Future of Work is Here - 10 Years Sooner

I confess - ten years is arbitrary, and it came right out of arse.

Mostly, remote working in technology companies was an outlier during pre-COVID times. But now that we were all forced to run a remote-only experiment, technology companies haven't been suffering in productivity. In fact, some say productivity has increased. But how can this possibly be? Parents have their kids at home. I have two boys - a six and an 11-year-old. Since my wife has to be there at work (O.R. nurse), I had the pleasure of managing the boys during the pandemic. And let me tell you, this was the most challenging time of my life. Sure, I value precious time with my kids, but boy, am I glad we weren't running out of alcohol like toilet paper. :) Nevertheless, I don't feel any less productive at work. I believe I am more productive. But how?

Commuting

In the bay area, you're lucky if you have a 30-minute commute each direction. I knew someone who commuted 2 hours ONE WAY to get to work. Sure, some of that time was on a train where you *can* work, but spending 4 hours a day commuting takes a toll. My commute was 35-minutes door to door. That's 1 hour and 10 minutes a day. Add an accident on the way; my day is ruined. Since I drive, this is a complete waste of my time as it's not even a leisure activity - it's a stress activity. Please note that I said "door-to-door." Well, what about "getting ready for work" time, deciding what to wear, prepare your hair, gas in the car once a week, etc. These activities add up - we do this *every day*. Think about it. If you take 5 minutes every weekday on deciding what to wear, that's roughly 2-months of your life (if you live until age 70). We overestimate the importance of these mundane activities while underestimating the impact of our daily commute. Commute time is now our time.

But What About the Value of Face-to-Face Time?

If you've read any of my previous blog posts, you'd know that I value people

above anything else. When I join a company, one of the first things I do is remove "rules." Rules such as Work From Home days, Must Be In Office days, core hours, and on and on it goes. Instead, I focus on empowering people. I foster autonomy and facilitate a support structure around the people with all the flexibility in the world. People and deliverables - that's what I focus on. Luckily, our culture was already well-suited for COVID times. So, the new way of working wasn't too foreign for my team.

But wait, what about face-to-face time? We certainly had them, and it was incredibly useful. I am, by no means, underestimating the importance of face-to-face time. After all, I am all about people and psychology. Humans are social creatures. We crave interactions (most of us, anyway). I do believe we aren't getting enough *quality* face-to-face time. I believe face-to-face can be virtual, and it *can be* almost as good as face-to-face (i.e., I am not saying *it is* today). Remote working technologies have a long way to go. The good news is companies like Microsoft, Zoom, etc., are focusing on it aggressively. Thank goodness. Because I still feel we spend the 15 mins of the meeting saying, "can you hear me? Sorry, I was on mute". Add that to the Wifi problems, broadband connectivity issues, camera issues, etc. And don't even get me started on the audio latency. Audio latency is what makes phone calls, and video calls NOT live. It's more of a semi-real-time "messaging" than a live call. The subtle delay in speech definitely changes the dynamics of the conversation. It's what makes us more tired when we get off the phone (okay, okay-conjecture, but it can't possibly be good). Nevertheless, these issues have to get fixed.

Thankfully technologies such as 5G, Wifi 6, Nvidia AI Video Compression (link below) are being born at the right time. The holy grail of this would be an Augmented Reality or Virtual Reality glasses with spatial audio that allows me to be with my team eating lunch - the ultimate distance shortener—all without perceivable latency. Don't worry. It's coming sooner than you think. Ahem. Apple. :)

One other area of evolution we haven't discussed is equally essential - asynchronous communication. This is far more critical now than ever. Think about it. In our personal lives, we text people far more than we talk to them. Tools like emojis, animojis, that infamous "Read" marker in the Messages app, telepresence indicator in Facebook, etc., are heavily used in our personal lives. Why isn't it prevalent in our business tools? Why is it that I

can communicate a complex food order with a note for Cashew allergies in UberEats without ever talking to a human but can't communicate as richly with my co-workers in a professional setting? Okay, maybe that's not an optimal comparison, but I still feel I can communicate with my friends more richly offline than I do with my colleagues.

Meetings

Ah, meetings - the heartbeat of businesses. If it's the heartbeat of companies and we crave human interactions (most of us, anyway), why do so many of us hate meetings? No, not all meetings, and no, maybe not all of us. But there is definitely a sense of "ugh!" when someone says, "let's set up a meeting to discuss it." Why? Do we have too many meetings? Are too many meetings run poorly? Is the meeting agenda not clear enough? I am sure it's a combination of all of them and more. We instinctively **know** there is a problem, but we don't know what it is.

Enter the post-COVID world. It's even more important we take an in-depth look at meetings. One of the reasons why remote-only work is attractive is flexibility--precisely, the flexibility of time. And flexibility mostly goes out the window if my calendar is booked with back-to-back live meetings. Let's take a closer look. To oversimplify for the sake of discussion, I put meetings in 3 broad categories:

1) Decision-seeking (strategic, board meeting, team, architecture, design, etc.)

2) Informational (status, HR presentation, training, all-hands?!, etc.)

3) Informal (1-on-1, happy hour, celebrations, etc.)

Right off the bat, I am going to profess this. If you have weekly status meetings, you aren't utilizing the power of asynchronous communication. You aren't using tools to achieve it. You have to think creatively.

Notes:

- At one end of the spectrum, informal meetings need to be live with a camera on. This is supercritical. The other end of the spectrum is Informational. To a large extent, informational meetings don't need to be live. If you need more depth, then use a pre-recorded presentation. I

don't understand why companies don't utilize this. Sites like Khan Academy (entirely informational) are highly effective at this. We must incorporate this. And yes, we do need better tools to facilitate this.
- We also need to get better at async communication.
- Globalization - We don't have a choice anymore. Employees are more scattered than ever before. Async communication is a requirement.
- Conclusion: This is a paradigm shift. COVID has compressed the time of what was already happening slowly. Those who figure this out will undoubtedly have a competitive advantage.

Link:

Nvidia AI Video Compression - https://www.theverge.com/2020/10/5/21502003/nvidia-ai-videoconferencing-maxine-platform-face-gaze-alignment-gans-compression-resolution