

TECHNOLOGY WAS ALWAYS THERE, TRANSFORMATION HAPPENED IN THE HUMAN MINDSET



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The corona virus while being a health and humanitarian calamity has also triggered a major global business and economic crisis. Drastic changes are happening at global level within business organizations to minimize the negativities the crisis can create. While some organizations use a short-term focus, the smarter organizations are having a long-term approach in facing the crisis.

Extensive Research and MTI's own international experience across 47 countries in 23 years show that how businesses respond to the crisis, is what separates those that 'survive and thrive' from the 'departed'. Mr. Hilmy Cader, the CEO of MTI Consulting, an internationally-networked, boutique management consultancy, shares his thoughts on strategizing the new normal and looking beyond the corona pandemic.

Mr. Hilmy Cader is the CEO of MTI Consulting and under his leadership, MTI, founded in 1997, has carried out assignments in 47 countries across 5 continents, covering a diverse range of industries and organizations. He has developed several strategy models, columnist for regional business publications and a sought-after international speaker, recognized for his ground-zero thinking and strategic reflections. He is a Chartered Marketer and Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing (UK), had his executive education at the Harvard Business School (USA) and holds an MBA and EDBA from the University of Colombo.



What do you identify as the “Chop and Cripple” approach when facing the crisis?

When, everything is going well most organizations do not think about efficiency, for it is easy to hide a lot of inefficiencies within organizations and people really do not challenge them until they hit a crisis. Once they hit a crisis, there are two ways the organizations can react. Most organizations panic and they start reducing the headcount and salaries which is not going to be productive in the long run, although it might save a little bit of money in the short run. This approach affects the long-term productivity of organizations because when you let go of 10% of the organization without any transparency, you are creating a huge doubt in the minds of the remaining 90%. So, it is important to get back and have a more strategic look at it.

Could you give us few insights on MTI’s “Trim and Fit” approach of

facing the crisis?

The previously discussed chop and cripple approach was similar to cutting an organ from the body without knowing the real impact of it.

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We should never say excess people, what there is excess jobs and excess activities inside organizations. First, look at the strategy of the organizations and take off all the slack from the strategy. If COVID is going to be there forever, that is a different story. But it is not going to

be the case. In another few months’ time, we are going to come back because this is not the first crisis the world has faced. If you do not look at it in that way, the problem is you would let good people go. You would have gotten into a shell. It is like an aircraft which is very rusty. Whereas smarter organizations, even though they cannot take off immediately, they are gradually getting ready for it.

What’s your perception towards the Digital Transformation happened in many organizations during this time?

Lot of positivity came out of this and one such is digitalization that happened in industries. It could have happened anyway. One thing the crisis has done is to drive organizations to really look at digital transformation. Not just in customer even within businesses. In consulting we are able to do projects completely online now. We finished a project in Bhutan and 90% of the work was done online



It has to come from leadership level. There has to be conscious efforts to lock in these healthy habits once things turn back to normal.

MTI always had flexible work practices even before COVID-19. What is the role of flexibility and adaptability in a crisis like this, specially relating to practices such as 'work from home'?

Flexibility is very much needed. Ideally it shouldn't be only working from home but it should be working from anywhere. Flexibility means the employee should be able to decide the way of carrying out the work. Especially if you are a knowledge worker, you need to realize that there is nothing auspicious from eight to five. That is the kind of mentality that exists there after the industrial revolution; to get workers to the production floor from sun rise to sunset to get the work done. But today, we are knowledge workers. There is a huge upside from offering flexibility to workers. There is no need to monitor closely what time and where they work, provided they deliver results and there is a system to monitor results.

giving interviews to media, final presentation to the board, the workshops, which one year ago would have been impossible to believe. Not because of the technology but because of the mindset. Technology has always been there. Transformation really happened in the human mindset.

How did COVID-19 accelerated the digital transformation in Sri Lankan organizations?

Digital transformation has been in the agenda for a quite a long time, but the problem was in execution. COVID forced to execute what they were postponing. It has also reinvented the business models; they are challenging their channels. These kinds of changes were also

supported by consumer adoption to these channels. This quick customer adaptation further motivated companies to go into these kinds of reinventions and challenge their existing channels.

What organizations can do during this pandemic to maintain the safety ?

The crisis has done something positive but it can be temporary. It is in the hands of people to lock in the positives of the change, because particularly in a market like Sri Lanka, people have very short-term memory so they can easily go back to old ways of doing things. So, it is in the hands of people to lock in these healthy habits, before getting back to the old ways.

What benefits does organizations receive by offering flexible work practices powered through digitalization to employees?

Organizations need to offer flexibility to employees for two reasons. The first is that, you can get more out of employees. Second, there is a huge workforce, particularly females, who are not in the workforce because we have only one model where it is required to work from 8 to 5.30 every day. That is why even in the top management of

most organizations, female participation is less. Not because they don't like to join the workforce, but the option is either come and work at office or stay at home and manage the household, whereas, if you offer flexibility, you can tap in to quite a lot of talent which benefits the organization in so many ways.

How do you ensure employee commitment while offering flexible work practices?

That transition is not easy. Particularly if your culture is one of extremely high commands and controls, if the jobs are activity centric not deliverable centric, that is something you have to spend a lot of energy to train people and get people ready to work from home, but if people are given deliverables and if there is a proper way of capacity management, it can be done without a major challenge. However, equally important is the culture that you have within the organization.

What are the remedies available to minimize social issues that arise with 'work from home' practices ?

Another important thing is something like working from home needs lot of orientation. Proper lighting, proper seating, and ways to manage disturbances- all that is important. Since now the concept is forced into organizations who were not ready, there are attached social challenges as well. That is where the importance of options comes. If organizations can set up very cost-effective service offices, may be one in Battaramulla, one in Kiribathgoda, then people don't have to come to Colombo office to work, for two three days. They can go to these nearby service offices



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and work. So, these options are available as well.

What are impacts of digitalization in organizations to employee stress levels?

Even before COVID, if looked at the surveys done, two things are noticeably clear. On one hand, technology has improved the material quality of life. But on the other hand, stress levels have significantly gone up, employee engagement levels have significantly come down. Many reasons are there for this, such as, organizations have grown in size, sometimes organizations are only driven by stock market valuations. Half of that is inevitable because the world

that we are living in today is driven by consumption and that brings in a lot of pressure to the organizations and to the employees.

How did you manage employee stress level during this process?

To manage this, you need to look at what creates employee stress. Employees stress arise when the employees are unable to match their demand with supply. Their supply is the amount of time and the focus they can give. The second source of stress is, the constant feeling of inadequacy because of the material world we live in. So, what we are seeing in the corporate world is not a corporate issue but it is a wider social issue. The organizations have a lot to do with providing the necessary support system to help employees to cope with stress, but as individuals you need to have an understanding on what is happening around you as well.

What are your concluding thoughts on new opportunities the crisis has created at national level?

Yes, because of COVID there will be new opportunities, particularly in technology and health care. But we need to really focus on internal improvements to seize these opportunities because all our exports are very basic commodities and all our export income generation is from very basic resources. How do we get out of this? It can be done only if those people get better education, better enlightenment, and improvement of their skills. Otherwise, there will be many opportunities available outside but who is going to get the use of them. So disproportionately you must invest yourself in education and skill development.

By Daupadee Gamage