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COVID-19'S PANDEMIC: A TRIGGER THAT OPENED OUR MINDS TOWARDS REMOTE WORK (LATIN AMERICA SCENARIO)

Abstract. This article touches upon the case of COVID-19 pandemic and the swift transfer to a new work pattern that may have become the future of the office work. The trend that started after the Fourth industrial revolution, where disruptive technologies have arisen and finally taken a relevant place in the international markets, a noticeable and substantial shift, contributing with the modification of the whole panorama of the organizational structure, started to dominate. Reinventions and the latest technology development fortunately have managed to help in the mitigation of the impact of this pandemic. The access to the internet has become the best ally and the key to solve one of the biggest issues that has showed up: how to minimize the harm brought by lockdowns. The tool predicted in the past and called "Remote work" has been summoned, and fortunately, has been a gratifying solution, and has managed to open a new world of possibilities for workers who take part in the corporate spheres around the world, and absolutely changed the way of work, discovering that, actually, working from distance can be a possibility nowadays.

Keywords: COVID-19, disruptive technologies, organizational structure, corporation, pandemic, remote work, solution, work from distance.

COVID-19 arrived to America on January the 21st, 2020; 55 days after its detection in the epicenter, in Wuhan, China. Immediately, the panorama in this part of the globe began to notice changes, especially by the fact that most of the countries in this continent are considered third world countries, so its impact to society was noticeable. At the beginning, it did not seem to represent a big issue, but time showed us how a poor management of the situation in terms of bio-security protocols, plus the panic that news started to cause in population, which later derived in people looting themselves like for an apocalypse (causing agglomerations in closed places and furtherly, helping to spread the disease faster), ended: in a humongous pandemic, in which became evident that even developed countries, such as north American ones, with highly developed sanitizing and health systems, were even not prepared for such repent and drastic change. On March 11, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that the COVID-19 virus was officially a global pandemic, after barreling through 114 countries in three months, and infecting over 118,000 people.

It kept gathering pace with no visible sight to be finished [6]. And without a vaccine available, the only thing to be done was to wait and lock down, in order not to keep spreading the virus around, to prevent getting it or pass it to your loved ones, and hope the scientists to find a solution to this.

The COVID-19 reached us totally unprepared as it started spreading undetectably, though mortally, across the world. From that point forward, we have discovered that nobody is above it, and that it affected most cruelly the helpless, wiped out, and poor members of our society. We realized the value and importance that must be given to family, wellbeing, and human association, and how science is one of the pillars of nowadays humanity, which most of the times does not get the credit deserved. Moreover, we have noticed that a great effort is definitely required to slow down a pandemic of such magnitude. Economically talking, it showed us the two sides of the coin: on the one, if consumption stops, the economic system may crash, but if everything keeps going like usually, without taking any caution, situation may worsen, letting the other side to appear:

a considerable loss of life. Governments had underestimated the power of a virus which lacks a cure, and unfortunately the vulnerable ones are paying the price.

Previously, people were used to what until this year was considered as a normal lifestyle. The days of waking up early, moving around the city to reach the workplace and greet colleagues at working or studying places are no longer a possibility, or at least changed to a certain degree, but even the smallest adjustment such as wearing a mask has managed to influence our behaviour, and as mentioned, society was not aware of, nor prepared to how drastically COVID-19 was about to change the way we lived. Fortunately, in the current times, the panorama is absolutely different from the last big pandemic, and technology is one of the biggest responsible for that. In 1918–1920 (time of the Spanish flu pandemic), the option of working with the help of interconnected devices through the World Wide Web could have not been conceivable, because most of the commodities produced then were in need of handwork, not only to manufacture them, but extract the materials required to it, to operate the machinery in the production plants and to delivery everything to the requested points. Now, the unprecedented outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has required millions of people across the world into being remote workers. Remote working has become the “new normal,” almost overnight [12].

Adaptations had to be done. What happened? What changed?

Companies and workers are the base of formal economy of the world. After the shock suffered when COVID-19 became a global issue, most of the companies, especially the ones that take part in service sector, were able to realize that a big part of the jobs done by their workers is actually possible to be done remotely.

This is not a new practice; actually, several studies and scientific articles were written before the pandemic, and even before the arrive of the internet as we know it today, and somehow, surprisingly, predicted very accurately and without hesitating that this was going to be the future of employment. So, this brings up the question: Is remote work a new kind or way to do

the job? Or this pandemic was a trigger which just accelerated an upcoming process?

48 years ago, when technology was nothing compared to what we have nowadays, a visionary man started theorizing about “Remote Work”. Jack Nilles, a physicist and engineer, back in 1973 came up with the idea for telecommuting. As he was designing space vehicles and communications systems for the U.S. Air Force and NASA, he realized how telecommunications could replace time-consuming commuting for this staff. He coined both the terms “telecommuting” and “telework” as he worked on projects that would allow employees to work at home [11].

Literature regarding to Remote work, or what they called then “Teleworking”, defined it as “*an alternative mode of work, enabled by technological enhancements and increase in use of information technology (IT) on the one hand, and on the other hand, by an unconventional managerial approach, which takes it that work is what you do, not a place where you go*”. Rather than driving to a corporate workspace, they are allowed to be in their own space, whether at home, a cafe, a co-working or the place where the worker feels more comfortable. However, new challenges may appear, as we move forward in the search of new techniques to develop the activities done in the global market. Managing these types of workers may be challenging, but it has opened a new window of job opportunities, now requiring this to be a necessary management skill, as more and more jobs are beginning to move towards telecommuting or remote work. After all, both setups can drastically lower a company’s overheads, which are one of the costliest expenses. It perfectly describes what we are witnessing now. One of the most important sources of stress for any manager of a teleworking team is to maintain team performance and fulfill commitments to stakeholders, customers, and beneficiaries [5]. Studies indicate that the best method for managing telecommuting personnel is through a process called Management by Results, whereby both manager and employee agree on a common productivity measurement mechanism [2].

Day after day, mediatic drama has stopped, the stories about lockdowns have been disappearing, even though several countries continue applying strict policies to prevent the spread of the virus,

such as the use of masks in public spaces. And that the corporate world has taken into consideration the idea of remote work to be applied in their working spheres. Yet, this year has been unique. It is the time to start thinking critically and understanding, rather than wondering, that remote work is the best way of working, but building successful teams who are able to work from distance is going to be the key to success in this period of history. We should begin to learn from mistakes and to look forward to a solution to redesign the world of work. Alexander Torrenegra, a Colombian entrepreneur, investor and co-founder of companies such as Torre, Voice123 and Bunny Inc., is known for promoting remote work as a method to increase worker productivity and reduce the cost of operating companies. *“I think there are some challenges ahead that we can solve, such as:*

– Investing in technology and training, and developing new skills” [13].

A study by an international consultant on remote work in Latin America in 2020, conducted with 815 leaders in the region, found that 90 % consider that they have the technology to facilitate remote work and includes the use of tools such as emails and meeting platforms. However, only 22 % of the firms in Latin America responded that they are working completely remotely. This is a huge gap and more technological investments

are needed to adapt to the new work model. Regarding to skills, The World Economic Forum forecasts that 50 % of all employees will be in need of retraining by 2025, as technology adoption increases. Furthermore, the main soft competence requested is “adaptation to change”. Workers with critical thinking and problem-solving skills are also highly valued. These are points that require the attention of each professional, as well as universities and companies.

Torrenegra, who is an expert in the topic, makes a statement. What really matters from now on, is to try to learn something from what we have just lived through. The key for success when talking about remote working is good management.

Big tech companies lead stock market winners. Companies with net market cap gain of more than \$1bn in 2020, by sector. Circle size shows market cap added YTD, top 100 highlighted, top 25 labelled.

Proof of that is the economic success and rapid growth of several companies, especially those ones which sphere is related with technology, telecommunications and e-commerce (figure 1). These companies were able to make the most out of the pandemic, because the services offered by them stopped being a commodity, to become a necessity for the mankind.

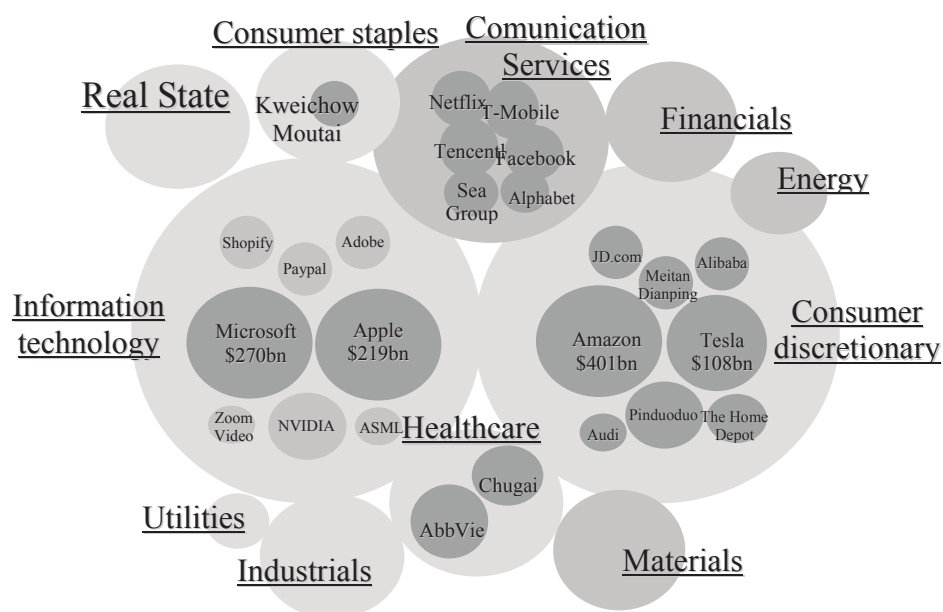


Figure 1. Companies' net market cap

However, the increase in the use of digital technologies produces as well increases in the amount of work that is recorded and stored, as now everything is recorder and stored in what we call data. It not only records whether an employee gets or not on time to work, but at what time, how long is that employee you active, how much does him / her takes part in meetings, or instead remains silent. Remote workers in the age of COVID-19 are conducting nearly ALL of these activities through digital technologies that create time-stamped logs of their behaviour [9] and this also helps to make, read and establish patterns of every employee digitally, practically automatically, in order to evaluate his / her performance and making the labor market a more competitive one, because now every worker is going to try to increase and better their “stats” generated by their companies’ systems.

What about the entrepreneurs and self-employees?

To put it in a nutshell, on the one hand, great part of the labor force needed the correct adjustments in order to start working remotely, so an increase in the consumption of technological goods was more than obvious to predict. In order to connect and interconnect to do the job, of course some network provider was needed, and that the demand on this sector experienced also noticed an increase. Moreover, another considerable share of the population, took advantage from this, not only to try to find a job for a certain company, but used the situation as an opportunity to open e-commerce businesses. In a 2020 paper, by the National Bureau of Economic Research, was established a report of the results of a nationally-representative sample of the US population during the COVID-19, where was found that between February and May 2020 over one third of the labor force switched to remote work, resulting in about half of American workers now working from home [4].

The smart use of social media massive power in order to start selling goods and services through it (which also, of course, got a remarkable increase in their traffic) boosted businesses from selling clothing articles, to decorations, handcraft, and the most popular e-product nowadays: educational

courses. When crisis strikes, with the drops in demand and sales of products and services, damages to enterprise liquidity occur. Financial disruption is present at both: micro and macro levels, e. g., it poses a threat to organizational financial certainty and the viability of entire sectors [10]. However, thanks to this pandemic, such sites such as e-learning platforms were also some of the ones that saw the biggest benefits, because people started to develop a desire of learning new skills, as a way to use properly the time they never managed to have before. E-learning platforms such as Udemy, Coursera or Platzi became more and more popular and naturally they were smart enough to keep developing and improving their platforms, in order to be able to handle the massive quantity of every day’s new clients that were (and are) requesting their services.

Not only was the sale of courses the hit in e-commerce. In just three months, from April to June of this year, the use of shopping applications increased by 90 % in Mexico, which reveals a favorable outlook for e-commerce platforms in general [1]. To give an example, according to the *Report on the Impact of Covid-19 on Online Sales*, prepared by the Mexican Association for Online Sales (AMVO, by its acronym in Spanish), these figures reflect the impact that the pandemic is having on companies, brands and consumption habits of Mexicans through the digital channel. The document details that 5 out of 10 companies in Mexico are doubling their growth on the internet, and 2 out of 10 register growths greater than 300 % in online sales turnover. This data is relevant given the context and circumstances developed during the pandemic that undoubtedly favored electronic commerce in an obvious way.

Among the strategies focused on the digital channel, companies strengthened their presence in search engines, social networks and ads on web pages, as well as opted for online sales, will continue to be put as priority in the long-term. This is reflected in the fact that 2 out of 10 brands and businesses expect e-commerce to represent more than 30 % of their total sales by 2021, says the document produced in collaboration with companies such as Netrica by GfK, Comscore, Shareablee and AppsFlyer [3].

The other side of the coin

However, this pandemic let us notice what could happen when the policy such as a quarantine is adapted, and how harmful it can be especially for the third world countries, where informal work is a much more popular practice and is the one that permits thousands of families not only to survive but to live decently. This people were, by far, the most affected ones. According to the data provided by International Labor Organization (ILO), out of the total world employed population aged 15 and over, 2 billion take part in informal economy, accounting for 61.2 % of world employment [8]. The proportion of informal employment varies in different regions (table 1). In America (40 %) less than half employment is informal, however represents a big percentage of the population, affected by the pandemic. The level of socio-economic development is positively correlated with formality, showing us that Latin-American countries show a remarkable backwardness compared to geographical areas where economies are more developed, such as Europe and Central Asia, which only have around 25 % of their population working informally, making it also easier for their governments to find helps for the affected people.

Table 1

Total world employed population in informal economy by International Labor Organization [8]

CONTINENT	INFORMAL EMPLOYMENT
North America	Less than 20 %
Central and South America	20 % – 49 %
Africa	~ 90,0 % and over
Europe	Less than 20 %
Asia	50 % – 74 %
Oceania	Less than 20 %

Education and informality

The level of education is another key factor affecting informality. Globally, it was observed that the higher the level of education, the less the level of informality is. Those who have completed middle and high education are less likely to be in informal employment compared to workers who have no education or only completed elementary

one. This phenomenon is observed at the global and regional levels, and countries share similar patterns regardless the level of their development [7]. Informality, in addition to job insecurity and instability, is associated with low incomes and, therefore, low savings capacity. In Colombia, for example, the fragility of the labor market, associated with the high proportion of employment in the informal economy, particularly affects micro and small companies and the productive sectors most affected by the lockdown, as well as female wage-earners. Most jobs in Colombia are concentrated in small firms with a high incidence of informal employment or self-employment in low skill-level jobs. The median monthly labor income for informal economy workers is close to 500,000 (138.70 USD) Colombian pesos, compared to 1,100,000 Colombian pesos (305.1 USD) for formal economy workers. Nearly 3.5 mln Colombian households lived below the poverty line in 2018 [2].

Conclusions

The new window of opportunities such an unprecedented event has opened for our society is incredible. Companies were pushed out of their comfort zone by sending their employees to work remotely, and realized that it was not a bad idea, because it helped in the reduction of operative costs while still bringing positive results. It helped us to understand that old paradigms have been broken, and a new era of working has arrived. Now is not only the level of studies or diploma important, but what set of abilities is a worker able to put on the table, in order to contribute to the company growth. To sum up, this year has definitely changed the way the world had been operating. As every crisis, there is always someone who gets benefited from it, and one who does not. The key here is to be careful but aware of the power these events bring implicitly; events which happen once in life and of the scale like that is rare, we have to take an advantage and life lessons should be learned. New job opportunities, new ways of managing and for the most attentive ones, even new and very profitable business ideas have been brought by this pandemic, which hopefully, is going to be over soon because of the cooperation of the different

governments around the world, and their endless efforts to find a cure.

The pandemic and quarantine revealed possible alternatives societies may adapt when necessary, especially if it is beneficial for a wide range of population. This situation is conducive to thinking about alternatives to the ways of living, producing, consuming and coexisting in the early years of the 21st century.

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ПАНДЕМИЯ COVID-19: НОВЫЕ ПОДХОДЫ К ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ РАБОТЫ (СЦЕНАРИЙ ЛАТИНСКОЙ АМЕРИКИ)

Аннотация. В данной статье рассматривается пандемия COVID-19 и то, каким образом мировые компании смогли осуществить переход на новый способ организации труда, который, возможно, может стать

прообразом офисной работы в XXI в. В результате четвертой промышленной революции прорывные технологии стали доминировать на международных рынках, и, как следствие, произошел существенный сдвиг в парадигме организационной структуры. Компании, которые вовремя смогли переосмыслить свои стратегические задачи и адекватно использовать технологические наработки, сумели быстро адаптироваться к изменившимся условиям. Оперативные действия помогли смягчить удар, который нанесли пандемия и последующий локдаун. Повсеместно доступный Интернет стал способом решения возникшей проблемы: как минимизировать ущерб от повсеместно принятых карантинных мер и как обеспечить устойчивое развитие компании в условиях неопределенности. Практика, которая раньше определялась термином «удаленная работа», стала тем механизмом, который позволил компаниям выжить. Успешное использование различных платформ для организации работы из дома заставил компании пересмотреть свой подход не только к количеству работников, которым необходимо находиться в офисе, но и к практике распределения оперативных задач. Вывод, который можно сделать с достаточной уверенностью – офисная работа после пандемии никогда не будет прежней.

Ключевые слова: COVID-19, прорывные технологии, организационная структура, корпорация, пандемия, удаленная работа.

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