Business Response to the Covid-19 Global Pandemic

Qualitative data from in-depth analyst interviews

About this document

This deck presents a thematic analysis of 11 in-depth analyst interviews conducted in May-June 2020. Respondents were all professionals from a range of backgrounds, countries and industries, who could provide an insightful perspective on their organization's response to the pandemic.

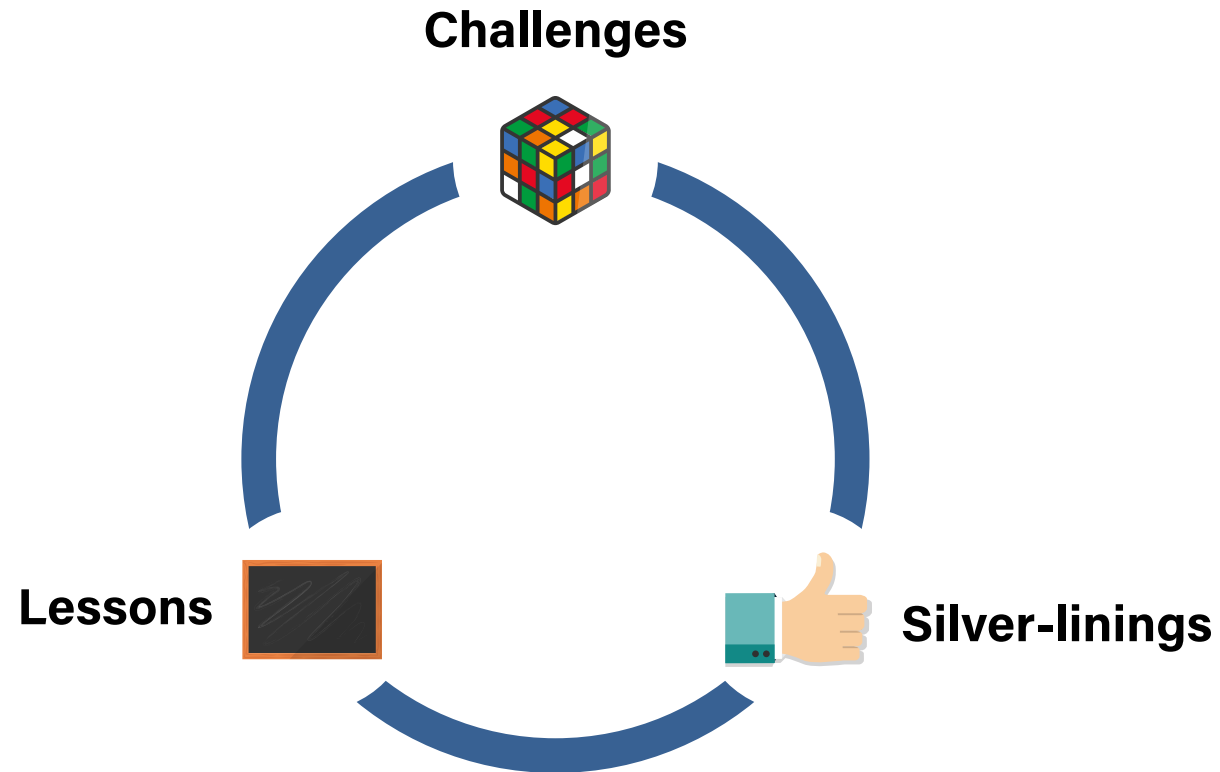|			Featured interviews	References (no. of mentions)
	Challenges Featured interviews: 11 References: 108	Keeping people connected	10	30
		Ensuring adequate IT security	10	23
		Maintaining productivity and morale	8	25
		Coping with greater responsibility	8	14
		Knowing when to log off	6	16
	Silver-linings Featured interviews: 11 References: 107	Increased adoption of digital collaboration tools	10	22
		Newfound focus on health and wellbeing	9	28
		Greater freedom to work autonomously	8	23
		Illumination of strengths and weaknesses	7	24
		Reclaimed time and focus	6	10
	Lessons Featured interviews: 11 References: 67	Recruitment can be broader and more inclusive	10	18
		Widespread home working really is possible	8	20
		Unpreparedness has a cost	7	14
		Adaptability is key to resilience	5	7
		The future of business is digital	3	8

Creating a 360 degree view of the Covid-19 impact

The Covid-19 global pandemic and its impact on business will go down as one of the most disruptive yet transformative events in recent history. With a dramatic increase in home working, many are now reflecting on their experiences and wonder what a 'new normal' might look like. To explore this further, we interviewed professionals and conducted a thematic analysis of their own words, yielding a range of insights which were grouped within three overarching themes. This research demonstrated that while the pandemic created lots of challenges, tackling it has provided many useful lessons, and in some cases, had even led to some positive outcomes.
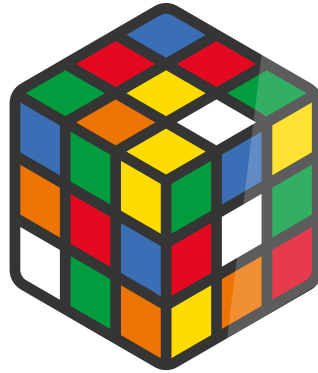
Challenges

Lessons

Silver-linings

Challenges

The first theme – 'The Challenges' – was salient for all of our interviewees and detailed the struggles people have faced, particularly in relation to the extra demands placed on them and their organizations as a result of the pandemic. For most, this encompassed day-to-day practicalities – keeping people connected and ensuring adequate IT security. Whereas for others, challenges meant establishing a sense of work life balance for home-workers, as well as maintaining their morale and productivity.

Keeping people connected

Read more...

Ensuring adequate IT security

Read more...

Maintaining productivity and morale

Read more...

Coping with greater responsibility

Read more...

Knowing when to log off

Read more...

Keeping people connected

FREEFORM DYNAMICS

"We have transitioned to working offsite but I don't like it as much. I don't feel I can get jobs completed as easily and I feel I can't give as much support to my colleagues."

"We have virtual watercooler meetings where we'll just chat about what's happened during the week and how everyone is doing."

"We have virtual happy hours, I don't drink, but now I always carry water with me."

It is perhaps unsurprising that one of the most prevalent struggles faced by our interviewees was keeping people in touch without the day-to-day in-person contact previously taken for granted.

However, beyond using digital collaboration tools to replace physical face-to-face work meetings, many of our interviewees found them instrumental in facilitating missed social connections.

"We are trying to schedule video calls once in a while to keep an eye on our teams. How are they doing, how are they holding up, how are they communicating?"

"The loss of social connection, the ability to just sit down and have a chat to someone, is a big issue from this pandemic."

"We always had a group chat purely for social communication, but there is definitely far more traffic now."

"People have a need to keep in touch, and our team achieves that digitally now."

Key takeaway While the loss of in-person communication inherent to the pandemic has certainly been a struggle, our interviewees appear to have innovated on what it means to stay in touch – via video conferencing and social chat channels.

Ensuring adequate IT security

FREEFORM DYNAMICS

"We have our own employee VPN. This is very much restricted to the device that the user is working on, usually a company-given laptop. The entire security is enabled there."

"Trying to mobilize the entire organization to work remotely is something we've never done before. Ensuring that we have appropriate capacity, bandwidth, functionality, extending this out to homes, ensuring the appropriate risks are managed and compliance policies dealt with is a significant task."

Most frequent in our interviewees' accounts of ensuring adequate IT security was increasing VPN usage, sometimes without the requisite training.

Nonetheless, people were mindful of compliance and regulatory requirements, doing their best to ensure that the current measures would withstand widespread home working.

"Of course, we had to make some adjustment for security and VPN systems to ensure that people can really work from home. It's not just get to the PC, switch it on and then that's it."

"The usage of tools has gone up and cybersecurity has been enhanced, but we are being careful with VPN access."

"Now, there are multi layers of security that we have implemented. This way, we make sure that the company Intellectual Property is not sold out, not sacrificed, not vulnerable."

Key takeaway The increased level of home working has frequently required additional attention to be paid to security. Despite the complexity and time pressure, most have risen to the challenge effectively.

Maintaining productivity and morale

> *"Productivity has definitely dropped. We've got a set of KPIs that we need to hit and we found that everything was down 30%."*

> *"I find it super difficult to work from home. I've got a dog that's very affectionate, so, she just distracts me."*

> *"Initially it was too much hassle to check everyone was working well and doing their hours. But then we got a couple of vendors on board so now we can actually do time monitoring."*

> *"The pandemic has demonstrated who can be trusted to work remotely."*

While it's sometimes assumed that people can get more done when working from home, a common concern among interviewees is actually a loss of productivity, and morale in some cases.

Several saw the pandemic as a test of who could be relied upon to manage their time and work effectively. One even went to the extreme of investing in a time monitoring solution in an effort to maintain productivity levels.

> *"We try to motivate employees by offering non-work related lessons, such as music classes and dance classes. We're trying to put our best efforts into keeping the employees upbeat, engaged and inspired."*

And some managers had focused on ways to improve engagement and morale.

> *"For the people that are self-starters and self-motivators, working from home is not a challenge. With other folks, you do still have to micromanage. I don't think that's shifted very much."*

Key takeaway The impact on employee productivity and morale appeared to vary amongst our interviewees. While some observed no drastic changes, others had issues and came up with different approaches to address them.

Coping with greater responsibility

"I'm working almost two, three hours extra a day and I've got so many other things to also look after as a result of the pandemic."

"We now have added responsibilities, and I have had to do things not normally on my working schedule, which was a big problem in the beginning because I often didn't have the background and information I needed."

One interviewee described providing employees with new tasks to counteract the loss of work as a result of the pandemic.

For many of our interviewees, the pandemic entailed a considerable shift in the scope of their role, often including greater responsibility and workload.

"I tend to shift gears in terms of focus at any given time, and given that the pandemic affected us so very suddenly, my day-to-day tasks are changed."

"I've been working 10 years now across 4 different countries, in different environments, and this is the first time that I've just been a bit out of my comfort zone. I think everyone's felt that".

"Our sales activity has reduced, so without their usual workload, we gave our sales people other tasks to keep them occupied. That way, we didn't have to reduce anyone's hours."

Key takeaway Many of our interviewees have seen drastic changes to their roles as a result of the pandemic. For several, this resulted in a greater amount of overall responsibility and, for others, this meant redistributing employees to other tasks.

Knowing when to log off

FREEFORM DYNAMICS

"There's no cut-off time since we just sit on a table or a chair with our laptops, gadgets and phones. With the comfort factor from home, work goes on and on and on, and we don't know when to stop."

"It's just like a very thin boundary between your personal and professional lives. Now, in spite of the fact you're at home, you're still stuck 'at work' at 6.30pm / 7pm. So, you have to try to balance it out."

"Unless we have a regulatory response requirement the executives have strictly told everyone to not respond to emails after 5 o'clock."

This theme, salient for half of our interviewees, details the merging of 'work' and 'home' felt by several who were experiencing a worse work life balance for it.

Thankfully however, it appeared that meaningful attempts are being made by some organizations to eradicate such a detriment to work life balance. For instance, by enforcing curfews around emailing and considering each employee's set-up at home.

"The staff find that it's now more taxing for them because it's not like going into work – they begin at the office at one time, they finish at a particular time, then travel back home. But here, the problem is you start, but there is no end."

"The biggest challenge was just making sure everyone had a comfortable workspace and making sure they were able to delineate between family and work time."

"I got a few nudges for the first two weeks - stop sending emails, don't schedule meetings through lunch times, don't schedule meetings after 4 o'clock. Now, I am trying to adjust to a new normal, trying to learn what is best for people to connect."

Key takeaway There is a risk of compromising work-life balance through home working, however, it appears that several are taking proactive steps to mitigate this.

Silver-Linings

The second theme – 'The Silver-Linings' – was present across all of our interviews. This theme highlights the unexpected ways in which the pandemic enabled people to emerge more resilient and with new ways of thinking. For some, the rapid uptake of digital collaboration tools enabled greater freedom and autonomy. For others, the matter of employee health and wellbeing became all the more important – and perhaps long overdue.

Increased adoption of digital collaboration

Read more…

Newfound focus on health and wellbeing

Read more…

Appreciation of freedom to work autonomously

Read more…

Illumination of organization strengths and weaknesses

Read more…

Reclaimed time and focus

Read more…

Increased adoption of collaborative tools

FREEFORM DYNAMICS

"Our faculty and students use digital tools a lot. In fact, the only silver-lining is that we were able to finish our Spring term and will start delivering the Summer term via teleconferencing or online teaching."

"First thing is the crisis has driven the massive use of digital tools. When you can no longer work normally, most decisions are happening through them."

The vast majority of our interviewees highlighted the increased uptake of digital collaboration tools in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. And indeed, many praised the innovative new ways of working these tools had enabled.

"Remote-working has made everything totally different. All meetings are done via video conferencing now."

"To help social distancing, all our leadership meetings are 'logged into' now. No more traditional conference rooms. This is the future of work."

"In this new world, we have a constant chat window open with the scientists, so that important questions can be brought to their attention and answered quickly."

"An advantage to doing telehealth delivery that I am particularly fond of is that we now have added eyes and ears in sessions that we couldn't have before. It just totally affords new ways of practicing."

Key takeaway The pandemic appears to have spurred the use of several digital communication platforms which undoubtedly serve as a vital tool to continue working and collaborating with minor disruption.

Newfound focus on health and wellbeing

FREEFORM DYNAMICS

"Some of my team have been attending meetings while cross-legged on their bed for weeks now. While it's hard to balance getting results with their comfort, we definitely need kindness and understanding during this time."

"We are being human first now. I think there's going to be more emphasis on individual health and mindfulness."

This theme, evident in all of our interviewees' accounts, detailed the concern and care emanating from senior professionals for their employees' and colleagues' health, and, in particular, emotional wellbeing.

Others characterised the pandemic as a catalyst for change, highlighting the ways in which people might have previously overlooked their health or happiness.

"Our organization is not placing difficult demands on employees during this time. We just want them to remain healthy and upbeat. I really do care how they're doing, whether that be in their personal or professional life."

"Empathy is so important, and you definitely see this more now in little ways. Beyond that, you need to be there for someone. Consider their experiences and home life. Are they managing to work effectively while also spending time with family and friends?"

"I personally think the pandemic was a shot in the arm, so to speak. After living such 'on-the-go' lifestyles, people are beginning to really think about what's important to them."

Key takeaway The collective struggle faced by everyone during this pandemic appears to have fostered a newfound emphasis on people's health and wellbeing, from both within and outside of the workplace.

Greater freedom to work autonomously

FREEFORM DYNAMICS

"We have demonstrated that we can have people work from anywhere. It's feasible, the work still gets done. So, if someone wants to go on vacation for a month, as long as they have internet access and can be online, I don't care where they're working from."

"We are more flexible now. We respect everyone's individual working pattern. For instance, I'll take a morning call because I'm an early-riser. Someone else will take the later calls."

"We're not going to force anyone back into the office. It's down to the individuals in terms of what they want."

Within our interviewees' accounts is a palpable shift in focus towards the individual, and a greater consideration of their needs and preferences. This lends itself to an organization that is more open to flexible working arrangements.

"Every individual is different, and we should cater for that. Some people are very happy in their living room, working off a laptop and screen, that suits them."

"We're discussing showing more flexibility when our employees return to work. Just treating people more like adults and letting people be accountable to themselves."

"Before this pandemic, we actually moved to a flexible work policy, you could work 3 hours in the morning, 4 hours in the evening, whatever fits. So, we were progressive and that's shoehorned itself into the pandemic and been working well since."

Key takeaway The pandemic has re-shifted focus to the individual and looks to be paving the way for increasingly tailored working patterns.

Illumination of organization strengths and weaknesses

FREEFORM DYNAMICS

"We had remote-working capabilities before but we never leveraged them to the fullest potential. Now, we realize, it was pretty much always there."

"Our staff have their own laptops, their own connection, they're using our internal network. Remote-working was possible before the pandemic, but now, it's improved a lot."

"This pandemic provided a test run for us. If this works for something so deadly, it shows us where gaps were and allows us to sharpen things up."

"Our software has always been cloud-based which allowed a seamless transition to home working, it's accidental genius really."

The unexpected task of moving an organization to a home working setup in many cases prompted a positive learning curve. Moreover, the demonstrated resilience apparent in the accounts of some employees appeared to serve as a confidence boost going forward.

"We had home working capabilities but never took them seriously. We never thought the whole organization would work from home. Our CEO works from his home office, that's the new normal."

"This pandemic has put our organization's mindset to the test. I think it was our readiness, our comfort level, that enabled the transition to home working."

"We're taking note of the challenges that supported certain decisions because, a year from now, those will be important questions to consider. How did we change as a result of this pandemic? Which things supported or challenged this transition?"

Key takeaway Undertaking rapid transition to home working in response to a crisis, in many ways, served as an unplanned test of organizational resilience. Interestingly, for many, it appeared that home working capabilities were there all along.

FREEFORM DYNAMICS

Reclaimed time and focus

"When working from home, I'm disturbed less and getting through a lot more work. Now, I feel a lot more efficient and relaxed."

"Everything I do is 'face-to-face', but now I can get the same results without the 45 minute commute there and back, it's more efficient."

"There's the possibility for more freedom in the way people organize their work now, including less time spent in transportation."

For others, working from home has meant less disturbance, boosting both their reported productivity and sense of wellbeing.

Furthermore, a realization that with video conferencing, "face-to-face" doesn't have to mean being physically together.

Several interviewees reflected positively on home working and the benefits it afforded, in particular, the reclaimed time and energy previously spent embarking on long commutes.

"Everyone is realizing how much time we save by working from home. Most people would prefer that over travelling for two hours a day to get to their office."

"The new normal won't be sitting in traffic for two hours a day. We'll have that time back and be more productive for it."

Key takeaway   The time saved through home working appears to have greatly contributed to many of our interviewees' heightened focus and wellbeing.

Lessons

FREEFORM DYNAMICS
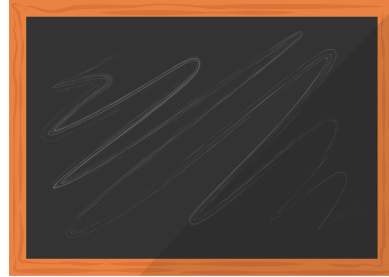
Salient for all of our interviewees – 'The Lessons' – focuses on the learnings of the pandemic. Specifically, what a "new normal" could and should look like for businesses of the future. Many were excited to conclude that greater flexibility in working practices lends itself to a more substantial and inclusive talent pool from which to recruit. For others, the importance of preparation and adaptability were especially salient lessons, as several learnt the hard way.

Recruitment can be broader and more inclusive

Read more...

Widespread home working really is possible

Read more...

Unpreparedness has a cost

Read more...

Adaptability is key to resilience

Read more...

The future of business is digital

Read more...

Recruitment can be broader and more inclusive

"We can spread the net out farther when looking for suitably qualified consultants to support us if home working continues."

Evident in interviewee accounts was a newfound demand for certain skills during the pandemic, and ones that would be a key feature in any future recruitment.

"We wouldn't hire people who don't want to use video conferencing because there is no other way for us to work with our customers."

"KPIs, programming and report-writing have been our biggest needs during this time. So, the people with these skills are the ones bringing huge value to our organization."

But perhaps most positive out of all the silver-linings was a recognized capability for recruitment beyond previous physical or geographic constraints, thereby, creating opportunities for people who might have previously been unable to participate in the workforce.

"People with disabilities who were previously not in a position to commute back and forth to the office, all of a sudden, have become front and center in terms of recruitment strategy."

Several of our interviewees also considered their organization's appeal to younger talent as a result of greater flexibility in working practices.

"Going through this crisis, having organized our teams in a more agile and remote way I believe could be attractive to the younger generation especially."

"It's time to find a new way of recruiting. If you don't have flexible working policies going forward, it could be more difficult to attract Generation Z, it's their time now."

Key takeaway The experience of the pandemic and home working have urged many of our interviewees to think 'outside the box' when it comes to future recruitment.

Widespread home working really is possible

FREEFORM
DYNAMICS

"We found that there is no difference between working from the office versus home, we produce the same level of productivity."

"Everybody is liking working from home. The question of whether we can continue is being considered by the CEO."

"You don't have to be in the office everyday to still be effective and get your work done."

"We are establishing ourselves as a company that works from home now."

For over half of our interviewees, the experience of rapidly transitioning to home working proved not only easier than expected, but also a popular and increasingly viable long-term solution.

"I don't think we'll go back to the old ways of working, this is a sea change. And I think key individuals will end up working remotely."

"As long as my employees have internet and can be online when we need them, I personally don't care where they're working from."

"A lot of organizations are going to think: 'Why are we invested in really heavy real estate when they can operate efficiently from home?'"

Key takeaway With people increasingly settling in a home working model, there already appears to be a discussion underway for a more permanent transition.

Unpreparedness has a cost

FREEFORM DYNAMICS

"Trying to revisit this from an applications view, especially dual factor authentication, would be a good exercise for us to do."

"Trying to make adjustments on the fly is really difficult and we have had to make workarounds. I think we're truly in a mode of hitting the balls as they're coming to us. Eventually, we'll need to go back and pick up the setup for it."

This theme, referenced by over half of our interviewees, pertains to the implied eventual cost of unpreparedness. One notable cost, of which, implementing measures which work 'for now' but will likely need further attention or amending going forward.

One interviewee spoke on the reality of technical debt for an organization that's had to adapt at an unprecedented rate. Moreover, they expressed hope that regulators would be sympathetic – even if "not every bell and whistle is hit."

"I think from a regulatory perspective, it really does shift things and the regulator is going to have to take a more of an interest in remote-working and how we police that."

"We're presuming that every auditing body is going to give us a wide berth if during this time not every bell and whistle is hit. If it looked like we were operating in good faith, I think that'll be supported. But it doesn't make organizations like ours that are used to hitting every requirement super confident or super comfortable."

Key takeaway A lack of sufficient preparation and the resulting accumulation of technical and compliance debt posed a challenge for several interviewees. However, several also report significant efforts already being made to mitigate this.

Adaptability is key to resilience

FREEFORM DYNAMICS

"We were not structurally ready for home working. But once we got the right equipment in place, people adapted and now enjoy it."

"Adaptation is the key foundation to success right now. Sometimes, there are no set rules or theories. You just have to look, learn and adapt."

"It's been a quantum shift in terms of how we operate. We have positioned ourselves to serve clients in regions beyond ours. I think demand for our services will increase because of how quickly we were able to adapt with telehealth."

Half of our interviewees reflected on the importance of being an adaptable organization – i.e. able to 'react to the unexpected.' Moreover, several interviewees credited their organization's resilience (and survival) to this ability.

Fortunately, some were even able to reap benefits for their business by virtue of adapting efficiently in response to the growing crisis.

"It's important to be prepared, to know how to react to the unexpected. That way, we'll be resilient to future challenges."

"One lesson I've taken from this crisis is the importance of addressing low-probability events proactively, day-to-day."

"Truthfully, the most surprising thing about all of this was that we were able to hit the ground running and not miss a beat. Our ability to execute everything has remained the same, or perhaps even better than before."

Key takeaway It appears that, for many of our interviewees, their organization's preparedness and adaptability during an unpredictable and rapidly escalating time, played an invaluable role in their success.

FREEFORM DYNAMICS

The future of business is digital

"I think the new normal will involve less square metres. Less people who are physically present but are available in digital teams."

"This crisis is definitely going to push digitalization of the business."

"All of our support is now digital, there's no human contact there."

Several of our interviewees described digitalization at a rate unmatched by any other time, lending itself to several interesting questions regarding contactless services and perhaps a lower necessity for office spaces.

"I suspect this pandemic will completely change the way the hospitality industry works. Guests now want a contactless service, that's where we're changing."

"We are thinking of re-architecting some of our applications to make them lighter. For instance, a call center supplemented with bots as opposed to people."

Key takeaway   The pandemic has undoubtedly acted as a catalyst, driving digitalization at an unprecedented rate. This has led several of our interviewees to consider ways of conducting business while keeping people-related contact to a minimum.

Where to go from here

The Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly had a devastating impact, and one in which its ripples will be felt across industries for many years to come. First and foremost, we express our sincerest gratitude for the collective voice our interviewees so generously provided. Without this, such rich and candid analysis would never have been possible.

Whilst it would be overly simplistic (and insensitive) to stand by the old adage 'with crisis comes opportunity', it is clear that many organizations have successfully risen to the challenge thrust upon them, with grit and tenacity in abundance. In doing so, we are now in a position to step back and really ask ourselves "where do we go from here?"

Indeed, many mature and innovative organizations are not afraid to acknowledge areas which should have been addressed long-ago – some even conceptualized the Covid-19 pandemic as a catalyst for many valuable silver-linings and lessons. As we begin the journey back to 'normality', it is important not to let these small but powerful strides become lost. Instead, it makes sense to capitalize on progress already made, which has laid the foundations for a more flexible, connected, and empathetic way of working.

Executive Insight Report

FREEFORM DYNAMICS

in association with

CISCO

A new perspective on the modern workplace

Forward-looking lessons from real-life pandemic experiences

Freeform Dynamics Ltd, 2020

For more information read our report: 'A new perspective on the modern workplace', he wants us to add: "For more information read our report: 'A new perspective on the modern workplace' at https://futureofwork.webex.com

Terms of use