spread across the world and not in a central HQ, CXOs had a hard time seeing if their team members were well. The pandemic increased the mental strain on employees. Gartner, technology analyst house, reports that in the fourth quarter of 2020, a quarter of the workforce described itself as depressed as a result of the pandemic.

"The need for well-being support has skyrocketed since the pandemic struck, giving organizations a new mandate to offer more and better programs," said Carolina Valencia, vice president in the Gartner HR practice. "Organizations, more than ever, must respond to all facets of the individual, from the physical to the emotional, and address some of the new stressors that have emerged over the past year."

Eileen Jennings-Brown, Head of Technology at the Wellcome Trust, a medical funding body, adds: "I have seen my team come under extreme pressure, as we have had to develop new processes and drive forward the business. One thing I realized about remote working was that I didn't really know how they were feeling, so I am using a tool called 15 Five that means team members spend 15 minutes putting in details of the challenges they face, and it takes me five minutes to read and learn from.

"I am now able to do a temperature test on how people are feeling and explore where there are challenges, as it is my role to remove the blockers and to protect them with air cover. The reality is that if I don't make our people feel heard, then we don't stand a chance."

To stand a chance, Mike Potter at Thames Water, the largest utility company in the UK, says communication is vital. As a transformation director, Potter is working on an engagement program to make sure all levels of the business have a powerful voice. Where teams may have been the recipients of technology-led change in the past, Potter says close involvement with all roles and layers of the organization will be essential. Employees that are engaged and feel they are taking part in a transformation are less likely to be worried and therefore seek out new opportunities.
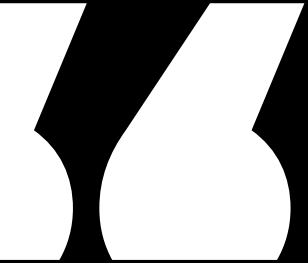
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"Technology professionals have played a key role throughout the pandemic, supporting organizations in the massive push for home working and helping them adapt their business models in response to the crisis, says Bev White, Chief Executive, Harvey Nash Group of the demands tech professionals have shouldered. "But it's been quite a journey. There have been long days, rising workloads and rapidly changing objectives. It's no wonder that mental health is struggling." Chris Howell, CIO with French headquartered publishing firm Hachette adds: "I am making sure that I continue to adapt, listening and making sure that I am informed about the challenges and context. This is important as people come into the organization who have life experiences that you cannot be close to." The CIO adds that the pandemic will have only exacerbated a challenge that was already in place: "For those people born in the 90s and up they are feeling like they cannot afford a house, they will be less well off, the climate is in a state and we live in an antagonistic world. So we have a cohort of people in their 20s who have high anxiety."

Not only must CXOs be aware of the needs of the youngest team members, but also the differences in responsibility across the business and therefore leadership methods required. "Wellcome is a culture of cultures because we have an investment bank, a museum collection, and a scientific organization. Each of these has different cultures and attitudes to openness, outcomes, and pace," says James Thomas, CTO with the Wellcome Trust.

Engagement and empathy are key; many members of the organization have embraced new ways of working; as a result, CXOs need to manage their teams in a completely different way. A hybrid of remote and in the office, working is likely to emerge. As a result, CXOs will need to develop leadership methods that integrate flexible working, demonstrate care and awareness; and are able to respond to the major challenges of our age.

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