

# The Design of Work in a Time of Crisis

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One morning in March we woke up and everything was different. For the foreseeable future we would shelter in place and do our best to carry on working without leaving our homes. Vast segments of the Western world's workforce changed their routines overnight by skipping the morning commute and opening their laptops in workplaces carved from the spaces of their personal lives.

With the grim numbers coming from news outlets, the facemasks and Zoom calls, a new everyday gains traction. This pandemic *war*, as it has been described, like all previous wars sees people improvising, inventing and adapting in order to get by. History tells us that the improvisation and invention by people attempting to bring order to the chaos of war accelerates human knowledge and, despite growing out of horror and devastation, improves our future.

The period following the American Civil War saw tremendous advances in the practice of medicine and healthcare operations. Squalid, unorganized treatment centers that killed nearly two times the number of soldiers who died on battlefields, gave way to planned, airy treatment wards that would help to control the spread of disease. Keeping a structured written record allowed caregivers to treat the ill in a more organized and effective way. As North and South reunited, healthcare's physical infrastructure, techniques, data, equipment and operations transformed. It is not likely to last as long as the Civil War, but it is already clear that this pandemic war, as it devastates, will leave us changed forever. In this current period of what may be called wartime living, there is opportunity to learn about the workforce that left the office last month and continues to be productive from home.



**Improvisation.** As a World War I Army nurse, the author's grandmother (seated third from left) shortened her uniform skirts to inches above her high-button shoes in order to avoid circulating contaminants from the ground into the air of hospital wards.

Every Zoom meeting that corporate employees organize and execute is a collection of individuals who have figured out how to get their equipment operating, momentarily push their personal lives aside to show up on time, and somehow function effectively within a virtual event – for 30 minutes, an hour, two hours or more. Every name on the conferencing software's 'Attendee' list represents a unique collection of improvisations and inventions that have brought that voice to the meeting. Collectively this group, despite each member working from a unique situation, will itself figure out how to assemble, interact and successfully achieve the meeting's desired outcome. This is happening hundreds if not thousands of times every day within corporations, across cities, states and countries. Within these wartime behaviors are learnings that we can take into our future. We should pay close attention to what's going on.

**I can't be seen like this. Or can I?** The video capability within Zoom allows us to be seen and heard. This is great for the family and friends virtual happy hours that are now the norm, but coworkers can be a different story. In a recent look at virtual meeting behaviors within a large multinational manufacturer, Zenda Consulting found that Europeans use their video capability most of the time, while their American counterparts rarely turned it on. We know that video conferencing makes collaboration more productive and interpersonal connection stronger. This time of quarantine is probably a good time to understand this behavior and experiment with methods that encourage a *Video On* culture.

**That kid of yours is annoying. Or is he?** Children are usually present in the workplace as framed snapshots. Now with children at home during the virtual workday, their voices, cries and smiling faces can be part of any meeting, at any time. Initially this might be annoying to a co-worker without kids, or one whose kids are grown and thinks that theirs "never behaved like this", or workers who are expecting the patterns of workplace meetings to persist in this new virtual world. Look closer at these interruptions and see if the video faces on the screen (if video is turned on) aren't smiling, even if just for a second. Perhaps we didn't even know our co-worker had a son, daughter, twins, infant, toddler – now we know them better. If parents recognize that this virtual work may be new and curious to their child, perhaps a formal introduction to this new normal, and those voices and faces coming through Mom's computer, will alleviate concern and satisfy curiosity. After all, to a kid, what's being discussed on a virtual meeting is

probably far less interesting than what they typically have going on. Perhaps a reasonable dose of kids in the work setting will be good for us – and them.

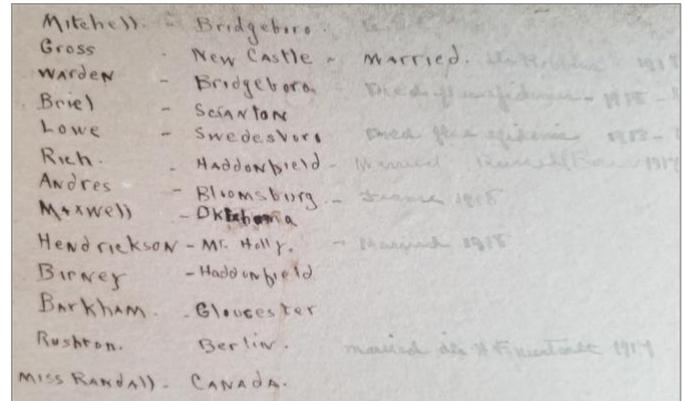
**Without a commute, I can work more. Should I?** Our daily patterns include the time that we get out of bed every day in order to be on the road and at work on time. During this pandemic our walk to the improvised office that we have created in the spare room takes just a minute. Once we are in our seats the day begins and before we know it what had been an eight-hour day is now nine, ten or more. And because it is safe to assume no one has anywhere else to go or fewer things to do during quarantine, the likelihood of extending work into the weekend is high. The parking lot no longer empties, and offices don't grow quiet as daily signals to wrap it up. Knowing that we're all in the same quarantine boat is not a free pass to push the business' needs into the personal hours of others – no matter how bored we are growing of Netflix's offerings.

**I'm pretty sure I could do this better, but how?** Challenges like learning how to obscure my video's background during virtual meetings, the do's and don'ts of real-time collaboration, and getting someone's attention when approaching their desk is no longer an option, produce a host of unofficial support channels and individual workarounds. These methods, growing from the necessity of the moment, are likely a trove of direction for the definition and dissemination of hints, tricks, policy and procedure in our current challenging time.

As the virtual workforce finds its feet and new patterns and norms take hold, now is a good time to understand what is transpiring within this improvised work event. For the near-term, we should learn what is working and what is not, so that corporate leadership can check policy and procedure recommendations and witness the inventions of the many in order to promote the best ideas and practices transpiring now. Long-term, operational strategies can be transformed by a closer look at what is transpiring now and using these insights to model new methods of work that we could not have imagined or considered before this terrible time.

There is no doubt that the workforce will be forever changed by what is happening now. Within this moment though is a chance to learn and understand new things about the human context of our operations – things that this war affords us the unique opportunity to see. By looking closely and understanding what we witness, we have the rare chance to grasp advantages, innovations and inventions that, after this terror has passed, can leave our workforce stronger and more effective than ever – and perhaps leave institutions more humane than their leaders could have ever imagined.

#### A sad footnote



On the reverse side of the photo appearing earlier in this article, the author's grandmother recorded the hometowns and life events of these women. Two of these caregivers would lose their lives in the Spanish Flu epidemic.