



PIVOT, ADAPT, THRIVE: RESILIENCE & RECOVERY WITH TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS

Gooty Agraharam, Corporate SVP, Technology Services

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“The advance of technology is based on making it fit in so that you don't really even notice it, so it's part of everyday life.”

—Bill Gates

INTRODUCTION

The way businesses responded to the COVID-19 crisis will be studied for years to come. Companies demonstrated agility and adopted path-breaking approaches to de-centralize their workforce and enable remote working. Manufacturing lines were re-purposed to deliver medical and protective equipment. Supply chains were re-configured. A few airlines began hauling cargo in the place of passengers. These measures allowed businesses to stay operational in severely constrained contexts, and offer crucial value to employees and customers.

Technology was the cornerstone to driving these changes. From enabling remote working

to digitizing information and processes to allowing leaders to execute strategic changes at previously unthought of speed, technology helped businesses move forward quickly even as the virus spread and lock-downs derailed economies. Now, as businesses step into the new normal, technology solutions will once again be pivotal in accelerating their recovery.

In the past few weeks, many organizations accelerated their technology adoption by implementing productivity, collaboration and communication solutions, and business software to digitize their data and operations. Cloud-based solutions were deployed quickly to adhere to the regulatory norms of various industries and ensure data privacy.

While these actions helped companies retool significantly, the technology landscape in most organizations is still far from mature. There are ad hoc and complex processes, and gaps in systems that should be addressed for businesses to become truly agile. In the new normal, the ability to change, at speed and scale, and meet emerging opportunities and challenges will be a decisive factor for competitiveness and survival. Resilience and recovery will hinge on realizing the true potential of technology, underpinned by analytics, digital and process excellence.

There are three capabilities that will be crucial in this journey:

- **Data-driven Decision-making:** In mature technology-enabled businesses, data flows in transparent and real-time mode across the organization, making organizations a lot more agile in reading situations on the ground even before they evolve. This allows businesses to react swiftly in times of uncertainty with objective evaluations of options and risks, and even course-correct faster to protect crucial business operations

- **Speed:** Technology solutions accelerate the pace of operations, decision-making and impact by enabling real-time connectivity, process automation and data analytics. Importantly, it helps make the move towards a flatter organization, enabling better collaboration and alignment across functions, geographies and hierarchical levels
- **Innovation:** The direct linking of data, decisions and strategy at all levels in a business unlocks valuable insights and ideas. With businesses being called upon to innovate around new constraints and requirements, these insights and ideas can be used to spark a culture of agile development, research and innovation

Let us now look at a few aspects of technology solutions that businesses must invest in to achieve the adaptability and resilience to survive crises like COVID-19. The focus here is on achieving maturity as most businesses have already started on their adoption journey, but currently have a complex hybrid environment comprising of legacy and advanced solutions.

Figure 1: Key Pillars to Achieve Technology Maturity



CONNECTIVITY & COLLABORATION

Most organizations pivoted to remote working as the first order of business to stay operational. The focus was on enabling connectivity. Connectivity is often misconstrued as only bandwidth speed — it is in fact seamless access to systems, applications and data through secure and reliable voice and data connections. However, most existing systems and applications are usually in legacy environments, making access and rendering over a virtual private network spotty and cumbersome.

Transitioning to cloud-based environments with secure containerization of data and applications should be the desired end-state here; businesses that have already made the transition are experiencing significant advantages of speed and resilience. Organizations that see remote working as a long-term model should consider moving their application platforms to the cloud. Businesses that are already in the process of making this change can use work-arounds such as prioritizing access based on nature of work (real-time or non-real-time), or redistributing data and process tasks in workflows to ease loads during transition.

After connectivity comes real-time collaboration across geographically dispersed teams. The initial adoption has been ad hoc since most companies were exploring collaboration tools, especially ones with enterprise-level support and features, for the first time. However, replicating in-office communication and collaboration protocols in completely virtual environments has not been easy. Businesses have had to feel their way around assimilating a cohesive collaboration environment comprising of project management tools, productivity tools, content collaboration platforms and workstream management tools.

The next big challenge has been in activating these collaborative environments and training employees on the technical and soft skill adjustments required to enable truly engaged and productive work. Even the simple process

of conducting team meetings over videos has been a steep learning experience for most companies, with rules and protocols around brainstorming, inclusivity, sharing, and mindfulness being developed on an evolving basis. Blended learning, in-workflow or just-time learning and micro-learning are significant game-changers for companies to drive engagement and behavioral changes seamlessly.

DATA

Technological solutions position data at the core of business strategy and execution, making its security and risk management crucial for operations. Additionally, achieving the benefits of a data-driven enterprise is only possible when users can access the data anytime, anywhere, customized to their needs. Building an organization with data maturity requires attention to the following aspects:

- **Architecture:** Revisiting the data architecture allows businesses to make important decisions on how they want the data to be stored, secured and accessed, both from within the organization and outside. This is a long-term decision with several downstream impact. While there are several models that can be adopted, the core objectives are to ensure separating and securing of applications and data, and enabling speed of access without compromising on data integrity or regulatory guidelines
- **Regulatory Compliance & Data Privacy:** Various regulations around data privacy (such as GDPR and PCI compliance) make data management processes such as data masking crucial for dealing with sensitive information. Designing the guidelines for regulatory compliance encompass setting rules and controls for user authentication, role-based access, and access from external networks and devices. The latter becomes a bigger concern in a remote working environment, and organizations should go beyond process audits and explore interventions such as random screen sharing



and additional mobile usage restrictions. Similarly, continuous communication and education on the implications of data security and privacy will help reinforce the desired behavior. Human resource policies should include stricter penalties to deter data breaches

■ **Self-serve Data Analytics & Business**

Intelligence (BI): Analytics and BI solutions transform structured and unstructured data from diverse sources inside and outside the organizations into business-critical metrics and insights to improve decision making and governance. Mature organizations ensure that the data and insights created by these solutions are easily accessible and usable for all employees through automated and customized report generation, interactive visual dashboards, and more. This reduces the time taken by employees to mine information

to guide their activities, and empowers them to drive business objectives in a focused, data-driven manner

AUTOMATION

As countries emerge from lock-downs, and customer behavior and preferences become clearer, insight-driven innovation, faster time-to-market and maximum cost efficiency will become crucial competitive differentiators. Automation solutions such as Robotic Process Automation (RPA) for rule-based automation of repetitive, structured tasks, and intelligent automation leveraging cognitive technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) for unstructured processes, can be leveraged together to enable end-to-end automation.

Intelligent automation, leveraging AI, can mimic human thinking and recommend next-best actions based on unstructured data. Such automation has been proven to enhance cross / up-selling rates and customer satisfaction in customer service functions. These systems eventually become self-adaptive and self-sustaining, thereby helping leaders to take corrective and pre-emptive actions to ensure long-term business continuity.

The adoption of RPA or intelligent automation requires a thorough and accurate understanding of systems, processes, resources and requirements. Process mining software can help businesses identify gaps, bottlenecks, key operational drivers, metrics and success criteria for subsequent technology interventions. More importantly, process mining helps drive seamless coordination between systems, platforms and people, and can serve as a prescriptive tool for discerning areas that need automation.

PEOPLE & SKILL RESILIENCE

Remote working has made employees adapt to working under constraints and challenging home environments, while learning to work with a whole new set of digital and collaboration tools. This has presented employees with a steep learning curve in terms of new skills, protocols and behaviors, and organizations are adopting technology solutions to offer them the required support and training. Digital learning solutions have seen a resurgence with businesses leveraging latest innovations in e-learning to embed training seamlessly into employees' new workflows. Blended learning, mobile learning, micro-learning, and in-workflow learning are some of the approaches that are seeing success in driving faster learning and behavioral changes.

With several organizations now contemplating remote working as a permanent model, we can expect long-term changes in business

workflows, job definitions and skills mapping. Process heat maps can be a great way for organizations to identify jobs where the work model will change, and map skills, role, connectivity and collaboration requirements accordingly. Performance management is another aspect that will change, with realignment towards measuring and managing outcomes rather than effort. Employees will be required to show greater levels of self-direction, creativity and problem-solving attributes to excel in the new work model, and businesses will have to define newer performance indicators to evaluate the same.

Businesses have also acknowledged the mental strain on employees due to the crisis, and most have re-purposed collaboration and communication tools to replicate the sense of connectedness experienced by employees in the workplace. From virtual 'water coolers,' remote coffee dates and 'meet the family' celebrations to online life coaching and counseling support, organizations are leveraging technology to support employee wellness, and maintain engagement and connectedness.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has revealed the gaps among laggards as digital natives continue to demonstrate higher agility and resilience by reinforcing their market positions. Businesses should therefore take this opportunity to weave technology into the fabric of their business, re-engineer processes and establish an agile operating model — one that is inherently insight-driven and intelligent.

COVID-19 is not the first pandemic in history and definitely may not be the last — and while technology cannot prevent new crises, it can definitely help companies be prepared in the true sense.

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