Rethinking Workplace Ecosystem during Crisis Recovery Period: Lessons from COVID-19

James Adekorafo Osei¹ and Emmanuel Yoku²

¹Masters Student, Faculty of Business Administration, Kings University College, Accra, Ghana.
²Strategic Planner, Amani Manufacturing Company Limited, Tema, Ghana.

*Corresponding Author’s Email: jamesosei6@gmail.com

Abstract

**Purpose:** The aim of the study was to rethink how workplace ecosystem should be modelled during crisis recovery period with lessons from COVID-19 pandemic.

**Methodology:** The study adopted a desktop review of literature on publications, interviews and surveys by major global consultancy firms. This method established an extensive data research using online data sources. Only resources relating to the topic under study were considered for inclusion.

**Results:** The analysis of the data resulted in a process that led to a core category that showed how the workplace can be re-imagined, re-improved and re-invented, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, where five different strategic categories to achieve that target were identified within this process. These strategic categories are; opportunity to break with the past, workplace redesign, technology, digital strategy, and remote working and new sense of workplace.

**Conclusion:** COVID-19 exposed many weaknesses and issues that have been present in business for a long time, in particular how to carry out daily activities from physical to virtual interactions perspective. In the new way of operating, companies are able to identify which roles need to be carried out face to face or which of them do not, and to what extent.

**Recommendations:** The study recommend human resources managers to position themselves as HR who are designed for speed, new ways of working, digital first, teams, adaptable organizational strategies, and changing business requirements. As organizations rethink work, it is important they communicate how and why they are redeploying workers and identify how this supports new business priorities. This includes providing context and rationale for changes and clear communication on new workforce policies. The study also recommend HR leaders to reassess and explain compensation and promotion plans for the short term while managing expectations through the recovery process and toward sustainable operations.

**Keywords:** Workplace, rethink, crisis recovery, COVID-19.
INTRODUCTION

According to Cambridge Dictionary (2020), the workplace can simply be understood as the building or place where people perform their jobs. According to Endrissat et al., 2015; Fisher, 2010; Gill, 2019; and Goffee and Jones, 2013, the concept of workplace goes further to dimensions such as social relationships, gathering, creativity, training, motivation, engagement, self-realization, among others. For a long time, several studies such as Ritzer (1996, 2005), DiMaggio and Powell (1983) have been conducted on organizations and organizational life. According to Gill (2019), rationality in its pursuit of efficiency, has been accompanied by a gradual dehumanization of organizations which threatens employees’ sense of identity and their relationships with others. On the other hand, it has been found that internal and external intangible capital influences the productivity of companies and, therefore, economic growth (Rico & CabrerBorr, 2020). As stated by Pfeffer (2010), the modern workplaces’ physical space has been continuously reduced over recent decades, turning the actual office into a grid where employees carry out their tasks in spaces smaller than three square meters. This leads to reduced well-being for individuals and worse results for companies for multiple reasons, including as illness, absenteeism, together with an overall poor contribution to society.

More still, organizations are under threat from various sources which can cause crisis. A crisis is a progressive process that may not be restricted to one area within a common border. It may ensnare rapidly and emerge with other crises, and its consequences are extended (Hart, Heyse & Boin, 2001). The word ‘crisis’ has been used interchangeably with a number of other terms, including disaster, business interruption, catastrophe and emergency (Herbane, 2010). It cannot be safely asserted that the vulnerability results from environmental forces or failure of the technology itself (Perrow, 1999), or exclusively from human error (Reason, 1990) although it often results from these three factors. Venette argues that ‘crisis is a process of transformation where the old system can no longer be maintained’. Therefore, there is the need for qualitative change. If change is not needed, the event could more accurately be described as a failure or incident. Generally, three elements are common to a crisis: a threat, surprise and a short decision time.

The workplaces during the early COVID-19 period was initially perceived as having higher work-pressure for employees and was deemed a crisis. Whilst people were adjusting to working remotely, they were also asked to join many virtual sessions to keep them engaged, learning, and focused on meaningful projects. Whilst it is better to ‘over communicate’ and ‘over support’ during challenging times than to abstain from it, organizations had to find the right balance and cadence between global, regional, local and functional and this in order to keep all well aligned. There was also a risk of raising both work-pressure and starting redeployment, as it unintentionally stressed people as they could assume that their current assignment may come to an end or their efforts are not perceived as useful by the company.

The workplace under COVID-19 may be understood as a situation given by the new circumstances where the COVID-19 has triggered a general worldwide transformation affecting the workplace in particular. Initially, companies were not prepared to face a situation where employees had to leave their workplace and do their tasks remotely from other locations or from their own homes. The identified strategic categories are essential to reach the new workplace while at the same time they feed back to each other in such a way that allows certain patterns of observation to be established regarding what could be the workplace of the future, completely different from what
is known so far. The future workplace is neither what is known today, as it is considered as a transition period, nor what could have been under the previous non-COVID-19 conditions, as they will never be the same again. However, inevitably it will be more inclusive, more mature and novel, considering employees’ and business needs creating a good balance between them. According to McKinsey (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic brought new ways of doing business according to which organizations must change how they operate along with the role of offices in generating secure, successful and rewarding careers. Moreover, COVID-19 brought unparalleled challenges where many companies around the world have demonstrated their ability to face the challenges, responding with pre-designed crisis management plans (Mikušová & Horváthová, 2019) and creating new work conditions to protect workers within an unforeseen situation. The truth is that COVID-19 took majority by surprise and the situation changed radically since March 2020, leading to a serious rethinking of what the workplace was before the pandemic, what it currently is, and what it will be after COVID-19. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 2.7 billion people, or four out of five workers in the global workforce, have been affected by lockdowns and stay-at-home measures. Organizations’ first priority in crisis response has been ensuring the health and safety of workers. Now, as organizations begin to emerge from this phase, leaders are focusing on the next set of workforce challenges as they plan for recovery. Certainly, it seems that nothing will remain the same, and this paper aims to rethink how workplace ecosystem should be modelled during crisis recovery period with lessons from COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out based on publications, interviews and surveys by major global consultancy firms, establishing extensive data research using online data sources, covering worldwide data sources, some of them especially relevant for this case study based on their tight relationship within the workplace context. Documents, publications and surveys from highly reputable sources, such as Forbes, Gartner, McKinsey, Gallup, WHO, Boston Consulting Group, KPMG, PwC, EY, Deloitte and others, have been analyzed, mainly from March to July 2020, covering more than twenty countries and regions, where the main facts concerning the situation of the workplace in relation to COVID-19, the return to work and future scenarios were extracted. The complete literature input is detailed in Table 1. Information gathered from consulted studies and interviews has been subsequently refined to support and fine-tune the results. Once all the data from each of the consultancy companies had been collected and classified, notes were taken, and common categories were postulated as described in the Results section.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the data resulted in a process that led to a core category that showed how the workplace can be re-imagined, re-improved and re-invented, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, where five different strategic categories to achieve that target were identified within this process, namely: (1) Opportunity to Break with the past; (2) Workplace redesign; (3) Technology; (4) Digital strategy; and (5) Remote working and new sense of workplace.

Break with the Past

During the government-imposed lockdowns, companies inevitably adapted to continue working assuring that main operations were done remotely. However, companies replicated what was done
before the pandemic, by translating existing processes into remote working contexts. While in the past organizations were simply theorizing about new forms of work, the crisis of COVID-19 has forced them into taking actions, such as actually shifting to completely new ways of working, and even re-imagining new forms of work as required by the new pandemic circumstances. Therefore, companies must identify the most important processes within their organization, geography and functional structure, for their further re-evaluation involving both of management and employees. This effort should re-imagine the existing career development paths proposed by human resources such as promoting intrapersonal relationships with closest coworkers by requiring face-to-face office contact at the beginning while gradually shifting toward remote work. – and the execution of different business activity processes or production stages, such as limiting face-to-face meetings for planning activities while working remotely for the actual execution.

The use of automation will be one of the change opportunities for the workplace of the future. Jobs should be redefined according to the desired workplace considerations, such as performance or productivity that will determine the level and type of automation where the use of artificial intelligence and semi-automation of repetitive and non-skilled work is the current reality. However, the main future concern is going to be about shifting from currently established physical business activity to a virtual or hybrid approach with partial physical contact. This will mean rethinking the whole business process as this transition will inevitably involve a major use of automation where no workplace will be needed. Organizations must rethink their values and corporate culture so that they can be compatible with new ways of working, for instance: talent development must consider whether aspects such as face-to-face mentoring can be done in the same manner in the digital world. Similarly, the cultural values inherent in the company should be reconsidered. The temptation to return to pre-pandemic approaches should be avoided, preventing mistakes previously made.

It is necessary to build the new processes for a digital world, educating and preparing the organization so that there are no differences between the processes related to face-to-face and remote work. New ways of working will force companies to redefine employees’ tasks and how they are performed, especially when working remotely. It will be necessary to reexamine organizations’ economic policies of reward and motivation, as well as to have an effective balance between the development of the career model and their productivity. Future jobs will not be the same as those of the past, leading to the need to rethink how performance is measured and, consequently, appraisals may not necessarily refer to the actual performance index but about the employee’s ability to overcome uncertainties, adapt to everchanging business scenarios and demonstrate leadership qualities. Therefore, breaking with the past is the first category to change the workplace. Organizations of any size should consider the present moment as their best opportunity to break the inertia of the past and eliminate old bad habits or outdated ways of doing things. This category implies that all organizations are able to imagine new ways of work, and how the workplace will be, either by their own means or by means of external consulting services.

Workplace Redesign

To prepare for the new post-COVID-19 situation, companies should redefine the actual way work is performed and located. Depending on the type of work and the requirements to perform it, it will be important to comprehend the models and dynamics necessary to develop tasks and workplaces according to their needs. Companies will have to align their people, processes and
technologies as well as career policies, work models, and even contracts. Therefore, workplace redesign is a basic and prior category on the road to achieve the re-imagined, re-improved and reinvented workplace. Offices have rarely been considered in detail beyond basic functions, such as work cubicles or confined spaces, meeting rooms, shared services, without really taking into account the fundamental objective of the organization or the needs of the employees. Therefore, in a COVID-19 world, it is time to rethink and transform. As a result, companies must design workspaces that can support all forms of interaction that take place on site or remotely. For instance, if the company is conducting collaborative work, possibly a high percentage of the office could be dedicated to meeting rooms. If the company is focusing on remote working, perhaps it would not require a large amount of office space, which could be replaced by home offices or satellite offices close to the employees’ location.

The redesign of the workplace must be based on objective criteria that take into account: safety reasons, such as occupational health and safety regulation; social distance, such as the increase of the employee’s minimum required working area; and a real estate revolution in the office market, where remote working will require less surface area and new locations need to be found. When employees return to work, organizations should rethink some aspects of the workplace, such as cleaning, social distance, as well as providing gathering places, common areas, and amenities. Organizations will be challenged to recreate the favorite employee aspects of their homes such as rest areas or their own decoration. Moreover, it will be important to maintain personal interactions so that work environments can meet the needs of employees, whether they work locally or remotely.

To change the workplace, it will be necessary to change the paradigm of how space is used: how much is really needed and what are the applications in relation to collaboration, productivity, culture and business objectives. In addition to considering where the offices should be, it is necessary to determine the desired modality for these offices: ownership, rent, co-working or remote work. As a brief note, some reports indicate that prior to COVID-19, only 3% of the US office market was considered flexible space, while their growth was estimated at 25% annually during the last five-years. This means that flexible solutions were already present, and while there has been a 12% and 9% decrease in working time within headquarters and satellite offices, an increase of 20% to 27% in flexible office working is projected.

After COVID-19, reducing property costs could be significant, where companies and real estate groups should redevelop the workplace layout, as there is a major potential reduction by 30% of real estate costs up to 100% for fully remote, while reducing the impact of unforeseen disasters. Therefore, all this reassessment will not only improve the way of working, but has the potential to save costs (mainly real estate), improve operations, and facilitate maintenance, where companies cut these costs by considering alternative workplace strategies and examining new space management approaches. Within the future workplace, technology is a factor for employees returning to work safely, considering the possibility of future pandemics or lack of vaccines for COVID-19, where companies have to define the ways employees reach their workplaces together with the associated health and safety factors, such as cleaning or social distance aspects. Therefore, the future workplace has to be more digital, less hierarchical and more flexible, complying with the health, safety and technological conditions required by the evolution of pandemics, such as COVID-19.
Technology

Companies have been very careful with their spending budgets and costs during the pandemic, but have continued to maintain digitalization, research and development, as well as technology and cyber-security investments. This category explains how technology is a key factor in defining the workplace during COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, most organizations have been increasingly using technology to engage employees, to facilitate their work and enhance feelings of well-being, health and safety. Organizations have detected the following key success factors within the workplace that has been established during the confinement and the new reality: (1) Training in remote working tools and technologies; (2) Extension of data collection, using technologies for collecting data on employee health and safety, monitoring employees by means of virtual entry/exit control, monitoring the use of computers at work, conducting productivity tracking or employees’ commitment and wellness; (3) Leverage of digital tech and advanced analytics for better and faster decisions; strengthening employee capacity and links to serving customers more effectively; and (4) Establishing a combination of in-house and remote access, using network agnostic tools, cyber-security management including data management and automated digitized workflows, managing to maintain an executive presence virtually.

The reassessment of technological protocols and processes together with the use of performance management tools is considered positive, where many companies have established controls that restrict some activities. Technology helps in collaborative work environments by enabling agile workplace interactions. Frequently, due to the pandemic, workers had to take care of children or elderly people at home, therefore organizations had to adjust the productivity levels required for home-based employees. Regardless of employees’ past technological knowledge, the pandemic has presented an opportunity to improve the use of these tools. Although the use of new technologies is often challenging and problems can occur, such as limited access to the corporate network or actual network overload, nevertheless, telecommunication companies have been able to boost their connectivity infrastructure and organizations have been able to enable user interfaces that have facilitated remote work. As has been demonstrated, the technological component has played a decisive role in remote working, in terms of the digitalization of the company’s business processes, and has become the main survival factor facing companies during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has also been one of the levers for employee engagement with the workplace, and to sustain the corporate culture, learning, collaboration and productivity.

Digital Strategy

This category considers the acceleration of digital transformations as the trigger to remote working and workplace transformation, while revealing important gaps within the IT infrastructure, workforce planning and digital skills development. The outbreak of COVID-19 has generated many questions within organizations regarding the impact it could have on the company’s digitalization process, which in some cases was already underway, while in others not yet begun. However, the adaptation to COVID-19 has been remarkably successful as, prior to the crisis, the technology already had a highly strategic value for companies, therefore in a very short period of time new remote work models have been implemented, employees have been trained by means of digital platforms within new digital solutions which they were not used to operate, procedures have been adapted and digital collaborative work modes have been encouraged. Consequently,
companies with a high degree of digitalization were able to carry out this change process faster and more efficiently as compared to non-digitalized businesses.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 brought to the surface the existing technological transformation gaps within companies, which caused serious issues, such as: how their remote working environments were inefficient; that their infrastructures could not withstand an increase in traffic or have suffered serious cyber-security problems. In addition, companies that were already aware of the security, scalability and flexibility features offered by cloud environments, had realized the mistake of not giving them adequate technological priority. For many companies, this unforeseen situation has served to identify basic aspects required for a digital workplace environment, such as the wide variety of processes that are still supported by paper documents that could be easily digitized to avoid such dependence, and therefore this could help organization in designing their digital transformation plan and raise awareness that the higher the level of digitalization, the greater the adaptation speed to the new workplace and the market.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to address the different technological challenges regarding companies’ digital transformation process, that together with the development of new technological enablers, such as artificial intelligence, 5 G, block chain, quantum computing or virtual reality, could have a significant impact on the whole society, and could continue to do so in the coming years, such as: (1) Technological infrastructure ready for ubiquitous remote working; (2) Deployment of cloud ecosystems adapted to responsive mobile devices and data driven decision-making organizations; (3) Acceleration of cyber-security systems together with increase of threats; (4) Hyper-automation, robotization of processes and commoditization of artificial intelligence solutions; (5) Collaborative work and e-learning platforms, promoting innovation and creativity in organizations; (6) Customer-centric strategy oriented towards the new digital channels for interaction and virtualization of experiences; and (7) Significant increase of E-commerce platforms and contactless technologies. At the same time, it is necessary to change the organizational culture towards promoting agility and collaboration, however given the impossibility of foreseeing the future, top management will be constantly required to analyze all potential scenarios and provide the necessary flexibility to rapidly address any unexpected event that could surface in the future.

The analysis of the initial situation, together with the impact of the expected different technological solutions and enabling technologies on the organization, will serve to develop a digitalization strategy and a transformation roadmap which will establish the baseline for the future deployment of transformation initiatives from both digital and change management points of view; together with the cultural changes, this will result in a better adaptation of the workplace and, ultimately, of the company itself to the new market circumstances. The acceleration of the digital transformation and operational models forces organizations to monitor how these digital platforms and new consumption habits affect their activity: stimulate strategic thinking, strategic decision-making and improve processes that facilitate the discovery of new business opportunities, consequently resulting in a better workplace that encourages companies and employees to generate positive feedback.

Companies should review the set of metrics used to monitor the performance of their operations and their investment priorities, as reducing costs or investments in the digital field could be counterproductive for the future of the company. Therefore, it is necessary to maintain investment
in digitalization by first developing the initiatives that provide short-term support to employees, together with those that provide a potential increase in revenue and/or cost reduction, mainly by optimizing business processes while avoiding salaries or resources cuts. The effects of COVID-19 make this category extremely important in the evolution of the workplace, as companies must face up to a profound transformation, this opportunity being the catalyst and accelerator of changes through digital transformation. The workplace has entered a process that goes beyond a mere transformation, where an accelerated change process is deployed in the adoption of digital enablers and the implementation of initiatives that maximize the flexibility and creativity of its employees, pursuing the opportunities to emerge from the crisis in the most successful way. As the digital transformation process is already in place, the effects of COVID-19 make this category extremely important in the evolution of the workplace, as companies must face up to a deep transformation, this opportunity being the catalyst and accelerator of changes through digital transformation, where employees, companies and workplaces will inevitably become more agile and dynamic than ever.

**Remote Working and New Sense of the Workplace**

Although most of the companies were reticent to have employees remote working, this pandemic has forced a worldwide experiment where many more people had to work from home. COVID-19 accelerates new working and workplace models, therefore resulting an increased overall flexibility. Prior to the pandemic, the prevailing mindset was that on-site offices and workplaces were critical to productivity, culture and attracting talent. Companies strongly competed for first-class office spaces located in major city centers around major world capitals, together with open, collaborative and welcoming office designs as their main strategy. The speed and effectiveness with which the forms of digital collaboration have been adopted by companies has been remarkable, where, in the majority of cases, results have exceeded their expectations. Remote working has spread rapidly thanks to the technologies that companies have been able to provide to their employees, allowing them greater flexibility to work both in and out of the office. Days after the pandemic began, many businesses were able to have more than 90% of their employees working remotely. Some jobs that would never have been thought of as being done remotely, such as customer service, insurance companies, brokers, etc, have been able to maintain operations effectively.

Several surveys regarding the future of the workplace, covering companies whose jobs are not on-site dependent, reveal that the majority believe that their jobs will be more remote than ever: (1) 40% believe that will use remote working in the future; (2) 37% expect that 25% of their employees will be able to work in a hybrid model; (3) 48% of employees prefer remote work as compared to 30% before COVID-19; (4) 80% of respondents who work at home would continue home working, 41% consider their productivity to have increased while 28% consider their productivity to have been unaffected; and (5) remote working during COVID-19 showed that productivity has increased by 15% to 20%, absenteeism has been reduced to 40%, turnover has been reduced by 10% to 15% and there is more than a 20% reduction in potential costs in the use of property and resources.

It is important for companies to have a complete vision of what remote work means, since this concept does not necessarily mean that all employees work from home, because remote work can be organized in such a way that employees work partially from home and partially at the office, according to a predefined calendar or through rotating schedules. Specific times can be defined to be on-site, off-site or anywhere if employees can work remotely all the time, with availability to
come to the office when required. Depending on the location of the workplace, the new workplaces could be “fully located”, “alternating on site”, “on demand on site”, “remotely connected” or simply “working from anywhere”. The advantages that this situation has brought to employees and organizations include the following: (1) Reduction of transportation times and the associated environmental impact; (2) Better productivity and better time management; (3) Balance between family and work, associated with a potential for greater happiness; (4) An increased feeling of protection and security regarding the potential effects of the pandemic; (5) The opportunity to access talent without geographical boundaries; (6) Implement of new processes aligned with remote work; (7) Strengthening corporate culture; and (8) Reduction in real estate costs. Therefore, while considering the future workplace, it must be taken into account that remote working has obvious benefits in people’s happiness and workplace change.

Despite most employees being satisfied with remote working, it must be taken into consideration that all the pillars of organizational culture consolidated before the pandemic, such as conversations, meeting and social contact being threatened by the lack of physical interactions between employees. Temporal remote working could have a minor impact; however, permanent remote working could result in major loss of talent and corporate culture. Although each employee and each organization have different needs, the overall COVID-19 experience has been considered as positive: productivity has improved, feelings of happiness experienced, remote work performed in a satisfactory manner, and employees’ engagement levels have increased; however this has not always been the case. As a result, the most relevant aspect is that there is still an ongoing journey to discover and try new forms of workplace as many of them have not yet been discovered.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 exposed many weaknesses and issues that have been present in business for a long time, in particular how to carry out daily activities from physical to virtual interactions perspective. The biggest challenge organizations will likely face in recovery is the tension between getting back to work and rethinking work as they embrace a new reality. How leaders and organizations handle the recovery may define their brands for years to come, and ultimately whether they are truly operating as a social enterprise. The recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, given the human dimension of urgent workforce challenges and the uncertainties facing business leaders, will require workforce strategies that focus on both short-term recovery priority actions. Opportunity to Break with the past; (2) Workplace redesign; (3) Technology; (4) Digital strategy; and (5) Remote working and new sense of workplace. By anticipating and orchestrating these five priorities in the context of a future directed toward purpose, potential, and perspective, organizations can lead, prepare, and support their workforces through the recovery phase while positioning themselves for the next phase: thriving in the new normal.

In the new way of operating, companies are able to identify which roles need to be carried out face to face or which of them do not, and to what extent. This process has become a mandatory action, where the best time to think about it and decide in an orderly manner is now, as depending on how it is organized, the workplace will inevitably evolve from basic on site towards face to face, remote or a combination of these. For instance, under remote or hybrid scenarios, such as partially remote and partially on site, there may be advantages for both company and employees in the way the workplace is designed. This can allow them to work from their home office or even a dedicated remote office close to employees’ homes, with fewer geographical constraints as compared to
reaching the main headquarters office. Therefore, people will live where they prefer, sometimes at lower living costs or close to loved ones, which consequently will turn the workplace into a more attractive place to work. Assigning jobs to the different workplace models can help to determine which people can work locally or remotely. This can be an advantage for companies and employees, as it will allow employees to be more comfortable with their jobs and workplaces, and more motivated, resulting in greater productivity for companies.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

HR leaders are uniquely positioned to support their workforces through the recovery and position their organizations for a new era of resiliency. For many, this requires a pivot toward HR designed for speed, new ways of working, digital first, teams, adaptable organizational strategies, and changing business requirements. As organizations rethink work, it is important they communicate how and why they are redeploying workers and identify how this supports new business priorities. This includes providing context and rationale for changes and clear communication on new workforce policies. Rethinking work also means rethinking the workforce size, composition, compensation, and performance management. Leaders should reassess and explain compensation and promotion plans for the short term while managing expectations through the recovery process and toward sustainable operations.

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