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The New Consultancy Model: Reimagining Work

Executive Summary

Consultancy firms have undergone a sweeping renovation in the past two years, adapting their businesses to the reality of the post-COVID world at sink-or-swim speeds. Consultants who specialize in certain vital areas, have risen to the occasion of massive demand as the business landscape as a whole shifted with equal rapidity. As the world begins to emerge from the worst of the pandemic, the most important question may be: what have we learned?

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1. Overview



Even before COVID, business was experiencing a sea change, and in many ways the consulting field felt it first. After all, it was consultants' job to flag the shifts in investor priorities, workforce demographics, and supply chain demands for the businesses that hired them. Still, new ways of doing things can be a hard sell. In that sense, the pressures of the pandemic have been an opportunity--a tough lesson in the payoff of a long-term outlook.

Advances in technology have given companies powerful new tools. They've also led to a need to hire and train people who can use those tools to their full potential. Now, in a reshuffled job market, this need is more pressing than ever--and this is only one of the major issues consultants will be called on to assist with in the coming months. The good news is that businesses, by necessity, have become more forward-thinking and open to new approaches. The world is ripe for ingenuity.

2. Leading through change

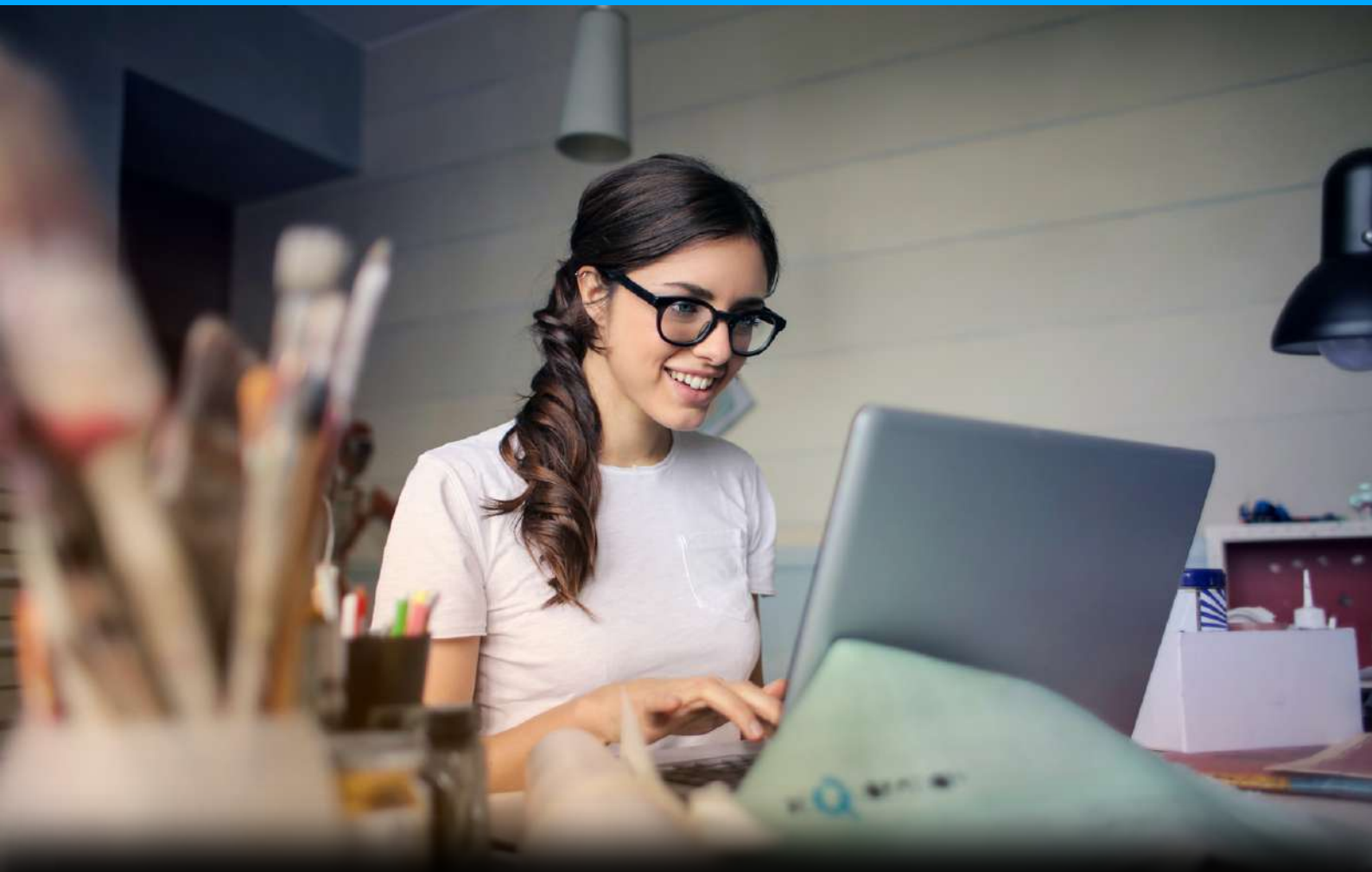


When a consultant is called in, it's usually because ingenuity is called for--because something has to change, as with technology updates, or because something already has changed and needs to be adapted to, as with new regulatory statutes (or a nationwide shelter-in-place order). These periods of flux require everyone to get on the same page. Well-defined goals and a step-by-step plan of action are a must.

Not everything can be prepared for, of course, and savvy managers (and the consultants they trust) have learned to expect the unexpected. The relative stability of global markets in the past decade has largely hidden the efforts of the workers and experts who've addressed the fallout from one major change after another. Cost restrictions, quick adoption of new systems, and generally doing more with less have become the norm.

In this climate, camaraderie and cooperation are everything. Consultants can take the reins in the face of change by finding common goals that everyone involved can share and relating them to each team and individual. Armed with a sense of shared purpose, an organization can become more than the sum of its parts.

3. Managing in a crisis



It feels like ancient history now, but believe it or not, 2020 began with record-high stock indexes and an all-around feeling of security. In late February, all of that changed overnight. The streamlining, decentralization, and shift to the virtual office that futurists and tech experts had long predicted became urgent necessities, and consultants and their clients had to adapt—fast.

While scientists understood on some level that humanity on the whole was heading into rough waters (pandemics often begin with novel pathogens that move from animals to humans, a consequence of habitat loss and climate change), businesses had presumed that they'd have years to prepare for the first major global problems. Contingency plans designed for more isolated disruptions and disasters had to be revisited or rewritten from scratch. In many cases, the safety of the public depended on the ability to keep essential services running with minimum face-to-face contact. Some contingency plans succeeded and some did not. Some “succeeded” on the bottom line, but at an unacceptably high human cost (deaths among food supply workers were up to 60% higher in 2020 than in a normal year, partly due to a lack of basic health precautions like sick leave). All can allow consultants to bring hard-won knowledge into the future.

One important takeaway is the importance of communication, particularly in a remote workplace. Across industries, businesses have had to restructure and speed up how teams check in with one another—often implementing updates that had been met with resistance for years. Consulting played and is still playing a key role in this process, explaining the importance of real-time collaboration and helping spur adoption at multiple levels of a company.

4. Key skills for the new workplace



One major feature of today's organizations is automation. Tedious but vital internal processes are becoming more like assembly lines that require more oversight than elbow grease from their human counterparts.

That means the skill sets modern companies seek look different. Uniquely human talents like creative problem solving, critical thinking, and on-the-spot learning are everything. Strong communication skills—especially as companies become more reliant on written exchanges rather than meetings—are also a hot commodity.

Also in demand are specialized knowledge bases like coding, social media marketing, and business development, which consultants may provide on an as-needed basis or help clients begin to hire or train for. Many aspects of the business world have begun to be honed down to a science, and thus people with highly specific expertise are the heroes of the hour.

On the other hand, budget limitations for staffing may open doors for generalists with broad knowledge of many aspects of their field. Consultants may be called upon to evaluate candidates mainly for flexibility and self-sufficiency.

5. Creating an adaptive workplace



Simultaneous need for versatility and specialization sounds like a paradox because it is a paradox –the kind that has always existed in business: what’s needed to do the work well is costly; profitability demands lowered costs; and success is likely to arise at the intersection of these competing limits.

Most consultants who work with businesses intuitively understand this, but it should be at the forefront of their minds as they equip clients for a future likely to be filled with twists and turns. They should be spreading the mindset that most of each employee’s work efforts will be spent responding to change—both with clients and within their own firms.

Fortunately, most of the world’s working people have already received a masterclass in this reality in the form of COVID-19. With major operations threatened, leaders and employees were forced to re-shape their plans and respond to chaotic conditions.

Workers must be prepared for an era where companies are increasingly willing to rethink which tasks and responsibilities have to be managed in-house and which can be outsourced—including core operations.

Asking for suggestions can boost creativity by sparking an exchange of ideas, even in the absence of a current problem up for discussion. Giving people autonomy helps them grow.

However, their growth will be enhanced by discussing the risks inherent in their projects, listening, asking leading questions and really taking the time to understand how they approach their tasks. This helps people reach their own conclusions and also “ask the right questions” when they tackle assignments.

As automation cuts down on the donkey work, people will be free to spend more time on analysis, meaning critical thinking will be a key skill for tomorrow’s workforce. Many firms are offering opportunities for consultants to train and improve their skills, because whatever skillset you enter the company with may not be the skillset you need in two years’ time.

Managers must also understand that the youngest workers have different frames of reference and different ways of consuming information. Part of a manager’s role is to help everyone contextualize and make sense of events, and reframe them in ways that support productivity.

Organizations will also need to adapt to changes in the wider economy post-COVID. Employees will need to be more self-reliant as remote workers. Companies will need to accept that the heyday of business travel is over—and that that opens up possibilities of hiring from much further afield. When firms are willing to hire remote workers, both employers and employees will enjoy more choice.

6. Diversity & inclusion



Amid the pandemic and its economic fallout, Black Americans continued to suffer disproportionate violence from police and other institutions. Protests responding to the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis asked Americans to examine systemic racism with a new urgency, and many responded. As a society, we became more aware of the long road that remains ahead to true equity.

Diverse hiring alone cannot remedy the problems that resulted in the killing of an innocent man, although it can help. Consulting firms can play a vital role in helping companies address racism beyond the HR department, rooting out policies that perpetuate systemic racism and encouraging divestment from political and financial entities that want to keep those policies in place.

The key driver of racial inequality is not racist individuals, although they can certainly do harm and should be addressed for the good of organizations. It is the entrenched legal and economic barriers that compound generational setbacks (redlining, loan policies that prevent upward mobility, environmental racism) and the cultural factors that exacerbate generational trauma (lack of representation, devaluation of minority cultural practices, tokenism).

Since many consultants work with a variety of companies and industries, they are uniquely poised to make a difference. Self-education is essential, as is the confidence to speak up and the diplomatic skills to advocate for those with less power in an organization to those with more.

As with the new change-oriented nature of operations, addressing social inequality requires a willingness to tolerate discomfort. Having difficult conversations, fixing deeply entrenched systemic biases, and overcoming long-standing pain will all be worth it in the long run—to all of us.

7. Technology & innovation



The current tech revolution in consultancy firms is about efficiency: finding ways for machines to do the tedious parts of the job, freeing up humans to do the parts that only a human can do.

It's also about profit: a recent survey found over 50% of CEOs measure the success of innovation by value creation, and over 25% look for improvements in the bottom line.

However, the highly regulated nature of the consultancy business has dissuaded some leaders from encouraging business process innovation. But this is changing: data and technology have reached a point where we can put more tools in the hands of non-techie employees, who can use them to automate processes without knowing how to code.

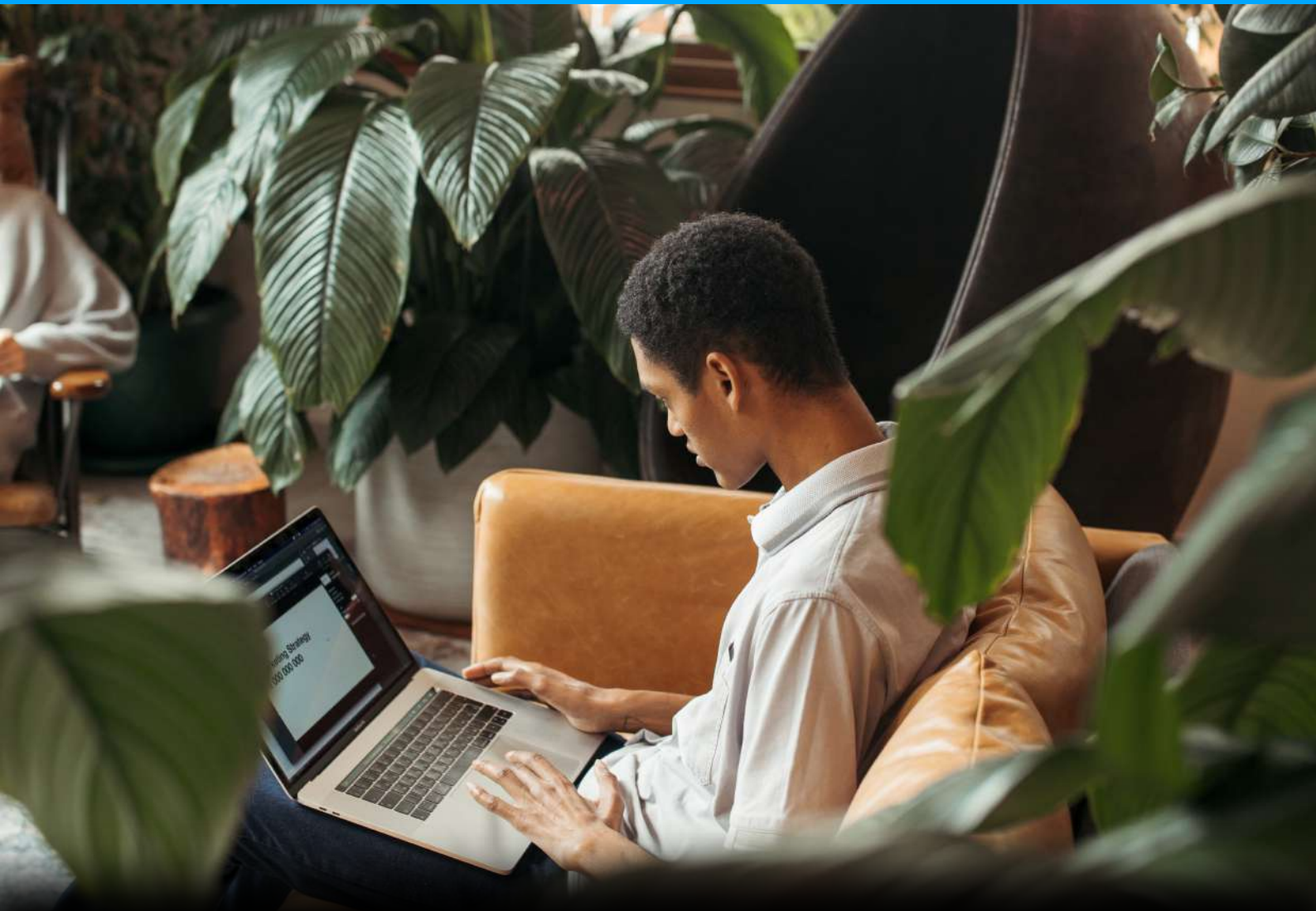
The reward is a more efficient workplace with lower costs, fewer errors and better recordkeeping. And better data means better opportunities to analyze and evaluate information.

The tech revolution raises questions on how to let go of legacy systems that may not be integrated with the new always-on, real-time programs. Migrating crucial data and functionality from creaky old spreadsheets and databases—and bringing along workers who are more comfortable with the old ways—remains a significant challenge.

This leaves some managers asking how fast to push. Managers must also ensure they stay aligned with the tech needs of their peers, avoid adopting solutions that are so bleeding-edge the industry has yet to accept them, and move on from any initiatives that aren't working. This is not the moment to waste time and money on the sunk-cost fallacy.

The shift to remote work was only possible because of earlier investments in tech, with companies that had already adopted continuous workflow processes enjoying minimal disruption during the transition.

8. Conclusion



The upheaval seen in the last two years may be extreme, but even as things return to a “new normal”, the turmoil in the workplace is far from over. It could be 2023 or later before we fully understand which of the unforeseen changes brought by COVID are here to stay.

The consultancy sector, and operations in particular, must take advantage of the lessons to be drawn from managing operations during COVID. That means staying agile, embracing change and not going back to the old ways. At the same time, pressures that existed before the pandemic will still be powerful drivers of adaptation for consultancy firms well into the future.

The increasingly diverse and capable workforce will seek guidance on improving their skills and growing their careers in an uncertain environment. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, change is the one constant of life. Professionals in the consultancy industry are all too familiar with that concept. This places the onus on leaders to take new developments on board as they guide their teams towards their goals.

Markets don't favor those who resist change. For business leaders in the 21st century, embracing change is key to success: encouraging teams to be creative, learn from the new, and ask questions. Part of the new normal must be to expect the unexpected.

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