Cultural Ambiguity:

The Advent of remote work?

This article explores the impact of remote work on organizational cultural identity.

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Organizational Culture. It encompasses the values, norms, and traditions within an organization.

Establishing a strong culture can often be a daunting task, one without an easy-to-follow linear roadmap! Your company culture directly affects the calibre of the candidates you attract and the employees you hold on to. It also defines the experiences and interactions your employees and customers expect to have.

So, how do you ensure your culture remains strong, vibrant and resilient in the face of unprecedented change?

The onset of the pandemic has forced us all to reconsider long-established methods of corporate communications, leadership and engagement. In the absence of water-cooler interactions and immersive team-building retreats, promoting the tenants of your organizational culture can often fall by the wayside.

If organizational culture is modelled by *leadership*, solidified by *employee interactions* and predicated by *past behavioural norms*, what happens when a large part of the organic experience is no longer available?

How much **control** do we really have over modelling **internal culture** in a **remote environment**?

In some instances, the move to a remote working environment has further solidified existing company culture. The start-up movement has showcased the ingenuity of organizations that have subscribed to and dedicated time and resources toward agile work practices. A recent study by Glassdoor has demonstrated a steadily increasing spike in employee satisfaction resulting from greater remote-work flexibility and increased workplace collaboration.
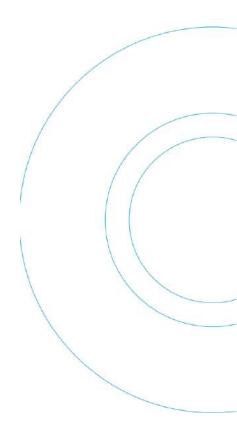
On the other hand, **subcultures** can form in response to the new working environment that may run in contrast to established internal practices and norms.

Consider Apple, their culture is premised around the belief that in-person interactions are critical to cultivating new ideas.

The company's elaborate, doughnut-shaped main headquarters reflect co-founder Steve Jobs' belief that well-designed office spaces bring about spontaneous interactions that result in unplanned creative solutions.

Apple is struggling to cultivate a return-to-work strategy that is reflective of its employees' varied needs. In response to CEO Tim Cook's expectation that employees return to work at least three days a week, Apple employees have argued that remote interactions can be every bit as effective as in-person ones.

While organizational culture undoubtedly evolves and grows as a company expands and reacts to market changes, **the development of organic subcultures that challenge existing norms is important to address**.

It is important to ensure the culture you encourage clearly aligns with your **values**, **purpose**, and **vision**. **Some foundational strategies to develop a strong culture include:**

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Define your Purpose
- What is your company's reason for existence?
- What are the company values? What do you stand for?
- What is the company's vision for the future?

Embed your Values into your Operations
- Formalize your values into operational norms that set clear expectations and define appropriate interactions across all levels of the organization

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Consider Tonality
- Set clear standards for the kind of language that is allowed and encouraged and clarify what's not appropriate
- Set the tone of your culture through both top-down and bottom-up communications, engagement and activities

Identify your Cultural Ambassadors
- Identify and showcase employees who already best represent what is expected of the company's culture

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Be Intentional with Recruitment
- Align your recruitment practices with your cultural values and expectations
- Ensure your recruitment process transparently demonstrates key tenants of your culture
- Prioritize attitude and diversity

Lead by Example
- Consistently exhibit the behaviours, interactions and engagement that reflects your organization's core beliefs and values
- Model the standard you want your employees, peers and teams to follow

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Prioritize Employee Well-being
- Happy employees are more motivated, interact better with customers and clients, and are far more likely to feel aligned with a company's brand values

Maintaining a strong company culture in a virtual environment can be more challenging. **Here are some ideas to help you get started:**

Encourage Transparent Dialogue

The first step is to acknowledge how your internal (and external) communications have changed. The pandemic gave way for many new collaborative platforms to help make working from home easier. When selecting which ones to implement in an organization, keep in mind that each platform has its own set of conventions of how to communicate, with some being more formal than others.

Acknowledge the unknowns. In order to cultivate an environment of trust and transparency, it is important, to be honest about what you do know and what you don't. Acknowledge your organization's 'unknowns' and keep your teams, peers and employees aware of emerging news, new norms and decisions pertaining to remote work and return to the office strategies.

Don't underestimate Employee Development

In the face of unprecedented change, many can feel uncertain about their future. By continuing to focus on the professional development of your teams and employees you provide the assurance that their role in the future of the organization is still very much a priority. Leverage existing training opportunities to reinforce the foundational tenets of your organization's mission, strategy and values and formalize the new 'norms' resulting from virtual work.

Create Responsive Incentives

Recognition, rewards and incentives should continue to play a vital role in a virtual environment. Prioritize incentives that help keep morale up while being responsive to your changing environment. For example, consider providing 'home office makeovers' or 'meal-box subscriptions' to respond to the needs of our new remote environment. Through 'Employee of the Month' type programs, you can also identify cultural ambassadors within the organization that have adapted to the new remote working norms but continue to visibly demonstrate key cultural values.

Prioritize Mental Health

Mental Awareness. Once a year, it was given its own day, or maybe even a full month's worth of attention. This is not the situation anymore. Isolation is key to keeping safe from the virus but is incredibly detrimental to mental health. To tackle this, organizations need to focus more on wellness and employee health than before. Consider organizing virtual activities. Here are a few to help you get started:

- **Midday Meditation**
  - Take 10 minutes out of your day to collect yourself and breathe. It can be as simple as sending a notification reminding everyone to take a break.

- **Mental Health Fair**
  - Dedicate a day to offering resources and support through a series of virtual stations/activities. You can invite tele-therapists for quick meet and greets each focusing on short activities or topical content such as stress management and dealing with anxiety.

Conduct periodic Pulse Checks

In absence of in-person townhalls, team-building activities and meetings it becomes vitally important to understand the pulse of your organization. Surveys that enable employees to anonymously express their views on new working norms, changes to existing policies and allow for collaborative solutions are especially important. Organizations are facing the daunting task of making critical decisions about, among other things, what a safe return to work will look like. These decisions will directly impact your employees and cannot be made in isolation.

Workplace culture is key to an organization's survival and the well-being of its employees. Remote work has raised the stakes, making it critical that organizational culture be as strong and positive as it can be. While the foundations of building a strong organizational culture have not changed, it is the method that has changed drastically.

A strong culture is dependent on a consistent voice, one that continually *engages*, *responds to* and *acknowledges* the needs of the market, and its people.

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