I. INTRODUCTION: THE BLACK SWAN AND THE CORONAVIRUS

Sometimes, shock events, sudden, largely unpredictable and unanticipated happenings, end up playing a monumental role in how the future takes shape for all of us, both collectively and individually. In both academic circles and the business world alike, these shocks to the system are now commonly referred to as “Black Swan” events, which Investopedia (2021) defined in the following manner:

A Black Swan is an unpredictable event that is beyond what is normally expected of a situation and has potentially severe consequences. Black swan events are characterized by their extreme rarity, their severe impact, and the widespread insistence they were obvious in hindsight (n.p.).

The concept was popularized with the publication of finance professor and thinker Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s (2007) book, “The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable.” Taleb took the concept from nature into the business world and beyond, even if real black swans are not as rare in nature as many have incorrectly assumed for centuries (Haworth, 2021). The term became part of almost everyday media coverage and even conversations when the financial crisis of 2008 occurred, which most assumed would have been the biggest Black Swan event of this century - until now.

Taleb himself has stated that he is “irritated” that the COVID-19 pandemic is widely regarded in and of itself as a Black Swan (Avishai, 2020). This is the fact that the pandemic was entirely predictable (making it what he calls a “White Swan” event), as in fact, epidemics had been warned about by epidemiologists and public health leaders for many years. However, the severe effect of the COVID-19 pandemic shows just how fragile our interconnected, complex systems are to such shocks, causing the kind of wider havoc that makes even something predictable, but highly unlikely, to become a true Black Swan-level event (Lustenberger, 2020).

Now, debating whether the COVID-19 pandemic is a “White Swan” or a “Black Swan”-level event is truly academic at this point as the disease still rages, with over 700,000 deaths in the United States and many millions more globally (as of late October 2021) (Webber and Hollingsworth, 2021). Already, however, some experts and thinkers have compared the current pandemic’s impact to huge, pivotal historical events, such as the Black Death, the Industrial Revolution, World Wars, and yes, the invention of the Internet (Forbes, 2021). Certainly, each of these historical events had a huge societal impact and were “game changers” - to say the least. And just like these significant historical Black Swan events, pandemics “are not just ‘biological events,’ but social, cultural and geopolitical events” (Jaffe-Hoffman, 2021, n.p.). And so yes, in time we will likely regard the coronavirus pandemic as a real inflection point - a Black Swan - in the way we not only live, but in the way we work, the way we organize, and the way we manage - and one
that will most likely continue to do so into the future.

II. THE IMPACT OF THE CORONAVIRUS

One thing is for certain. All our worlds suddenly and dramatically changed in March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in America (Van Kessel, Baronavski, Scheller, and Smith, 2021). In an age of easy and frequent movement globally, it certainly came as no surprise when the coronavirus outbreaks that had earlier occurred in both China and Europe were soon replicated in the United States, with severe effects (Schellekens and Sourrouille, 2020).

The coronavirus caused all of us Americans to scramble – to one degree or another at that point. In March 2020, from our family lives to our work lives to our social lives, almost every aspect of the way we lived was radically changed by the onset of the pandemic. Health care facilities scrambled to provide care safely to more and more COVID patients while protecting health care workers (Doherty, 2020). Primary and secondary schools (Herold, 2020), along with colleges and universities (DeVaney, Shimshon, Rascoff, and Maggioncalda, 2020), scrambled to provide online education, and in turn, students and their families scrambled to adapt to the sudden shift to remote instruction. And all of us scrambled to buy items that were suddenly necessities, from masks to hand sanitizer and to yes, toilet paper (Knoll, 2020).

Likewise, businesses everywhere scrambled to provide what services they could with new, profound safety concerns for workers and customers (Berzon, Ramachandran, and Jones, 2020), even as many of them faced significant challenges to their own economic viability (Pedersen and Ritter, 2020). And almost overnight, millions lost their jobs, causing severe economic challenges both on the macro and personal levels (Gould and Kassa, 2020). We saw some workers being categorized as “essential” and having to do their jobs much as before the pandemic, albeit with heightened risks and with important new safety protocols (Wolfe, Harknett and Schneider, 2021). The public rewarded these “essential workers” with all kinds of “thank you’s,” with literal applause for many of the “health care heroes” as they came and left their hospitals (Booth, Adam and Rolfe, 2020) and with a newfound appreciation for the vital role played by everyone from grocery store employees to truck drivers to sanitation workers (Vinoski, 2020). Tens of millions more of us were suddenly shifted to working remotely. This certainly brought on newfound challenges for the employees who found themselves working from home – and dealing with the “externalities” that shift caused for them and their families (Hansen, 2020).

The shift to remote work caused an unprecedented challenge for management in almost every organization, many of whom also found themselves working remotely for the first time (Cerullo, 2021). There was really no precedent – and certainly no managerial guidebook – for how to suddenly and radically shift the way work had been done and how to effectively manage in a very different way in the wake of the threat of the coronavirus. Indeed, short of perhaps the massive shift to wartime production in World War II (Bernhard, 2020), there has never been a more challenging situation in the modern history of the workplace for all managers and executives – and workers – than the past roughly year and a half since the onset of our current Black Swan – the COVID-19 pandemic – in the United States. Everyone who manages, regardless of the specific setting, has had to be adaptable - to say the least – in their approach to handling the many challenges posed by the coronavirus. From safety to staffing to service level concerns, every organization and its managerial ranks has been confronted with unprecedented challenges. Managers have had to try to balance “normal” operational concerns with epidemiological ones that were likely a mystery to most of them before early 2020. And all workers have had to adapt to the “new normal” – and then adapt again and again as conditions changed. And in response, many workers have chosen to change jobs – or even careers, leading to what is now commonly referred to as “The Great Resignation” and even more managerial challenges with staffing and service levels (Morgan, 2021).

III. THE GREAT SHIFT TO REMOTE WORK

Remote work – work done outside of the four walls of the office – grew exponentially at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. And as many workers experienced this mode of doing their jobs for the first time, they largely reacted favorably to it. This held true for most workers, even as they dealt with complications caused in their work and family lives by the sudden shift to working from home. And while there were certainly new operational issues for organizations having a significant portion of their workforce working remotely, many workers, particularly younger employees, began early in the pandemic to see this as a desirable shift. This was because many found they preferred the flexibility and other advantages to be found in working remotely over working in a traditional office environment. Many workers decided they wanted this to be the way they would work permanently, if not 100% of the time, then at least for much of their working time.

Remote work has been projected by the Harvard Business Review to be one of the lasting impacts of the current situation that will be a key part of the “post-COVID” world (Yoon, 2020). This would seem to be a trend in motion, for as will be shown later in this article, leading companies not just in the United States, but around the world, are increasingly making remote work and hybrid work (a mix of in and out-of-the-office work arrangements) a permanent offering to their employees today. This is because management is beginning to see expected, and even unexpected, benefits from offering workers the ability to work from beyond the four walls of the office. Remote work has been found to be especially well-suited for knowledge workers, enabling them to be even more productive in many cases working from home as opposed to the office (Birkinshaw, Cohen, and Stach, 2020). Remote workers have been found to be more satisfied with their jobs and to be able to use today’s tech tools to communicate and collaborate with one another almost as effectively as doing so in person, without some of the hassles and costs associated with being physically together (Le Phan, 2021). Remote work can also make an employer better able to attract – and retain – talented workers, particularly younger workers, in increasingly competitive labor markets (Lamb, 2021). In short, remote work has been found to largely “work” - both

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.24018/ejbrm.2021.6.6.1170

Vol 6 | Issue 6 | December 2021 10
for workers and for their organizations.

And so today, as we are certainly learning lessons about what has worked and what didn’t work in regards to remote work in organizations of all sizes and types during the pandemic, we must also look ahead to the uncertainty of the future in a new way. Remote work - and remote workers - will likely be a key part of adapting, reacting, surviving and thriving in whatever the next “normals” brought on by future shocks to the system that may occur (Levanon, 2020).

While we still are in the process of making adaptations to the way we manage and work in response to the coronavirus, it is important to remember that the current pandemic will surely not be the last Black Swan event to come rolling down the pipe. With the pace of change - and upheaval - today on all fronts all around the globe, the next shock to the system - whether it be caused by a natural disaster, terrorism, an economic shock, climate change, a cyberattack, political turmoil, another pandemic, or something completely off the “experts’” radars - is really only a matter of time until another, perhaps even more disruptive Black Swan event occurs. As managers and administrators, we should want to manage intelligently to best adapt to the circumstances and to position our organizations for success in an increasingly uncertain future.

IV. THE PRESENT STUDY

Let’s start with a caveat. The sudden shift to remote work brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic since early 2020 has by no means been just an American phenomenon. Indeed, management of companies all around the world have been challenged to respond to the pandemic on a whole host of operational, logistical, and human resource issues. On the personnel front, remote work has been widely utilized by leading global companies, such as Slack, Atlassian, Novartis, Wipro and many others (French, 2021). Taken together, this translates into a far bigger shift in the way work gets done than simply what we have seen here in the U.S. Worldwide, likely hundreds of millions of workers have seen their work at least partially shifted to the home environment for long stretches of time since the early part of 2020 until the present.

The focus of the present study however is on the American experience. In this article, the researcher presents a comprehensive look at the actions that leading U.S. companies have taken to date in making remote and hybrid working arrangements a permanent part of their strategies moving forward. As the reader will see, working from home – or from anywhere or everywhere - has taken hold in these major American companies, and not just in tech firms. Across America, executives have concluded that remote work “works” for their employees, and yes, for the interests of their companies and stakeholders.

In this article, the researcher presents a catalogue (current as of October 2021) of the leading U.S. firms that have publicly announced a shift to integrating remote/hybrid work arrangements for many – if not effectively all – of their workers moving forward. Then, the author presents a discussion of the surprising commonalities found between these firms’ decisions to permanently shift to remote/hybrid work, and what this likely means for work in all organizations in the years ahead.

V. METHODOLOGY

The author has been keeping abreast of the shift in remote work practices and policies for companies across America since the onset of the pandemic for this project and a variety of other work. As such, he personally had a good grasp of the moves made to date by major, “name brand” firms that had made public the changes they had made in regards to affording and encouraging their employees to shift to remote and hybrid work. To supplement this “market knowledge,” the researcher conducted a web survey in September-October 2021 to ensure the production of a catalogue of the major U.S. companies that would be as complete as possible regarding firms that have publicly shifted to enshrining remote/hybrid work arrangements as a key part of their operations on a more or less permanent basis going forward.

Screening out foreign entities and American companies for which not enough information was publicly available as of this time to discern their precise strategies for integrating remote working into their operations on an ongoing basis, this research produced results regarding the following 27 firms:

1. Adobe;
2. Amazon;
3. Capital One;
4. Coinbase;
5. Dropbox;
6. Facebook;
7. Ford;
8. Google;
9. Hubspot;
10. LogMeIn;
11. Microsoft;
12. Nationwide Insurance;
13. Nielsen;
14. PwC;
15. Quora;
16. Reddit;
17. REI;
18. Salesforce;
19. Slack;
20. Square;
21. Target;
22. Twitter;
23. Upwork;
24. Verizon;
25. VMware;
26. Zillow;
27. Zoom Video Communications.

As the reader can see, while this list is indeed “tech heavy,” there are firms from across the spectrum of American business included in this dataset. Indeed, the list includes companies from the manufacturing, retailing, and financial services sectors. As such, the author believes that the actions taken by the management of these leading companies is representative of the general shift in attitudes toward working remotely today across all industries and organizations. The experiences of these firms thus serve as important modeling for what is to come in regards to the mainstream employment of remote and hybrid work arrangements in the years to come.
VI. FINDINGS

The following items represent the corporate actions to date (as of October 2021) among leading U.S. companies in permanently adopting remote/hybrid work arrangements.

A. Adobe

In June 2001, the company announced that employees would have the option of working from home approximately 50% of the time and double the number of fully remote workers over time as it sees that “the future of work at Adobe will be hybrid” (Vigliarolo, 2021, n.p.).

B. Amazon

Amazon stated in June 2021 that corporate employees whose positions allow them to work remotely can do so two days a week. While the company stresses that it wants an “an office-centric culture” to afford its employees the best opportunities to work together, it does also envision hybrid work as part of the company’s future (Long, Groover, and Wallace, 2021, n.p.).

C. Capital One

Capital One announced in June 2021 that it intends to be a hybrid work company moving forward. Mondays and Fridays will be days where employees are encouraged to work from where they can “work from home or wherever they work best,” while Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays will see employees encouraged to come into corporate offices. However, employees will not be required to be in the office for a certain number of days (Clabaugh, 2021).

D. Coinbase

Coinbase has taken the stance that it will be a “remote-first” company, allowing most of its employees who want to work remotely to do so permanently. As a sign of its commitment to this shift, the company announced in May 2021 that while it would retain offices for employees to gather in, it would be closing its San Francisco headquarters (Chamings, 2021).

E. Dropbox

In October 2020, Dropbox announced its intention to become a “virtual first” organization. The company committed to establishing remote work as “the day-to-day default for individual work” and its intent to turn its existing office space into coworking spaces, called Dropbox Studios, to encourage collaborative work settings (Akhtar, 2021, n.p.).

F. Facebook

In June 2021, Facebook announced that employees can elect to work from home permanently if their specific jobs allow for them to do so. Employees whose jobs necessitate them to do at least a portion of their work in the office will be required to do so at least half of the time. Quite notably, Facebook also noted that employees who choose to relocate to areas with lower costs of living would see their salaries “adjusted” (Porterfield, 2021).

G. Ford

In August 2021, Ford announced its plans that even post-pandemic, many of its salaried employees - both in the U.S. and abroad - would work under a hybrid model, allowing them to work from home indefinitely. The company wants their managerial and technical workers to base “where” they work (in-office or remotely) and the percentage of time spent in each location based on the nature and needs of the work that they are engaged in with their fellow employees (Grzelewski, 2021).

H. Google

In May 2021, Google announced a 60-20-20 work plan going forward: 60% of “Googlers” would return to work on the company’s campuses, 20% would work under a hybrid model and have the option to use new office spaces, and 20% would work fully remotely (Goodison, 2021). In August 2021, Google announced that it would extend its return to physical work date for designated employees until at least January 2022, with CEO Sundar Pichai promising: “To make sure everyone has ample time to plan, you’ll have a 30-day heads-up before you’re expected back in the office” (quoted in Millward, 2021, n.p.).

I. Hubspot

In the wake of the pandemic, HubSpot vowed that it would transition from a “remote-ish” company to one that fully embraced remote work. To that end, HubSpot employees were given 3 work arrangements to choose from in January 2021, which they could revisit as their personal circumstances and work preferences might change over time:

- @office: You come into a HubSpot office 3 or more days per week. You have a dedicated desk for your laptop, monitor, family photos, plants, and anything else that makes your workspace truly yours. Beyond taking your HubSpot laptop home if you’d like to, employees who are @office won’t get an at-home desk set-up.

- @flex: You come into a HubSpot office 2 or fewer days per week. When you come to the office, you’ll be allocated a “hotel desk”, which will be organized by team when possible. Because you opted-out of dedicated desk space in an office, HubSpot will help support your work-from-home (WFH) set-up.

- @home: You work the majority of your time from home in a HubSpot-approved entity. HubSpot makes sure your WFH set-up is safe, sound, and sets you up for success (Burke, 2020, n.p.).

J. LogMeIn

In October 2020, LogMeIn announced a permanent move to a “remote-centric” workplace model, in which all of its employees would be afforded the opportunity to explore whether a fully remote, hybrid, or in-office schedule works best for them, especially in regards to their mental health. Employees were encouraged to develop their own “remote-centric persona,” which would specify the details and logistics of their specific working arrangement (Wagner, 2020).

K. Microsoft

As of September 2021, Microsoft extended employees’ ability to work remotely indefinitely due to shifting conditions with COVID-19 pandemic. This was the company’s third reset of a return to work date since March. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella stressed the need for flexibility in addressing the whole notion of what “work” will be in the
wake of the pandemic, stating: “Our new data shows there is no one-size-fits-all approach to hybrid work, as employee expectations continue to change. The only way for organizations to solve for this complexity is to embrace flexibility across their entire operating model, including the ways people work, the places they inhabit and how they approach business process(es)” (quoted in Quach, 2021, n.p.).

L. Nationwide Insurance

The insurance company announced early-on in the pandemic (April 2020) that it would be making a permanent transition to a WFH-focused model. By allowing most of its staff to work remotely, the company would close most of its large offices outside of its four primary campuses. This was forecast to translate into significant cost savings for the company, without sacrificing its competitiveness and ability to deliver quality service. Commenting on the shift, Nationwide CEO Kirt Walker observed: “We’ve been investing in our technological capabilities for years, and those investments really paid off when we needed to transition quickly to a 98% work-from-home model. Our associates and our technology team have proven to us that we can serve our members and partners with extraordinary care with a large portion of our team working from home” (quoted in Smith, 2020, n.p.).

M. Nielsen

Nielsen instituted remote/hybrid working arrangements for many of its employees early-on in the pandemic in 2020, to the extent that most of the approximately three thousand employees who worked in its New York City headquarters no longer work in the office on a full-time basis (Haag, 2020).

N. PwC

The big four accounting and consulting firm announced in October 2021 that all of its 40,000 employees can work remotely from any location in the continental U.S. moving forward (McCabe, 2021).

O. Quora

In June 2020, Quora formally shifted to a “remote-first” work environment. The company now affords almost all of its employees to work remotely and to freely relocate based on their personal preferences and needs. Quora is converting its existing office space into coworking spaces for employees and now is open to hiring talent from anywhere in the world. Quora’s CEO Adam D’Angelo recently commented on what “remote-first” entails, stating: “What it means to us is that remote work is going to be the primary orientation of the company. So with basically every choice we have to make about how we do something at the company, we’re going to say, ‘What would we do in a world where every single employee was remote forever?’ And we’ll make that choice” (quoted in Jamali, 2020, n.p.).

P. Reddit

In October 2020, Reddit announced that it would allow most of its employees to opt into working permanently from home. It also announced that employee salaries would not be cut if they chose to relocate away from the company’s major offices in New York or San Francisco. Additionally, Reddit is enhancing and adapting its offices to be more conducive to both its full-time in-office staff and hybrid workers, adding more areas and amenities to encourage collaboration (Ardill, 2020).

Q. REI

REI decided in the throes of the pandemic to shift to remote work, even to the extent of not moving into its newly constructed corporate headquarters in Bellevue, Washington. Eric Artz, President and CEO, remarked on their decision, stating: “The dramatic events of 2020 have challenged us to reexamine and rethink every aspect of our business and many of the assumptions of the past. That includes where and how we work. We learned that the more distributed way of working we previously thought untenable will instead unlock incredible potential. This will have immediate, positive impacts on our ability to attract and retain a diverse and highly skilled workforce, as we continue to navigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond…” This year has shown us our home is not a building. Our home is wherever we find ourselves doing our best work, pursuing our outdoor passions, serving our communities. Serving each other. That is what we will build around as we move forward — and as we accelerate into what’s next” (quoted in Verry, 2020, n.p.).

R. Salesforce

In announcing a major shift to the way Salesforce operates in February 2021, Brent Hyder (2021), Salesforce’s President and Chief People Officer, observed that: “An immersive workspace is no longer limited to a desk in our Towers; the 9-to-5 workday is dead; and the employee experience is about more than ping-pong tables and snacks” (n.p.). Going forward, Salesforce will offer three categories of flexible work for employees: Flex (where workers would only be in the office one to three days per week), fully remote, and office-based (a small number of core/key staffers who need to be available in person four to five days per week) (Hartmans, 2021).

S. Slack

Slack, a firm whose services enable many companies and their workers to work on a remote/hybrid basis, is itself shifting to a remote work model. In doing so, Robby Kwok, Senior Vice President of People, commented that: “Slack is going to become a much more distributed company. That means most employees will have the option to work remotely on a permanent basis if they choose, and we will begin to increasingly hire employees who are permanently remote” (quoted in Morse, 2020, n.p.).

T. Square

In May 2020, Square CEO Jack Dorsey announced that almost all “squares” would be able to work remotely “forever” (as he likewise did with all Twitter employees, see that company’s entry below), even when offices reopened fully. The only exception would be some security and facilities personnel who need to be on-site (Sonnemaker, 2020).

U. Target

In early August 2021, in response to the risks posed by the Delta variant, the retail giant delayed a planned return to the
office for over 8,000 employees at its Minneapolis headquarters, extending their ability to work remotely until at least after the first of the year (Kumar, 2021).

V. Twitter

According to the Washington Post, early-on in the course of the pandemic, Twitter was the first major American company to announce that it would enable its employees to work from home on a permanent basis. Twitter’s move was enabled by the fact that for some time leading up to the COVID-19 outbreak, the company had been exploring how working remotely could work better for its employees and for the firm. The effort began innocently enough with “an off-the-cuff email in 2018 by chief executive Jack Dorsey in which he encouraged employees to work from home after a productive day doing so himself.” Today, this effort has evolved to the point where, from the perspective of Jennifer Christie, Twitter’s Vice President of People, “The future of work is offering employees more optionality (emphasis added) (Dwoskin, 2020, n.p.).

W. Upwork

Hayden Brown, CEO: “Upwork knows firsthand the incredible outcomes that distributed teams can deliver. Building on our 20 years of experience as a remote work company, we are now permanently embracing a ‘remote-first’ model” (quoted in Pishevar, 2021, n.p.).

X. Verizon

Verizon quickly pivoted with the onset of the pandemic to offering 90% of its customer service agents the ability to work remotely. It is investing heavily in remote training and onboarding to enable existing employees and new hires alike to be able to work from home on a permanent basis, as well as redesigning office spaces for coworking and collaboration between remote, hybrid, and in-office workers (Robuck, 2020).

Y. VMware

From VMware’s perspective, the lesson of the pandemic was simply that “work location does not dictate success.” The company announced in December 2020 that it would look upon each of its 33,000 global employees as “personal innovation hubs.” In doing so, it offers each of them the ability to work remotely on a permanent basis and seeks to provide workers with the support and resources to do so in the most productive manner for themselves, as the company seeks to build what it terms as an “Anywhere Workforce” (Lang, 2020, n.p.).

Z. Zillow

Zillow was a company transformed by COVID-19. It moved from a company whose executives actively discouraged and culture did not support working remotely to, in just a few short months after the onset of the pandemic, allowing 90% of its employees to permanently work from home. In an interview with CNN, Zillow’s Chief People Officer Dan Spaulding explained just how difficult it was for their executives to reframe their “old ways” of thinking: “We have a lot of people, particularly in leadership, that were really wedded to the way we all grew up in the workplace, which was, you came to work five days a week and you started your meetings at 9:00 and tried to end your meetings at 5:00. They’d been in that rhythm for 10, 20, 30 years of our professional careers and I think there was a belief, that wasn’t just isolated to us, that if people weren’t in the office that they were doing something else, and maybe that something else was not being focused on their role” (quoted in Schlosser, 2020, n.p.).

In the wake of the pandemic, that thinking changed quickly as Zillow executives saw how people, including themselves, could change their ways. Today, Zillow is committed to being a “flexible employer of the future,” which means that going forward, the company’s Chief People Officer Dan Spaulding stated that:

“For the vast majority of our employees, we are committing that we’re going to be a flexible employer of the future. That means for some workers, they may never come back to an office. We are committed to keeping our offices and we are going to use our offices as a place where people will come and collaborate with their teams and other teams. We will also have an office available to work in when, say, they have small children at home or they have situations where they have a lot of roommates and they are going to want a place to go and work. But we also recognize that there is a balance between where people can be most effective and that balance is unique for all of us. For some people, that may mean coming into the office a couple days every month, and other people may want to come into the office three or four days a week just because of how their situation sets up” (quoted in Vasel, 2020, n.p).

AA. Zoom Video Communications

Zoom, whose platform quickly became the lifeline for many companies, educational institutions, and families to connect during the pandemic (Wyld, 2020), is itself taking a measured approach to a return to work strategy, acknowledging that there is indeed not “a one-size-fits-all approach to returning to the office.” The company is taking a hybrid approach - mixing remote and in-office work - and looking to reopen offices on a geographic basis (already having reopened and then closed their offices in Sydney, Australia due to rising COVID case counts in the summer of 2020). From the perspective of Kelly Steckelberg (2021), Zoom’s Chief Financial Officer, trust is the key to success for any new work arrangements, stating: “For any return to office, employees must trust that their employers care about their safety and well-being. Conversely, employers have to trust their employees can perform when they aren’t in the office” (n.p).

VII. Analysis

The fact that so many of America’s leading companies today have publicly embraced remote and hybrid work on a permanent basis is indeed impressive. It is a sign that the “in-office” first model of work that has dominated organizations of all sizes and types throughout the decades is fading right before our eyes. And yes, the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in likely a decade or two worth of change in the way work gets done almost overnight in March 2020. Since then,
however, executives of these leading companies have reached basically the same conclusion. This is the unmistakable fact that remote, and hybrid work not only works better today for their workers, it works better for their organizations. As Richard Fairbank, Capital One CEO put it: “While remote virtual work is something people have done in some jobs for decades, we collectively discovered something remarkable during this pandemic. Remote work is not a niche opportunity. It works at scale in the mainstream” (quoted in Clabaugh, 2021, n.p.).

These managers realized that shifting to greater use of remote and hybrid work models, given the changing needs and desires of workers today, is increasingly not only the smart thing to do, it is in fact the right thing to do as well. Again and again, in describing how they came to their company’s decisions on shifting to make remote work a permanent fixture in their organizations, top corporate executives would state just how much their own ideas about remote work had markedly changed over the course of the pandemic. This came not just from their own remote work experiences (as discussed earlier), but more so as they saw their managers and their employees adroitly adapt to the changing circumstances and get work done in new and innovative ways.

This researcher was especially struck by one such top executive’s description of how he changed his attitude completely regarding remote work. It was an observation made by Eric Fuller, the CEO of a Chattanooga, Tennessee-based trucking company, U.S. Xpress, as he discussed his personal journey from being a remote work skeptic to a remote work believer, something that this author believes many in management likely also experienced themselves in organizations far from the limelight:

“Prior to this pandemic, I had never been a big believer in working from home. Occasionally, we would have people ask if they could work from home and our answer was usually no. I thought we couldn’t effectively manage people if they were working from home. What we found is that our production actually got better. We put together a very rigorous schedule with daily touch points with each one of our employees working at home and we planned regular department meetings over the internet at least once a week…. What I believe now is that proximity (in the office in the past) let people to think they were communicating when they were not. Now we are forcing better communication and our employees say they have never been more connected and communicated with than they are now.” -- Eric Fuller, CEO, U.S. Xpress (quoted in Flessner, 2020, n.p.)

So, while leading “name brand” companies - the likes of the Twitter’s, Google’s and even Ford’s of the business world - are rightly drawing media attention for their decisions to shift to a “remote first” or “remote centric” employment model, beneath the surface, this researcher sees that there is also a great deal of movement toward making wider use of remote and hybrid working arrangements across the American economy in small and medium-sized firms. Likewise, the author also believes that there is substantial momentum toward shifting appropriate jobs in the public sector and beyond, in non-profits, colleges and universities, public school systems, health care organizations, etc., to employ greater use of remote and hybrid working arrangements.

The reasoning behind this is quite simple. Workers today increasingly want the freedom and autonomy that working remotely provides them, along with all the ancillary benefits that come from being able to work from home - or today, really anywhere. And so to compete for and retain the talent you need in your organization - no matter what size it is or what field it is in - the ability to offer employees the chance to do their work in what may not be the traditional way, but in a more modern way that fits far better with societal, economic, environmental and yes, technological realities of today, will be a key differentiator for all organizations moving forward. With organizations seeing that they can maintain – or even improve – their operations with a new operating model incorporating a great deal of remote working, remote and hybrid work is fast becoming a best practice way of managing.

VIII. CONCLUSION

It is clear that one of the most profound and likely lasting impacts of the Black Swan that is the COVID-19 pandemic is that remote work has taken a quantum leap since March 2020. Remote working has rocketed from an activity that only a relatively small percentage of the American workforce engaged in prior to the pandemic to become a mainstream way of working today. There are, of course, both positive and negative aspects to working from home – or really what is in reality working from anywhere today. However, many, if not most, of the tens of millions of workers who began working totally or partially outside of the traditional office environment now want to continue to do so for all, or at least part, of their work weeks.

While there are many operational and policy issues still to be worked out, remote work is fast becoming a permanent, important part of the way work gets done across today. And as was shown in the preceding section, organizations of all types and sizes are following the lead of many of the world’s most prominent companies in transitioning to a new management normal. Today, managing fully remote and hybrid workers, and integrating and coordinating their efforts with those who do remain working in the traditional office environment, is becoming a vital administrative task.

In conclusion, the author presents a practical guidebook for management to make use of as we shift to this new operating model. It is an 8-step “Action Plan” for successfully implementing remote work in your respective organization. This is geared to be useful both to management teams working in times of “normalcy” and in times like the present, where a Black Swan-level event shocks us into managing and working in new ways – with remote work invariably becoming a larger and larger part of our “normal” operations. The 8-step program is based on the best available information and “lessons learned” from organizations of all types and sizes having shifted much - or all - of their operations at least temporarily to a remote work environment in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The 8 steps are as follows:

1. Determine the purpose and timeline for remote
work.
2. Conduct initial assessments about remote work.
3. Develop necessary remote work policies.
4. Lay the groundwork for remote work.
5. Implement remote work arrangements.
7. Support all your workers.
8. Assess and communicate the results of remote work.

And the reader should please note that for clarity, the plan uses the term “remote” to refer to all work done outside of the traditional office setting. As such, when speaking about remote work and remote workers, the author is referring to both fully remote workers and those who work on a hybrid basis, spending less than their full work time outside of the office.

This action plan can serve as a roadmap for an organization looking to formalize its remote working arrangements with its employees and looking to maximize the value of such an effort, both for the organization and for its employees. It can be instituted both as a transition from the ad hoc remote work arrangements many organizations have had during the COVID-19 pandemic period and as a guide to starting up remote work arrangements in the types of work and industries where off-site work was previously not practical – for whatever the case. This framework can be utilized both in times of “normal” operations or in the face of yet another “Black Swan” level event that will necessitate more radical, quicker changes to be made. As such, the steps involved can be either accomplished in the time frames of weeks or months – but perhaps days - as circumstances might warrant.

It is hoped that this 8-step model can help spur your thinking as to how to best - and optimally - employ remote and hybrid working arrangements, so as to foster better organizational and personal outcomes for everyone as remote work and remote workers become more and more common - and vital - across the landscape of organizations.

A. Step 1: Determine the Purpose and Timeline for Remote Work

- In initiating any effort to make use of remote/hybrid work arrangements, it is critical to first engage in discussions, both within the managerial ranks and beyond, to determine the “why” of such an undertaking. It is critical for leaders to know - and to be able to communicate - the goals of making this operational shift (i.e., increasing employee autonomy, job satisfaction, retention, etc.; building resiliency for operational continuity; reducing overhead costs, etc.).
- Establish a timeline for the shift to remote/hybrid work, based on whether the effort is being done based on an external, “shock” event (such as a pandemic as was the case with COVID-19) or it is being undertaken as a more “normal time” organizational change effort.

B. Step 2: Conduct Initial Assessments About Remote Work

- Assess your employees’ current situations and work preferences to gather foundational information for establishing alternative work arrangements;
- Evaluate your current – and anticipated – work needs for your organization and units within it.

C. Step 3: Develop Necessary Remote Work Policies

- Mindful of the results of steps 1 & 2 and with an awareness of what other organizations are currently doing in these matters, develop a remote work policy for your organization, as well as working remote agreements that can be customizable for each employee’s - and his or her unit’s - specific needs.

D. Step 4: Lay the Groundwork for Remote Work

- Determine jobs that cannot be performed remotely for security reasons or other concerns that negate these roles from being performed off-site;
- Assess which categories of positions will be appropriate for any levels of remote work and then, in consultation with unit managers and supervisors, make initial decisions regarding assigning specific employees to remote/hybrid work (and work groups) and, in discussions with individual employees, determine the optimal level of remote/hybrid work for each of them;
- Working with work groups, determine the optimal amount of days that the team will all - or most - be present for in-office collaborative work to make an initial assessment on the amount of office space needed for the organization and its subunits and the types of spaces that will be necessary for groups to best work together in the office environment;
- Prior to making initial remote/hybrid work assignments, establish training - based on best available resources/information/best practices - for all employees who will be working on a remote basis and for their managers as well;
- Prior to making initial remote/hybrid work assignments, assess employee technology and home office needs to develop a plan for providing employees with the computing, networking, and ancillary resources they need to optimally work connected from home in a productive - and secure - manner.

E. Step 5: Implement Remote Work Arrangements

- Make remote/hybrid work assignments for employees and work groups;
- In the initial period (first days and weeks), initiate informal and formal efforts (communications, conversations, meetings [yes, including online meetings], etc.) to reach out to all employees and work groups – both in and out of the office environment - to monitor for transitional issues (in terms of operational problems) and for personal issues as well;
- Over the longer term (not just over the initial months and first year, but on an ongoing basis), proactively initiate and foster communications with all current workers and work teams, both to ensure operational productivity and efficiency and to gain feedback on how to make “mid-course corrections” that can enhance how remote/hybrid work arrangements “work” for those working in this manner.
F. Step 6: Monitor and Manage Organizational Culture

- Make specific efforts – small and large – to ensure that communication channels are open and active between employees, work groups, and management and to work to maintain the organizational culture and feelings of being “connected” and truly on the same team, regardless of whether workers are working on and/or off-site. Managing the culture of the organization – both as a whole and within locations/units/work teams – will be more critical than ever, and as such, managers at all levels should be urged and empowered (with discretion and with resources) to conduct activities that help foster feelings and a sense of connectedness between all employees, regardless of where and how they might work with each other. Team building sessions, communication forums, and opportunities for employees to simply “get together” – both online and in person – will take on more importance than ever, and such efforts, whether management-led or simply management-supported, should be strongly encouraged.

G. Step 7: Support All Your Workers

- Establish a formal program to make sure that all employees have direct access to support mental health resources through the organization and through its benefits program (an EAP – Employee Assistance Program would be an ideal gateway);
- Support the efforts of self-organizing ERGs (Employee Resource Groups) based around common demographics/interest areas to serve as an “employees helping their fellow employees” resource that may be just as, if not more, important to employees looking for help in dealing with work/life issues in the remote/hybrid work environment.
- Stay abreast of changing worker needs and developments in technology to ensure that your remote/hybrid workers have what they need to do their jobs properly, wherever and whenever they are working connectedly for the organization;
- With all of this, there need to be methods developed and utilized to ensure that all of these efforts “work” to support the needs of both remote/hybrid workers and those who supervise them;
- Examine your recruitment, interviewing, and hiring processes to ensure that they match the needs of your current – and projected future – work arrangements and strive to make continuous improvements in your human resource practices and policies, as well as your employee benefit policies, to ensure a match with the needs of your current and future workforce, especially as it related to the need for remote/hybrid work;
- Make certain that job requirements (knowledge, skills, and abilities) match what will be specifically required for remote/hybrid work and monitor how, where, and whom your organization recruits, as the physical location of applicants/employees may well – and likely won’t – matter as it has without remote work being an option.

H. Step 8: Assess and Communicate the Results of Remote Work

- Be aware of the internal and external constituencies of remote work and be proactive in communicating the who / what / when / where / why of your organization’s remote/hybrid work arrangements and be proactive in communicating not only with your direct constituents, but also with the wider constituencies of other organizations and management teams who will be looking for information and guidance on what works - and what doesn’t work – when it comes to having remote/hybrid working arrangements;
- Establish a periodic formal review process – at least quarterly - to review the state of your remote/hybrid work arrangements to assess how they are truly working for your organization/agency/customers (both external and internal) and for your employees and be willing to make changes as needed in connected working arrangements on the organizational, work unit, and individual levels. And each year moving forward there should be an annual review of the state of remote/hybrid work in your organization, and an “Annual Report” on such efforts would be of interest both to your internal and external constituents and perhaps well beyond.

REFERENCES


Chamings, A. (2021, May 6). Coinbase to Close San Francisco offices for good, will have no headquarters. SFGate.


Dr. David C. Wyld was born and raised in the Dallas, Texas area. He received a D.B.A. in Management from the University of Memphis in 1993. Previously, he had earned both an M.B.A. and a B.B.A. from Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas in 1985 and 1984, respectively. He currently serves as the Merritt Professor of Strategic Management at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, Louisiana. Dr. Wyld is the founder and publisher of both Modern Business Press (publishing leading-edge academic journals) and The IDEA Publishing (publishing articles of interest across a wide variety of topics, giving both newbie authors and content marketers a platform for their ideas). As a prolific writer himself, he is a frequent contributor to both respected academic journals and widely read trade and general interest publications. He has established himself as one of the leading academic experts on emerging applications of technology in both the private and public sectors. Dr. Wyld continues to be an active strategic management consultant, a qualified expert witness, and invited speaker on a wide variety of topics to trade, corporate, governmental, and academic audiences.

Dr. Wyld has earned Southeastern’s President’s Award for both Excellence in Teaching and Research, making him one of a select group of faculty who have been awarded campus-wide recognition for more than one aspect of the professorial role.