



REDEFINING THE WORKPLACE

“How can leaders help redefine work for the better?”

In the first of our pioneering digital dialogues, we invite 11 leaders across technology, business and innovation to discuss how organisations are reimagining workplaces in light of the pandemic – and the key lessons learned in 2020.

“How can leaders help redefine work for the better?” From digital poverty to re-designing education, it was this question that underpinned the 90-minute discussion held over Zoom on 10th September, where we asked some of the UK’s leading minds what they have learned over the last six months and how British businesses can move forward sustainably.

Digital poverty is very real: we need digital first, not digital only

The negative impact that digital poverty is having on many people’s lives was perhaps the most sobering and urgent issue highlighted on the day. With so many people working from home and/or home-schooling, “digital access has moved up the hierarchy of need,” explained Dayne Turbitt, Senior Vice President and UK General Manager at Dell Technologies UK. Having access to computers and the internet was no longer about shopping or entertainment, but essential for work and learning, and therefore an urgent requirement for everybody.

It requires looking past our own privileges to realise this, and that lockdown for parents and guardians might be a very different experience to some leaders, as highlighted by Priya Guha, venture partner at Merian Ventures. “We have to rethink how we deliver services, especially public ones,” said Priya. “It used to be digital first but it now seems to be running towards digital only, and I worry about that.”

The future is here: we need to use all the tools available to us

For head of product at Government Digital Service, Trisha Doyle, and the Said Business School’s Entrepreneur-in-Residence, Charmian Love, it wasn’t a question of looking to the future, but planning for the future now by using the most advanced technology available to businesses.

Describing how UK government departments have responded to working through the pandemic, Trisha said: “What I’ve really seen is that the most digitally and technologically mature departments – the ones that have adopted modern ways of working, embraced things like the cloud, that are moving away from legacy technology in a sustainable way – were best able to respond to the COVID crisis in a really nimble, corrective way.”

Charmian agreed. Quoting the sci-fi author, William Gibson, she said: “the future is here, it’s just not evenly distributed”. Now was the time to be more heliotropic, she continued, that we must look to a bright, positive future and act now to make that happen. “We have to be able to again be motivated by hope and positivity in the future that we can build, but we also do need to be rooted in that reality of the now.”

Leadership empathy is more important than ever: how we work is changing

The need for a hybrid model of remote and workplace working was a topic returned to repeatedly. Margarete McGrath, Chief Digital Officer, Dell Technologies UK, cited new research on remote working that suggests a longer working day with 13% more meetings. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the number of attendees was up compared with before the pandemic, while the duration of these virtual meetings was around 20% shorter.

How we interact in these meetings is different too. According to research from MIT, our speech on digital calls only represents about 10% of how we communicate. “So what are the new ways of reading one another and connecting in this digital age?” asked Margarete. “How are we going to use and leverage new technologies such as AI and others, to build greater collaboration platforms, and greater levels of creativity and productivity?”

For many, practical concerns from a lack of space, desks or office equipment, or internet bandwidth, have made remote working more difficult – particularly in the long-term.

This presents challenges for employee productivity. Director of UK Enterprise & Government Sales, Jas Bhogal, argued that virtual meetings can risk greater misunderstandings: “You don’t have the same visual or emotional cues that you have when you’re face to face.”

Jas added that this too could have mental health implications and that a traditional workplace setting mitigates risks such as fatigue and loneliness, which puts a greater onus on leaders to identify mental health concerns within their teams while working remotely: “Many employees miss the spontaneous, informal collaborations that you would have when you’re in the office, in the corridor or at the coffee machine.”

Both Margarete and co-founder of WorldRemit, Catherine Wines, expressed the need for leaders to listen more and be more empathetic. “[It’s about] leadership empathy, a stronger sense of kindness and looking after one another and moving forward as a collective community,” said Margarete.

In a similar vein, Catherine called for this new, empathetic hybrid work model to put an end to presenteeism once and for all. “Let’s not use software to track how long someone spends at their computer at home,” she said, “let’s look to outputs instead.”

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We mustn't neglect diversity and inclusion: we need more voices than ever

For the president of techUK, Jacqueline de Rojas, keeping diversity and inclusion top of the business agenda is more important now than ever. She emphasised that leadership on diversity and inclusion matters not only for the sake of employees, but also to ensure we have the diversity of thinking required to get organisations through the pandemic.

Only a diverse set of voices, Jacqueline argued, would pull us through the crisis, and those businesses not “listening to the voices on the edges” would suffer. “Had they inclusive teams and dropped the group-think, I think different decisions, better decision-making, and better outcomes would have been made. So that’s my plea for leaders; look outwards, not inwards.”

Listening to all voices and learning from each other was a mantra repeated throughout the discussion. Merian Ventures’ Priya Guha emphasised the importance of cross-collaboration that spanned generations, geographies and business sizes, while the chairman of Mastercard, Rick Haythornthwaite, called for a “fundamentally different type of leadership”. Problems wouldn’t be solved at 10,000 feet, said Rick, instead we needed leadership that “embraces its generosity and its warmth” with power that “sits at the edge, next to the problem.”

Wellbeing is key – but leaders must lead by example

Wellbeing was a subject returned to throughout the discussion, with Sir Anthony Seldon, vice-chancellor of The University of Buckingham, emphasising the need for leaders to lead by example. Asking the delegates how many of them practiced mindfulness, Sir Anthony explained that no change could be made without leaders focussing on their own wellbeing and stillness practice. “There’s no point in having a wellbeing policy unless you yourself, or everyone listening to this, in your own lives are more settled, more reflective, more contemplative and more open to fresh ideas.”

Deloitte partner Brett Walsh, agreed. “It’s not just the policies,” he said, “it’s actually building wellbeing into work design, and actually being honest about it and actually trying to do something genuine.”

As for how companies can build wellbeing into their work design, Brett pointed to the move towards purpose-led companies, suggesting that wellbeing policy wasn’t something that could be retrofitted, but that it came organically from purpose-led social enterprises. “Because people really want to work with an organisation for which they feel they belong. And the genuinely purpose-led organisations are the ones that are bringing real meaning to purpose.”

Later in the conversation Brett returned to this theme of wellbeing and purpose when touching on industry 4.0: “I don’t think it’s human or technology, it’s human and technology that is the future. But the future of work will be augmented, and I absolutely agree that we need to make sure that we concentrate and focus on the human side of that augmentation as we move forward.”