

Down in the Weeds Where the World Once Wasⁱ

In all things, time is the enemy when we are struggling to make things better within the confines of extreme restrictions. The struggle really makes it feel as though we have been dealing with COVID 19 for a much longer time than is the reality. Socially, medically and politically this struggle has dictated how our lives have changed and will continue to change. The urgency associated with this pandemic has companies scrambling to quickly implement a remote workforce without doing their normal due diligence.

A primary target of discussion for every business is; should we move to a hybrid workforce, when should it happen and how should we do it. The consensus opinion of those that have tried this is to not do it arbitrarily. Understand the nuances of the process and the ramifications incumbent on the company as a whole and work to avoid the pitfalls.

“Remote Workforce Dynamics, the development, provisioning of a system, and analytics leading to the ability to transform companies into Hybrid Companies”ⁱⁱ manifests in the local environment, the company environment, and the remote workforce individual environments. Analyzing the processes you have in place, relative to a remote workforce, and identifying where those processes will benefit the transition will lead to prioritizing the steps toward how and when it should happen.

Every company’s strategy will vary from the basics, but this considerable task cannot be completed without getting down into the weeds... “The Devil is in the details, but so is salvation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And so, the subject of this article is “how should we do it”. We will not discuss the types of questions you should ask your workforce or the methods available for collecting the data needed to make the proper decisions. We will discuss question structure, the philosophy used for questioning, company strategy, the assessment tool, and the differences inherent in company demographics. Additionally, we will touch on the character of the environment you create, the IT perspective, management’s role in the transition and the importance of understanding the personality of your workforce.

Let’s start by admitting we will have to engage with our current employees and use their knowledge to uncover details of the current reality we are about to change. This is not unusual and is typical in business process improvement assessments. Doing a business process improvement assessment is really no different than assessing for a remote workforce commitment. After all, initiating a remote workforce is, in fact, an option for business process improvement. Your employees know best how they are performing their jobs and can offer, in their comments, hints of data that can enrich the strategy. While we are at it, we should admit that this is not an easy thing to do considering the personnel commitment needed on both sides of the equation and the personal dynamics that will have to be explored.

Workforce Personality + Processes + Technology / Mgt style + Mgt commitment = Performance

The company will first have to decide the basis for the strategy. What will be the goal when we structure our conversations with our employees? Will this be an exercise to uncover the global assessment of our organization relative to a potential remote workforce? Will this conversation be expected to uncover a global positive personality (what we need it to be) of the potential remote workers, or will we strive to be able to select / de-select specific people to become (or continue as) remote workers? And, from whom will the data come and how accurate will it be? It is possible to accomplish all three objectives in one assessment.

What you need to do is implement the “Wisdom of Crowds”^{iv} philosophy to accomplish your objectives. There are four pillars to this philosophy. The crowd from which your data will be acquired must have four characteristics and one overriding analysis tool. The respondent base (your employees) must be

Independent (anonymous), **Diverse, Decentralized**, and have a **Large Footprint**. The overriding assessment tool must be an application that can handle the analysis of the information in real time with the ability to selectively differentiate one demographic from all the others while analyzing global anonymous data.

The “entire” workforce (or a representation of such) will have to deal with many issues from a variety of standpoints; each employee demographic, function and position.

One major issue in question is how management’s role will change in the workforce transformation. This is not a subject that can be addressed by questioning and strategizing with only management. This will impact processes and particularly management style. Day-to-day practices and norms of behavior that shape mindsets and beliefs will necessarily change and, therefore, the methods in use for supervising people will have to change. The remote workforce will need the ability to take ownership of their actions and decisions because supervision will not be readily available and along with ownership comes responsibility. The personality of the remote workforce will need to be crafted to meet the needs associated with the new reality. In order to accomplish this, the transformation team will need to consider personality traits, on a global basis, so, the entire workforce functions as one and every situation has an expected outcome.

Discovering and cataloging the personality of the global (including remote) workforce means questioning the demographics, functions and positions that normally work with each other. Typically, you will discover that the opinions of the various demographics will differ in their answers; management is always more positive in their thinking than employees and there will be position to position differences. A good analysis tool will differentiate these differences and average the variances to present a global picture of the organization. It will report the traits that make up the personality of the remote workforce and match those traits to the personality of all other respondents. In addition, it will structure the data to present priorities that the strategy might follow to achieve maximum effectiveness.

Understanding the personality of the workforce will give you evidences of the extent to which the remote workers might contribute to the changed environment and the character of that environment. How will the employees that are not remote respond to the remote workforce? Will they be accepting and willingly integrate remote people as a part of the team, or will there be resentment, jealousy, and vindictiveness? How will the attitude of those that are not remote workers affect the entire company and how should you position this dynamic? Carefully structured questions asked selectively of different demographics throughout the company will help you with this and just might be the answer to how processes will need to change.

The IT perspective will establish what it will take to accomplish the organization and communications necessary to differentiate how the business and technical applications need to change. Therefore, a specific set of questions must be designed and directed to IT and technology users. This will determine much of the cost (hardware, software and training) necessary to build a remote workforce. A help desk will have to be established for the remote workers to obtain an immediate response to every-day technical issues. In truth, this might be a rolling responsibility of the IT department where a few designated people share the responsibility. An ancillary benefit will be the discovery of how the existing workforce is coping with the hardware and software they have and overall upgrades could find justification in the exercise.

Of course, an assessment that analyses the company’s ability to be able to create, structure, and implement a remote workforce must be anonymous. An anonymous survey cannot, however, be used to select or de-select candidates.

Since, in an anonymous assessment, you should still be able to ask specific questions exclusively to remote and potential remote workers, the value is in the communal information. The information will still be included in the global analysis, but an additional analysis phase can specifically and separately

reveal the personality of the remote workforce. It is important to know the overall traits of the remote workforce to be able to strategize their work processes.

Should you decide to use this assessment to select / de-select candidates for the remote workforce, you will need to plan in advance for the inevitable issues around privacy. Question structure will have to take into account the personal nature of the questions directed exclusively to the candidates and those questions must include Home Dynamics, Remote Environment, Compensation, and Benefits. Responses will have to be viewed exclusively by a pre-approved team trained to confidentially evaluate and consider consequences. Candidates will need to know, in advance that they are being considered and that their answers are not anonymous. And most importantly, the analysis tool must have the capability to selectively differentiate this one demographic (remote worker) from all the others in the same analysis while presenting the global representation of the workforce.

If you decide to transition to a hybrid workforce, get down in the weeds; you will not regret it.

About the Author:

Michael St. Angelo is the President and CEO of NeuraMetrics Inc. www.neurametrics.com Mike has held executive sales and marketing positions at a company that was the worldwide leader in process automation, an industry analysis firm that studied and advised major corporations and utilities and a company that marketed enterprise software. He was a part of, and managed successful remote workforces. He has led the development of an efficient and robust method to conduct mission critical, process and organizational assessments, benchmarking and studies. His methodology and tools offer expanded insight into causes of organizational performance including analysis of process behaviors. Mike has taught undergraduate courses and provides freelance articles occasionally for industry publications. He may be contacted at: Office: (904) 246-9733, Cell: (904) 631-7879, stangelo@neurametrics.com

ⁱ Conor Oberst – Consequence of Sounds

ⁱⁱ Mike St. Angelo – The Hybrid Workforce

ⁱⁱⁱ Admiral Hyman Rickover

^{iv} The Wisdom of Crowds – James Surowiecki