Small Scenarios for Changing Times:

Zoomerang

By Heather Bussing, Stela Lupushor, and John Sumser

Spring 2020

Zoomerang

In late winter 2019, many workers fled their offices for the safety of home. These knowledge workers embody a new class of privilege who have the ability to work and earn from the convenience of their house. The change was hurried by necessity, but with little understanding of the consequences.

Surprisingly, being freed from centralized work locations can feel more constraining. Remote work requires detailed scheduling of interactions. Gone is the serendipity that drives cohesion in the workforce. Even worse, the boss can suddenly see your home and home life, even if it's mostly from the torso up.

It seemed like we'd have more time and greater schedule control. Instead, it feels like we are never really disconnected. We simulate happy hours and book clubs but experience greater isolation.

Being virtual is exhausting.

We lose our sense of presence in virtual environments. Humans have a built-in ability to tell the difference between waking and dreaming. It is short-circuited in a video conference that forces us to pretend that flickering pixels are actually people. It's unsettling and requires extremes of cognitive energy.

2D is not 3D. While we now can see the members of our teams in a Brady Bunch matrix, we can't see their bodies or their body language. Reality is flattened to two dimensions in remote work. We are losing subtle cues, signals, and we have to work harder to fill-in the missing parts of our communications.

Home offices are cesspools of interruption. Video brings people (at times strangers) into our homes. It feels intrusive. We are conscious when interruptions happen and stressed anticipating them. After a while, we stop noticing this tension and start feeling it as headaches and other physical responses to stress. Our families are forced to share our inability to separate work and not work. Both home and work suffer from the fuzziness of the boundaries.

Basic communication, long taken for granted as a foundation of organizational life, is harder and requires more energy in distributed environments.

Californians at Work., National Archives, General Records of the Department of Labor

Consider the Following:

1. *Busy is usually the opposite of productivity.* Inviting everyone to every meeting does not increase organizational understanding or belonging. It models time wasting at management's discretion. For knowledge work, less is almost always more.

2. *Consider establishing 'no-meeting' zones.* Take a day or two a week and prohibit meetings. Knowledge work requires time free from interruptions.

3. *Reward boundaries between work and not work*. Enforce quitting time. Let the elimination of commuting time be a benefit, not an excuse to extract more busy-ness.

4. *Learn to choose communication forms strategically.* Not all calls require video. Try a walking one-on-one where you report the number of steps at the end of the meeting. Not all communications need to be calls. Bring back long emails.

5. *Trust breeds trust.* Find time to build trust and co-create new ways of working. Lead by example and trust that people will do what they have to do. Make it safe to fail and to ask for help.

6. *Encourage conflict.* The structure of remote work makes it hard to engage in the conflict necessary for great problem solving. Disagreement is essential to pressure test ideas and solutions. But constructive conflict requires active support by the organization. While some conflict is expected in any working group, it can be more difficult to spot and resolve when everyone is distributed. Don't let things fester.

7. *Create spaces for accidental interaction.* Give teams assignments to get to know each other. The glue that holds organizations together is often a matter of serendipity. Encourage unstructured interactions where there is no goal or agenda.

8. *Look at costs and consequences of the new reality.* Be careful of the way you treat the team. Be even more careful about making unsustainable promises.

9. *Rethink how you work.* The work is no longer the same as it was. This is an opportunity to create something better.

Right now, our future is not forecastable or predictable. We do, however, know that those who are putting their lives at risk on the frontline wish they had WFH problems. Reprioritize, do what's right, and don't forget to breathe.

About the Small Scenarios series:

Massive change is afoot. The pandemic gives us the opportunity to rethink and reappraise. The small scenarios project is designed to provoke thought about the medium-term future and how it will be different. The goal is to help HR prepare for the future we will encounter in a few short months.

The Small Scenarios Team

HEATHER BUSSING   Heather Bussing is an employment attorney, HR Tech analyst, writer and editor where she explores the intersection of people, technology, law, and work. She also teaches internet law. She's appeared in the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, CNN, Mashable, Business Insider, and NPR discussing employment issues and tech.

STELA LUPUSHOR   Stela Lupushor is a geek by training, consultant at heart, entrepreneur in character, on a mission to humanize the workplace, empowering greatness - one woman at a time.

JOHN SUMSER

For 25 years, John Sumser has been chronicling the comings and goings in HRTechnology. These days, his primary focus is on intelligent tools (AI) and People Analytics. He is a Senior Fellow at the Conference Board, the Intelligent Tools columnist for HRExecutive magazine and the founder/ principal analyst at HRExaminer.

About HRExaminer

HRExaminer is s research and publishing company focused on the evolving edges of HR and HRTechnology. The publications team includes a 25 member editorial advisory board who deliver insight and opinion. The company also produces two award winning podcasts (live on Thursday and Friday mornings at 8:00 AM Pacific). Each year, HRExaminer delivers the market benchmark report on the evolution of Intelligent tools in HRTechnology.

Contact
Web: hrexaminer.com
Phone: 415.683.0775

John Sumser,
Principal Analyst
@johnsumser
john@hrexaminer.com
+1.415.683.0775

Heather Bussing,
Principal Analyst
@heatherbussing
heather@hrexaminer.com
+1.415.683.0775