

## An account of the CMCE Research Conference 2020

*by Mick James, Director, Redhouse Media Ltd*

One positive of Covid-19 it is that at least it came at a time when we had developed technologies that could support many industries through lockdowns. So much so that many are now questioning whether we will ever return to full-time office-based work.

Management consultants are of course no strangers to working virtually, but very few gain their formative experiences in such environments. Face-to-face training, on the job learning, observation of behaviour, good or bad: can these be replicated--or will today's young consultants labour under a permanent disadvantage?

This is an ideal topic for the CMCE to explore: at its recent Conference it brought together many different voices and insights. One thing that became clear was that there are two distinct answers to this question. Making the technology work, getting people to change their working practices: this is not insignificant. But beyond that is the challenge of gaining a true understanding of how people learn and what truly underpins collaboration and productivity.

PwC's Jeremy Dalton gave insight into the cutting edge of "XR"--augmented (AR) and virtual (VR) reality. The encouraging news is that not only can people replicate team working (in ways that go far beyond multi-screen Zoom calls) but that in learning environments XR can provide higher levels of engagement and better outcomes than traditional training. Dr Christine Rivers of the University of Surrey has not only researched remote collaboration but experienced at first hand the challenge of moving universities and particularly business schools into online spaces. There's an adoption barrier, but beyond that the question of how students will value their time as a learning experience—and how it will impact on their employability.

For many students it is not so much the transition as being in a transitional period. Dr Peter Chatterton (who works as a digital innovator in the government's digital modernization programme for universities) pointed out what students want is consistency, but find that different tutors have different levels of digital competence—and that over-innovation is as much of a problem as being a digital laggard. A key point was the need for tutors not to simply create a lot of online course modules but to move back towards a more holistic view of people, and adopt the role of coach as much as teacher.

Steve Asher, a consultant specialising in international operations, took this thought into the world of work and the emerging management consultancy literacies. Consultancy is now as much about EQ as IQ and this cultural capital is hard to develop outside face-to-face contact. Remote training struggles to recreate the much richer and more contextual world of corridor gossip and the informal chat. This is particularly acute when trying to understand the nuances of working cross-culturally.

As a recent graduate of the business school at City University London, Kelly Matos has done timely research into how consultancies are addressing these key issues, while, at the same time, coping with a downturn in billable work. These range from setting up yoga sessions and giving access to

therapists to trying to formally design better ways to work collaboratively and help individuals structure their own work schedules in lockdown. But there is also a need for individuals to adapt to the online environment and use it actively, reach out to learn from others and build their networks in different ways.

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To paraphrase an old cliché, the future is not only here but it is now quite evenly distributed. Many industries have been catapulted along the digital learning curve. But for the emerging “class of 2020” this will have been a deeply challenging year to which they will have had to adapt very quickly without the resources—which can range from workplace experience to simply a quiet space to work at home—their older colleagues enjoy. Many may feel a bit short-changed, whether in terms of the value they are getting from formal education, or the bonding experiences they might have had as a cohort of new recruits. It’s a baptism of fire: in future we may be the ones who have much to learn from them.

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*The Centre for Management Consulting Excellence was founded by*

