



BEYOND REMOTE WORKING

FIVE SUCCESS FACTORS FOR ADOPTING NEW WAYS OF WORKING IN THE MIDDLE EAST

By Thomas Joykutty, Timur Suleymanov, Rami Riad Mourtada and Shoaib Yousuf

GLOBALLY, COMPANIES HAVE GRAPPLED with the question of remote working for decades. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced a tipping point this year. Lockdowns and social distancing requirements have forced millions to work remotely. Organizations are re-visiting both pros and cons as the pandemic drags on. One recent study found benefits such as reductions in real estate costs and increases in productivity; partially driven by worker's reduced commuting times. Major companies like Google and Uber have extended their work from home policies until June 2021. And some, Twitter, Facebook, Hitachi, and Careem, have gone so far as to announce a permanent shift to remote working for many or of their staff. Drawbacks have been cited mainly at the individual level, including the risk of feeling isolated, working too many hours, and struggling with remote working technologies. In the long run, these challenges may impact employee engagement, productivity, and retention.

Now, with pandemic restrictions easing, it is time for organizations to reflect on the

effectiveness of their remote working experiences so far and decide where to go from here. Options range from fully embracing remote work to putting various “hybrid” forms in place, depending on function, location, and team objective.

No remote work effort, however, will succeed long-term unless companies also rethink and transform their underlying ways of working to address employee concerns and safeguard their agility and productivity. This is especially true of companies in the Middle East, whose traditional ways of operating emphasize in-person experiences and connections.

New Work Practices Drive Business Performance

Since well before the pandemic, companies around the world have explored new and better ways of working, including digitally enabled teams, automated processes, new levels of authority and empowerment, and remote work. The benefits are clear, and outlined in previous [BCG research](#) on mea-

asuring the impact of agile. Teams solve more business problems on their own and internal processes are simplified, leading to greater productivity and up to twice faster time to market. Greater cross-functional collaboration simultaneously boosts product and service innovation, while reducing project costs by 25%. And faster responses to customer needs increase their satisfaction – up to three to four times higher. These factors, along with a more flexible work environment, improve both motivation and morale, with surveys showing employee engagement at 90% or greater.

Recognizing the potential benefits that new work practices can bring, many organizations in the Middle East have already started down this path. The region’s corporate workforce is filling up with ambitious, highly educated “digital natives,” not yet accustomed to hierarchical corporate structures and processes. They are eager to embrace newer, faster, more collaborative ways of working, particularly when technology underpins most priority projects. Indeed, Middle East companies that insist on maintaining the old ways of working may struggle to attract and retain younger talent.

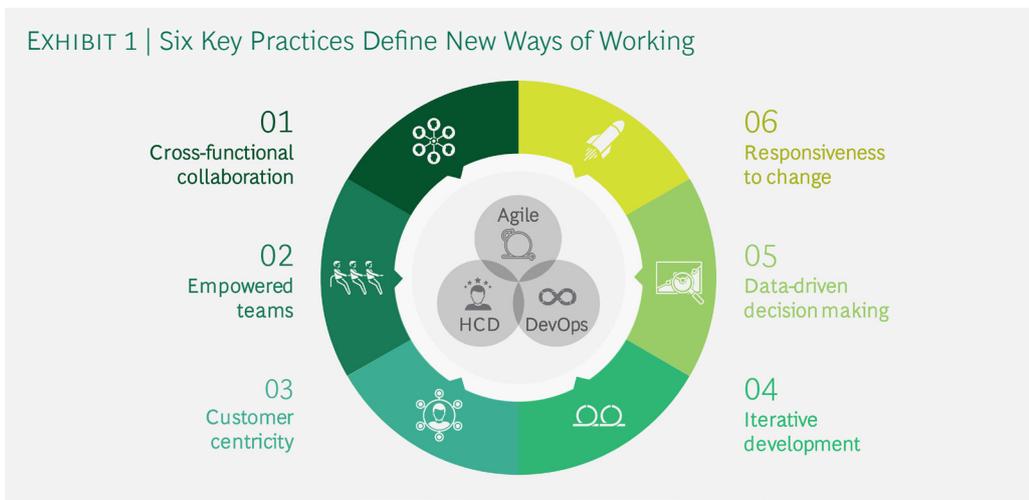
Our recent experience with several Middle Eastern flagship companies shows how new ways of working can rapidly improve performance outcomes. Until recently, it took business and IT teams at one large private-sector company up to six months to launch a new feature for their customer-facing applications. They established a team of special-

ists from functions across the organization to speak with customers, identify their pain points, and run focused sprints every 2 weeks to deliver small iterations of improved functionality that were very needed by customers. Piloting these innovative ways of working, they were able to deliver new features within two weeks. Additionally, customer satisfaction has improved, as the company engaged them throughout the development process. Seeing that the company values their feedback has dramatically improved customer collaboration.

Six Transformative New Ways of Working

What do we mean by new ways of working? Derived in part from the successful processes and behaviors emerging from high-tech software companies—including agile development and design thinking—new ways of working include several distinct but interrelated practices found to be applicable across a wide range of organizations (See Exhibit 1).

- 1. Cross-functional collaboration.** Breaking down functional silos and working collaboratively in a structured way to ensure input from multiple angles—business units, marketing, IT, HR, and others—contribute to solve problems more effectively.
- 2. Empowered teams.** Giving teams the responsibility to make their own decisions to achieve a specific, focused goal,



while ensuring they are aligned with other teams and the overall organization's direction.

- 3. Customer-centricity.** Encouraging all employees to truly understand their customers (whether internal or external) and seeking to fulfill their needs, and provide seamless end-to-end customer journeys, as a primary goal.
- 4. Iterative development.** Encouraging teams to release incremental improvements frequently, learn from customer feedback, and adapt the next iterations accordingly.
- 5. Data-driven decision-making.** Gathering data directly from a wide range of sources such as customer engagement metrics, and using the insights from that data (through advanced analytics, if needed) to guide decision-making.
- 6. Responsiveness to change.** Rapidly course-correcting whenever necessary in response to changing needs and requirements.

- *Better accountability.* Creating small, cross-functional teams ensures joint accountability and focus on what is important, while reducing the risk of silos or tangents.
- *Structured communication.* Daily, short team meetings with a set agenda and regular reviews of work accomplished ensure frequent, efficient communication. This helps to mitigate issues related to isolation, overwork, or unproductive meetings.
- *Effective prioritization.* By being customer-centric and applying data-driven approaches to decision-making, individuals and teams will know precisely what tasks to prioritize, reducing the potential for wasted effort.
- *Frequent outputs.* When teams deliver frequent, incremental output, their progress is more transparent, and “facetime” is deemphasized as an indicator of productivity.

New Practices Also Make Remote Work More Effective

Clearly, these new approaches extend well beyond remote work. Though BCG and our clients are looking well beyond the pandemic, remote working remains an important factor today. Fortunately, the new practices can help to increase the effectiveness of remote working through:

A Tested Approach to Piloting New Work Practices

Having struggled to make the transition to remote work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, some companies may hesitate to introduce further changes. But the world has irrevocably shifted, and we must all find a balanced way forward. For companies wanting to position themselves for both current challenges and long-term success, BCG recommends the following tested approach (See Exhibit 2).

EXHIBIT 2 | Five Steps to Transforming Organizations' Ways of Working



- 1. Find a complex business problem that needs urgent resolution.** Leaders might view new work practices as unserious, and experimental; a “theatre” not suitable for solving real business problems. To change this mindset, use the new approach to tackle a specific business challenge head on, and solve it.

What complex problem has proved persistent under traditional ways of working? Ideally it should align with a clear business objective that entails customer interaction—such as resolving customer complaints faster, improving customer acquisition processes, or delivering a new mobile app. In most organizations these problems are easy to find.

- 2. Start with a pilot, then iterate and scale.** Convince leadership to try solving the problem in a new way—using examples from other companies if necessary. A change effort might typically involve months of planning, analysis and design before initiating any tangible action. Instead, adopt an iterative “test and learn” approach by establishing a time-bound pilot program that embraces the new ways of working.

The pilot should have two core objectives: to solve the identified problem, and to do so in a fundamentally different way, applying the practices described above. Once the pilot succeeds, leaders can take the lessons learned and scale the new ways of working across the organization.

- 3. Choose the right cross-functional team, one that is motivated to deliver actual results.** There is no shortage of talented people in the Middle East who are willing to test new ways of working, although they may lack practical experience. When picking teams for pilot programs and beyond, look for both the right attitude and skill set. Recruit colleagues who understand and are willing to embrace the values and

principles behind the new ways of working. These “early adopters” can become effective change-agents, helping to train newer members and share experience across the broader organization.

Ensure the team is truly cross-functional. Tackling complex business problems will require a mix of people from diverse corporate functions and business units. This will also avoid potential silos within the team. Teams that share cross-functional knowledge and experience increase their chance of success.

Finally, dedicate all team members fully to the pilot. This allows for regular collaboration and avoids the risk that line managers will distract individual members from the team’s goals. It is critical to define clearly the time commitment of each member, in agreement with their line managers, and to ensure the team has the tools and information needed to work together effectively.

- 4. Capture and cultivate senior leadership support to keep the momentum going.** Many organizations support major change initiatives through their hierarchical organization structures. This highlights the importance of leadership support for new work practices, both at the pilot stage and as they are scaled throughout the company.

One effective way to cultivate top-level support is to have teams regularly report their progress to senior executives. One project team held weekly sprint review showcases with selected executives. Despite initial resistance, executives began to look forward to the meetings. Coaching executives on what to expect, which questions to ask, and how to communicate their support helped build morale among team members, and boosted the mutual trust between the two groups so critical to success.

5. Develop playbooks and enlist external coaches to embed adoption.

Assume organizations will be unfamiliar with the concepts and techniques underlying the new ways of working. We recommend preparing a playbook that outlines fundamental concepts, typical new processes, best practices, common challenges, risk mitigation, support tools, and templates. Share it with the pilot team and have them update it during the pilot.

Enlist coaches experienced in the new practices from other companies to advise teams and senior leadership. They can ensure that teams avoid the trap of blindly following pre-imposed processes, and encourage them to embrace the culture and values needed to make the transition successful.

The Time for Action Is Now

COVID-19 has focused attention on how to be effective when working remotely. Today, as organizations look toward strategies and success drivers in a dramatically changed

“new reality”, they should take advantage of this momentum. Furthermore, companies should think beyond remote working to longer term needs.

Here we have outlined several high-impact ways to improve how work is done: cross-functional collaboration, empowered teams, customer-centricity, iterative development, data-driven decision-making, and faster responsiveness to change. Organizations entirely new to these concepts, however, may initially find them a challenge. The key to success lies in following a flexible, comprehensive approach to testing new work practices, starting with identifying a complex business problem to solve, through to making sure the necessary support materials and coaching are in place.

This will establish the foundation and confidence to scale up new ways of working across more business units and functions. For companies that get it right, this may emerge as a rare positive legacy from the pandemic.

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