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What Covid taught us about exponential diversity

This year, International Women's Day also marks roughly one year since the global emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic.

It was a year that tested many of us in ways we had neither expected nor wanted. Business leaders and employees had to relearn so many activities and adapt quickly to continue moving forward.

Two epochs of business: before Covid and after Covid

From this point onwards, we will view business history in two epochs – Before Covid (BC) and After Covid (AC). The lessons we have learned will not fade with time; we now understand what it means to try to continue normal business operations in the midst of a terrible pandemic. We know what fully remote actually means.

We now know each other's living rooms and family pets. We also intimately understand the stress of caring for young children when quarantined in small quarters, with reduced entertainment and education options. On the bright side, we have learned how to effectively create and manage remote teams, how to hire without meeting in person, how to deliver crucial outcomes without gathering around a table and crashing a deadline. We have learned how to rethink culture and make it work in a 100% digital environment. This is business after Covid. It's better, more resilient, and, oddly, more people-centric.

Embracing exponential diversity

Long before Covid-19, we had known and accepted that diversity is a crucial element to success. Mountains of research have proven the value of diversity at every level, from the individual to the team to corporation.

More diverse teams are more likely to produce products with exponential growth potential. Companies with higher levels of diversity are more likely to return higher profits. Even at the leadership levels, female-led companies are both steadier and more profitable over time.

So we knew diversity was important. What we did not fully grasp was the rich multi-dimensionality of diversity. We call this exponential diversity, as opposed to incremental diversity. Yes, we have always considered diversity on the axes of skin color, and sex. Covid-19 put so many less obvious dimensions into stark relief, dimensions like: age, career stage, marital status, family status, location (urban, rural, suburban), generation (Millennial, Gen X, Gen Y, Baby Boomer), income background, origin, work experience, personality and participation style, chronotype (Lark or Owl), and even political persuasion. In each person, multiple elements of diversity are at play.

How many ways can all these elements of diversity combine, collide, and create challenges? It is truly an exponential matrix with each new diversity element considered, adding more combinations and variances. Managing and creating in a way that keeps diverse employees engaged and productive used to be viewed as only a challenge. In Covid-19, we have learned that the challenge is also a tremendous opportunity.

Companies that enthusiastically embrace and foster exponential diversity have a distinct advantage in the after Covid world. Managing through an exponentially richer version of diversity makes the organisations more user- and people-centric. This, in turn, helps us make superior products, deliver better services, and, equally important, be better corporate citizens.

A better model for diversity

So what lessons can we learn from it all? And how can we build a better model for developing exponential diversity? To start with, establish a baseline of diversity on gender and ethnic diversity. In the United Kingdom and elsewhere, even on these metrics, organisations remain skewed away from historically underrepresented groups. This skew is particularly egregious in the upper ranks of management and in technical jobs. This remains a work in progress and should be the first priority.

Given this assumption, what can we do to improve organisational diversity on these numerous other independent aspects? A good start is to build a holistic model for team diversity. You can do this easily and simply by tallying the characteristics of a team to get an initial distribution. Equal representation is impossible. But at least some representation is doable and quite beneficial. So, that means you will want a team that has people from each age cohort, parents and singles, people from different socio economic backgrounds, introverts and extroverts and Larks and Owls (maybe in different time zones, if need be). You are not striving for perfect. Rather, you are trying to make visible something that before had not been counted and, over time, work towards a goal of greater exponential diversity.

Beyond team and organisational composition, inject thoughtful consideration of exponential diversity into the business decisions and planning process, including into your user experience. Examine how a new product or service might work not just for broad demographics but also within the more granular parameters of exponential diversity.

Consider how each business decision can impact people given their specific diversity characteristics. This consideration should have both an internal and external focus. For example, a new product that is designed with a specific diversity demographic may be easily tweaked or modified to serve equally well a different demographic. Likewise, instituting new processes around green-lighting marketing campaigns might be engineered to take into greater account how the campaign might be received across a broader range of diversity groups. Yes, it is possible to get lost in the weeds here. But consideration, not perfection, is the goal.

After Covid-19: exponential diversity, resilience and growth

Some time in the near future, society will have returned to a semblance of normal. The exigencies of the pandemic will give way to a broader palette of choices for how, where, and when we all work together. The fears of unemployment will give way to a resumption of the race for talent. We can and must look back and ask what we learned. We learned first-hand the richness of diversity layered into our most valuable resource - our people. We started to understand how to unlock the power of that diversity to make our people engaged and more productive.

Our job going forwards is to ensure that this diversity is better measured and encouraged. International Women's Day celebrates both the rise of women and the great distance we must still travel to make them equal partners at every level of society. Honoring women and bringing their contributions into greater relief is a crucial part of any baseline discussion on diversity.

Best of all, honoring and fostering our exponential diversity will benefit women, for sure and there is no false choice. In a world where we properly programme and prioritise exponential diversity, we normalise the diversity that is humanity. We encourage and reinforce the best of human values - acceptance, empathy, trust - and benefit with higher functioning teams that make superior products, companies, governments and societies. The pandemic jolted our sensibilities to bring exponential diversity into focus. Now it's our job to make it a way of work and work life.