



DON'T BE SATISFIED WITH THE BAND AID OF VIRTUAL WORK

Key points

1. Washing up on the shore of virtual work
2. Learning the opportunities of virtual work
3. The positive aspects of virtual culture
4. How to transfer virtual culture to the new normal

Landing on the shore of virtual work

Many people have landed on the shore of virtual work. Somewhat like survivors from a sinking ship they have pulled themselves up onto the shore and remained there – gasping for breath but have not really moved any further to explore the island they are on.

This is a shame. There is a lot in working virtually which can positively impact work cultures. But as with anything, before the new improves on the old, we have to get good at it. And above all we have to notice what is happening before we can extract the lessons and apply them to our over-all working culture.



Don't be satisfied bandaging the wound

As a first step, please encourage everyone to learn and use the tools of virtual work, which make meetings richer and more interactive. This includes naturally the video function, whiteboards, breakout rooms, chats, polls, hand signals, and add on tools such as templates and virtual co-working spaces. We have experienced many people in virtual meetings all day without using headsets – this creates more echo, less ability to modulate voices and transmit emotions, and an overall higher noise level. Many do not use the video function – and not only because of bandwidth concerns. A simple useful piece of knowledge – people who are in endless conference calls without videos tend to space out and multi-task – which they do much less when videos are on (only 4% report multitasking when the video is on compared to 57% that do not)(Gavett, 2014). Learning involves reflecting on when functions are useful – such as side conversations in chat, quick polls to clarify opinions – and not just simply trying them out once in a while. Just as a good meeting or conference has structure and order, so too good virtual meetings have order and structure.

Understand the challenges of virtual meetings

The problems of virtual meetings are obvious:

- **Lack of Sensing:** Lack of bandwidth limits our ability to get a rich, embodied feel of the people – this can slow development of trust, and we can miss many subtleties of body language and mood. This is especially so when we do not use video functions or when people have technical issues. So, we often sense less.
- **Lack of Being:** Lack of time to just be together – virtual meetings are often 100% functional. We do not walk to the coffee machine together in the break, nor do we share jokes as we wait for a meeting to start – we often just sit quietly or finish off other work. Thus, unless we make time for it, there is little time for social connection and just being together.
- **Lack of Feeling:** Lack of embodied signals means we resonate less with each other – something that many people find rewarding – and thus we can be less engaged in virtual meetings. When we are together in a room, we tend to synchronise our emotions, and can cheer each other up. This means in virtual meetings we also feel less. Since many people automatically look for these signals – and now try to extract them from tiny screens, this means that for many virtual meetings are very tiring.
- **Draining** – constant screen time activates our nervous system. In addition, trying to read each other on tiny screens, with tinny voices is tiring – and many withdraw from this effort or the ongoing stress. In addition, we tend to transition from meeting A to B without more than a 30 sec break (because we can) nor do we take real pauses.

In a survey of 230 fulltime employees, seventy-three percent admit to being more attentive and engaged in video conference calls than audio-only calls, and 82 percent make an effort to prepare more for video calls (Collins, 2016).

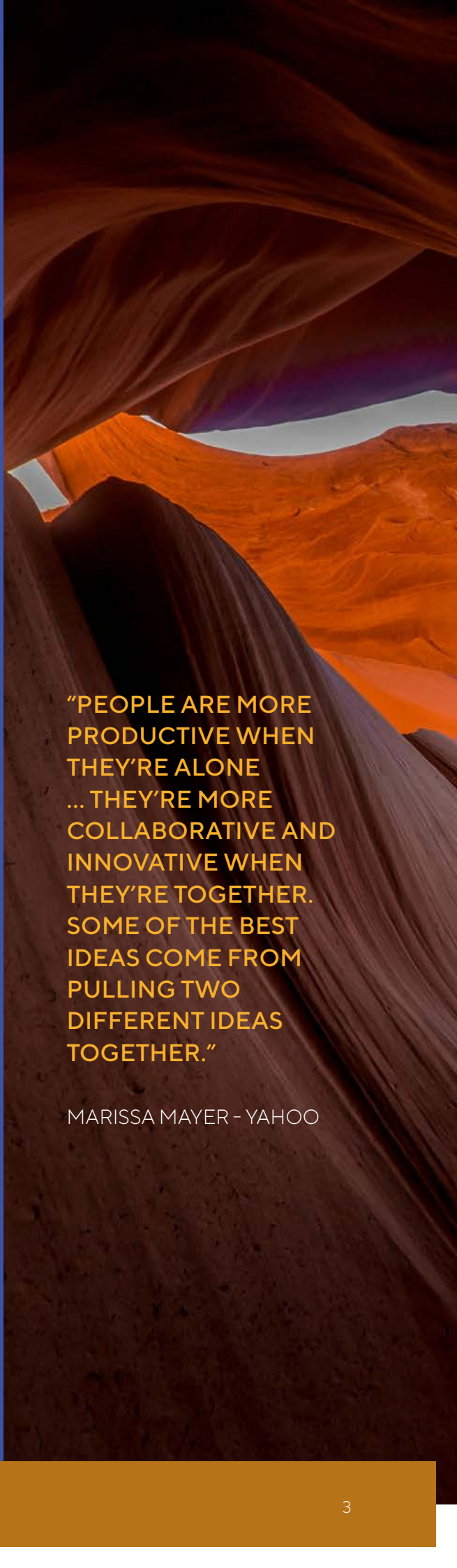
In addition, those people who are more heart based – perhaps more emotionally sensitive or socially connected tend to suffer in this working environment – missing a lot of what nourishes them and feeds their intelligence (Sobel Lojeski, (2015).

Build skills of sensing, feeling and being in virtual work

While these problems are immediately obvious, they can be adjusted for by some of the following measures

- **Ensuring maximum bandwidth** – Use of video allows us to read some facial and bodily signals. Use of headphones with micro allow us so to modulate our voices more subtly and hear better, and thus tune into subtle language signals. Ensuring everyone has the same bandwidth can also be very important – since inequalities in bandwidth lead to inequalities in participation.
- **Being present** – interestingly enough, the more present we are with our own feelings and our own emotions, and the more willing we are to share them, the more we can create resonance in virtual meetings too. This is a subtle but also powerful process. Try it – see what happens to the quality of the virtual space if you really notice your own state and emotions in the body – and when people share this. Allow space to hear people and notice how we can all resonate together. Because of the virtual space being more intimate (it is our home) and there being less distractions (less sensory impressions) some people can find they can be more mindful and present while working in the virtual environment – and are thus using this time to maintain a continuity of presence with themselves that they would have found hard to maintain in the busy office or travel schedule.
- **Making time for things that are inefficient** – scheduling virtual coffee breaks, having an end of week cocktail hour, scheduling team social time online – all of these can help create space for social interaction and a joint sense of being.
- **Discipline and boundaries** – a virtual meeting can be organised at the drop of a hat – and joined equally easily. This makes for many pointless and not well thought out meetings. This means people need to be more thoughtful in whether a meeting really is sensible now or not.

There are many examples of online meetings and communities where people share a powerful sense of presence. This is initially surprising – but is something that can occur if we address the challenges consciously. Sharing mindfulness or compassion practices during such session is a very effective way to build this sense of joint sensing, feeling and being.



“PEOPLE ARE MORE PRODUCTIVE WHEN THEY’RE ALONE ... THEY’RE MORE COLLABORATIVE AND INNOVATIVE WHEN THEY’RE TOGETHER. SOME OF THE BEST IDEAS COME FROM PULLING TWO DIFFERENT IDEAS TOGETHER.”

MARISSA MAYER - YAHOO

Amplify the positive – and let it infect the new normal

All of the above can help the virtual space have depth and resonance – but they do not entirely go all the way to making the most of working in the virtual world. Some particular characteristics of working virtually and what it can teach us includes the following:

- **Connectedness** – it is undeniable that the virtual world allows for a tremendous degree of global interconnectedness. Whether it is weekly town halls, global best practice sharing on topics, stories from the front – we have seen all manner of deeply moving community forums established in companies. While they might not have the same richness of experience that offline interaction does – they are quick, easy and have incredible reach. In addition, it is much easier to cross silos – there is a tremendous degree of functional interconnectedness that arises in the virtual space.
- **Equality** – virtual meetings are inherently more equal. We do not meet in someone’s office or someone’s territory. The trappings of power in terms of big offices are not visible. There is no special chair – and no one always sits next to the boss. People who can be dominating in person because of their charisma or physical presence can often not be impressive in the virtual space. Such embodied signals of power affect us – and can be surprisingly absent in the virtual space. Content is king. This can reconfigure team dynamics to a more equal form of collaboration. Interestingly equality in turn taking is a predictor of collective intelligence (Engel, 2014). It may well be that the equality of the setting plays out in equality of turn taking. Equally it can be helpful to share roles for managing the virtual meetings within the team. This could include a facilitator/integrator separate from the team leader, a tech enabler, a virtual meeting savant to share little micropractices. This experience of equality and sharing of team meeting roles is an excellent habit to take into our normal work life.
- **Empowerment** – it is not really possible to micromanage people working in distributed teams. (Worryingly – it might become possible... but that is for later). In addition, since people are working alone, they need to be motivated by themselves. Thus trust and empowerment are much more effective means of getting stuff done than trying to micromanage and control people. In very traditional or risk averse organisations this can be a challenge – and it will call into question a number of functions of management. It will certainly accelerate the need of many leaders to become more agile, empowering and trusting.
- **Safety and intimacy** – many have reported that people who are often quiet in live meetings can be surprisingly active in virtual meetings. This is because connected to the inherent equality of the setting, virtual meetings can provide people with a greater sense of safety. They only show what they want to. They can turn of the video from time to time. They are not in danger of being easily emotionally influenced. In addition, because people are acting from the safety of their own space, virtual meetings can be surprisingly intimate – and thus make up for some of the inherent obstacles to connections in virtual work. Many people report being more intimate with clients and co-workers – something they have not done before and which they actually appreciate.
- **Humanity** – the office environment is intentionally neutered to minimise emotional displays. Sitting in our homes – with our cats, dogs, kids, and pictures as well as home furnishing style visible – makes us more human. We have to acknowledge our humanity in this setting – meaning we can become more tolerant of this side of our nature. This has been often stated as crucial for the future of our working life – perhaps this is something we can maintain.
- **Humour** – there is something in the virtual world which allows for humour and funny displays more so than the real world may. This is probably because the inherent safety and the pent-up longing for human resonance which rewards humour in this space. We have heard many stories of Funny-hat cocktail hours (who would EVER had thought this is a weekly occurrence in a real-world corporate setting), joke sessions, whacky WhatsApp groups and stand up virtual comedy meetings. This is all welcome.
- **Making the invisible visible** – much of what builds trust in teams is non verbal, emotional, social and generally invisible to the logical or financial eye. It tends to be unconscious – and many are unaware of this level of our interaction and functioning in the normal working environment. When we get into the virtual environment this is often stripped away – and people who are unaware of this tend to try to focus solely on tasks at hand in online collaboration. They might not notice how this damages trust or collective intelligence in the medium to long term. The more time we spend in virtual interaction the more we have to be conscious about this level of interaction – and thus bring to consciousness what has previously been invisible.

So, it is important to become skilled and versatile in the tools of virtual work – so that we can bring out the advantages of virtual work. That will allow us to cultivate seven very positive aspects of virtual work. If we take these seven points into the new normal – connectedness, equality, empowerment, safety, humanity, humour and making the invisible visible, we all stand to benefit. We recommend that you have a real discussion about these aspects of virtual work in your teams, departments and organisation as you transition to the new normal – and see how you can maintain this in the next weeks and months. Some ideas to make this possible:

- **Connectedness** – keep some of the large virtual gatherings and cross functional gatherings – even if everyone is in the office
- **Equality** – share hosting roles in live meetings, shift positions in rooms, change meeting rooms.
- **Empowerment** – consciously reflect on what went well when people were more empowered – review your decision-making processes in teams to support this further.
- **Safety** – discuss the sense of safety you might have experienced in the virtual work, and discuss whether this can be brought to the office
- **Humanity** – continue to share about your personal life. Start and end meetings with check ins and check outs.
- **Humour** – allow more humour to creep into the meetings- even inviting people to share the joke of the week or the funny video of the week.
- **Making the invisible visible** – see some of the ideas in our upcoming article.

Shifting mindsets with mindfulness

But actually, doing this will require a mindset shift. The above points are probably rather obvious to people on reflection – but still we cling to our hierarchies, our usual methods of control, our lack of information sharing or disempowering of others. This comes actually from a stressed mind – trying to control the uncertainty. When we begin to look more deeply at things, we realise we do a lot of this unconsciously and in an un-reflected manner. This is the process of shifting our mindset:

- Becoming conscious of the unconscious patterns that affect our behaviour
- Reflecting on them and their roots
- Attending consciously to our new behaviours.

So even if the cultural shifts of knowledge work can be glaringly obvious – we still actually need to both become conscious of them, reflect on them and really be specific about what behaviours we need to change. Mindfulness practice will be crucial here.

Sources:

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