

Big changes – but here to stay?

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The Covid crisis has had a major impact on global business – including of course the businesses that directly serve patients; pharmaceuticals and healthcare. So are the changes here to stay?

IRC Global Executive Search Partners brought together a number of experts in the field for a Global Virtual Roundtable entitled *Post-pandemic trends in the Healthcare and Life Sciences sectors* to discuss how the pandemic has changed working practices – and asked them which changes they believed would be permanent.

People must come first

The Covid pandemic was unexpected; it took everyone by surprise, including the healthcare industry. The initial response, as an MD from a large Asia-based pharma company told us, was to make sure that his employees were safe. The next priority: ensuring that both patients and customers had a reliable supply of medicine. Only then could he begin examining this strange new world and assessing whether its features – what he called ‘the new normal’ - would be permanent.



Businesses exist thanks to people, of course. But the people factor was highlighted as one of the most important priorities in adopting strategies to deal with the crisis. Yes, digital has become crucial. But so has a whole range of skills and competencies that are merely augmented by technology.

Another speaker agreed there was a re-evaluation taking place in each and every one of us. Some people were fundamentally rethinking how they regarded other humans, others less so. But the pandemic, he said, was a real opportunity to forget for a moment that he worked for a company and was first and foremost a human being, not the holder of a title.

People, he said, would start 'valuing values' more. The 'value of values' would increase – even in business. His area of healthcare – dental – had suffered heavily during the Covid crisis, as dentists had been unable to serve the public properly for months. But now they can begin again, the patient's expectation of treatment will rise, he said.

Work from home

One panel member said he thought the change to the way humans have been interacting should be put in parenthesis. Distance working is not normal, he said. He said

it was abnormal for humans to avoid each other, to not interact physically. Trying to enforce virtual relationships would be counterintuitive.

So this period, he said, should be seen as a transition period. A temporary period – a crisis in parenthesis – but one that would certainly act as a catalyst to bring forward developments and changes that will actually happen. These changes will happen in the external environment - the macroeconomic environment, and the internal environment - within the companies.

A speaker from an Ireland-based medical company stressed the need for executives to remain sympathetic to workers and their personal situations; some, he said, were already seeing some element of burnout because they can't switch off. This was especially difficult in families with young children.



And yet, he said, at least in his segment, productivity is up. Companies don't want to talk about it because obviously it's not the right time to crow about such things. But across manufacturing in his area, KPIs were up.

Changing business models

Speakers agreed business models would now begin to change, and fundamentally. Businesses must rethink how they reach out to customers. The pharma industry is

perhaps privileged in this respect, as the sales rep has access to both doctors and customers. Many other sectors never meet the doctor or customer. But now, increasingly, those meetings are not face-to-face but virtual. So there is a need for a business model change.

Externally, the crisis will show up in some cost-containment measures for pharmaceuticals, because budgets will be shifted from personalised medicine towards more primary care and preparedness for the future. Countries will spend limited resources on vaccines and prevention, and this will reduce spend on pharmaceuticals and more expensive and more personalized medicines.

Internally, within those companies, there will, of course, be an acceleration of digital. This won't replace humans, but rather complement human interaction. It will not replace the human factor. But it will force the pharmaceutical industry to embrace a little bit more of the big digital world that it was very reluctant to face in the past – telemedicine, remote diagnosis, multi-channel marketing and so on.



Evolution of supply chains

One speaker said his company was looking at efficiencies where everything is globalized. Everything is single source, driving more and more efficiencies. How do we create enough slack which offers flexibility in the supply chain? And of course, the health and safety aspect of all this has been brought to the fore.

Our speakers agreed, however, that supply must be assured: guaranteeing supply of components, raw materials, consumables will be essential, and pharma will certainly be focusing on that.

Supply chains, they conceded, were a challenge. The medical device industry has a very stretched supply chain from the point of view of distance, with components coming from India or China to the western world where actual manufacturing takes place, and then it's distributed right across the world. That, said one speaker, is a challenge in the post-Covid environment. Many countries will be thinking about bringing their supply chains closer to home as they look for certainty in the supply of essential medicines - something that could quite significantly impact the medical industry.

New medicines – in weeks, not months

Certainly, Covid has accelerated decision-making. One example, said one pharma speaker, was a new medicine being developed and manufactured not in six to eight months but in weeks. Some are obviously saying - why can't we do that all the time? So processes are being re-examined for the long term.

Agility and adaptability

Speakers agreed that moving forward, agility and adaptability would be key skills in running an organisation. Obviously those buzzwords have been used for many years, but the Covid pandemic has given them a new urgency. People with those skills will be in high demand.

One compared it to piloting a ship through choppy waters. The weather is bad. But you cannot lose sight of your destination. As leaders, maintaining a clear eye on the horizon was key to arrive safely in the port.

The need for trust – and eyeball contact

Another said business leaders right now would benefit greatly from trusting their people. They need to empower them so they can make decisions without having all the pieces of the puzzle in front of them.

And crucially - leaders cannot lose sight of the fact us humans need that actual eyeball contact. We cannot, he said, become complacent in terms of leadership roles, that what we're doing right now is sufficient in terms of communication. Digital communication, he said, would never pick up on the nuances of human interaction.

That moment when the day is done, things are calm in the office and you just sit around having a chat before going home – this is key for the leader of a business. That human interaction with colleagues and team leaders.

That element is missing now, and it's up to leaders to show the ability to adapt to the new digital environment and find ways to compensate for that lack of human contact, to really understand the heartbeat of your organization.

Virtual hiring

Companies still need to hire of course, and now they're having to do it virtually. This is happening in pharma and medical devices – speakers had seen placements during the lockdown and watched colleagues starting a new job during the pandemic.



Other hirings were interrupted by the pandemic – but speakers said it made no sense to postpone the process. Instead, it was completed via virtual onboarding – which was certainly challenging in the beginning, but if organised well, worked very well.

Will this continue? Of course, virtual hiring can be an option where people are not based in a particular location. This is true especially for the dental industry; because the commercial and sales function is very much relationship-based. There is little doubt the virtual world would continue to collide with the real world in the search for global talent.