

## **The new reality?**

**Greg Whateley**

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The 'new normal' has been explained away – suggesting that the changes that have occurred and reframed our working lives in particular are now normal. The term 'new reality' is probably more fitting as we stretch and yawn our way out of the COVID-19 scenario and take stock of the new environment we have created and are now living within. What the 'new reality' though implies is a heightened use of technology with the notion that we will not return to what we once accepted as normal.

Reflecting on everyday experiences – in the new reality – technology is ubiquitous in fact our day to day lives are now essentially digitalised. I cannot recall when I last printed a copy of something to read or use. I read novels on my phone; I make lists electronically; I pay for goods and services electronically; I conduct most meetings on line; and I proof read on screen. When did this all happen? In reality it has crept up – but it was indeed accelerated by COVID circumstances that forced many of us into the digital age – never to return.

### **Digital Technology**

In what appears to be quite a rapid development (COVID-19 is regarded as an accelerant by many) technology is all around us and we have become heavily reliant on it. My own academic and private life is now essentially digitalised. My travel documents are in my Apps; my diary is electronic; my health care is electronic; my vaccination evidence is in my digital wallet; and all my banking is done on line – essentially I have become paperless – probably a good thing – and actually quite easy to manage. On reflection I think I am better off in the new reality than I was in the normal world prior to COVID. I had slowly accepted changes to banking for example – but I now use a range of Apps for a range of activities – airline bookings and management, health management and communication. I save hundreds of hours thanks to the digital revolution and the technology available to me.

I do wonder however, whether I would have made this significant change to my daily life and work activities without a catalyst. Change usually requires some kind of crisis – we all hope for a small crisis and a small change. COVID-19 was certainly not a small crisis. It impacted the world (and continues to do so) so it comes as no surprise that change was also significant – and likely not to have occurred fully without the full impact of the pandemic. Like it or not I am digitalised and continue to evolve in this new space – *I am a digital citizen*.

### **On line teaching and learning**

My own institution – offering business degrees at bachelor and masters level – offers only online teaching and learning at present. This was thrust upon us early in the piece but we adapted very quickly – made the necessary investment in the technology – put the time and effort into training staff – and currently support the effort. In turn, the student response has been very positive in terms of reviews, surveys and feedback. In recent surveys (T3, 2022) students have indicated that 93 per cent would like to remain on line – on the Melbourne Campus with postgraduate students the percentage is 100. What has been highlighted over and over are the issues of safety and flexibility – augmented and made feasible by quality online learning and teaching.

The classroom experience has changed – and I suspect forever. For some three years, now, our students have been digital and virtual. They have used digital resources and completed online (in some cases invigilated) examinations. Endorsements from industry groups have remained stable and the evidence (SFUs, QILT, Grade Distributions and Staff Surveys) would suggest very little movement from the positive feedback received consistently pre-COVID with the evidence secured during COVID. By way of spoiler alert – COVID-19 is still with us. *I have become an online convert.*

## **WFA**

The notions of Working from Home (WFH) and Working from Anywhere (WFA) have now been embraced and form part of the dialogue when talking with staff and employees. I have been surprised (in some respects) with the rapid take up of the concepts. There is considerable traction within my environment – and for that matter across multiple sectors. I personally have explored the notion of WFA from other continents – and with the challenge of time differences – have found the concept to be most effective and productive. What was once an extremely difficult concept to manage – has now become second-nature. The improvement in technology combined with the general acceptance that people can be anywhere and work effectively has meant a dynamic change to the concept and the application.

To further investigate the validity of WFA I have operated from both Asia and Europe for extended periods of time. I have explored the mechanics of setting up an office and operating a consistent schedule. The technology elements were easy enough. The dependence on WIFI is of no surprise – and to date I have been lucky. The only challenge has been the time zones – and Europe provided me with challenges – essential early starts. *I have become a digital nomad (all be it a greying one).*

## **Providing options**

The new reality is about providing options. In the higher education sector a hybrid approach to teaching and learning is the most logical, safe and practical approach. This is where classes are delivered both in person and online simultaneously – and students choose the option they prefer. In the work place having the option of F2F or WFA is also logical and practical. A combination (blended) is probably the most effective approach making it possible to interact and be productive at the same time. The key issue though is providing options – and this has been driven by COVID-19 and the enhanced access to technology and a new way of thinking. *I have become a hybrid advocate.*

Out of the classroom the same notion of options has become essential. Online shopping is a phenomena that started well before COVID – but has clearly accelerated and remains strong. I find myself shopping on line – these days in preference to actually visiting stores. The speed of delivery is a key factor and this often influences my product choice. *I have become an online shopper.*

## **Embracing Change**

Essentially the key ingredient of the new reality is embracing the notion and application of change. One needs to be prepared to do things differently – and often more effectively given the chance. Things are certainly not the same – and this should be a matter for celebration rather than concern. We all know that change is constant – we simply need to acknowledge that and adapt accordingly.

In my own case – on reflection – I have morphed into someone I would not have recognised some years back. I am a digital citizen who manipulates my digital resources on an ongoing basis – and would not consider going back to bank visits, paying in cash and using paper based resources. I have become an online convert in terms of teaching and communicating – I enjoy the occasional F2F meeting – but essentially I find the online option more effective and efficient. I have become a digital nomad who no longer thinks in terms of a single, located office space – but rather I am comfortable travelling the world and using the resources available to me to do what is needed. As part of the process I have also become an advocate of hybrid and an avid on line shopper.

In all, we need to understand (and accept without too much grumbling) our ‘new reality’ and work towards maximising the benefits of an environment that we have created and now live in – I think it is reaping what we sow.

**Emeritus Professor Greg Whateley** is the Deputy Vice Chancellor at the Universal Business School Sydney/Melbourne and Vice President (Academic) at Group Colleges Australia.