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## **Business as Unusual: Business Continuity Management in a New World**

There's no doubt about it - Covid-19 has changed the business landscape dramatically and fundamentally. It has accelerated digital transformation, revolutionising how organisations and individuals work. Technology has been a business-critical enabler these past few months, more so than ever before. It has enabled businesses to continue doing business as they and the rest of the world went into lockdown, and it is helping them recover and transition to new ways of doing and being.

### **Digital leadership and digital skills**

Digital leadership and skills are key to maintaining business continuity and moving successfully forward in this new environment we are all operating in. That's why The Open University (OU) joined forces with the BCS (The Chartered Institute for IT) IT Leaders Forum to co-host a webinar called Business As Unusual: Business Continuity Management in a New World.

In the webinar, several experts – Chris Youles, CIO at the OU, Philip Crewe, IT Director at Royal Mail and Chair of BCS IT Leaders Forum, Jesmond Baldacchino, CIO at Malta Freeport and Geoff Hudson-Searle, NXD senior adviser, thought leader and author of several business books – shared insights and experiences in order to stimulate conversation about how organisations can build the skills and structures they need to pivot and thrive.

Topics covered in the two-hour webinar included the IT, operational and cultural challenges facing organisations this year due to Covid-19, ensuring business continuity during lockdown and what the speakers think the future holds as organisations transition out of lockdown and into another new normal. Several key themes cropped up repeatedly, themes around resilience, leadership, adaptability, trust, how the economy and workplaces are changing, what organisations need to do to stay relevant and successful in these changing times and the importance of skills as an enabler of change.

## Homeworking

A significant and immediate challenge faced by organisations across the world was how to continue operations while keeping employees and customers safe. For many organisations, this meant moving entire workforces to remote working, and setting them up so that they could work from home but still collaborate with colleagues and customers. The OU, for example, moved almost all of its workforce to remote working and equipped them with the necessary infrastructure, within the space of a week.

Just as important as the practicalities was the need to help employees feel comfortable about working and communicating remotely. Youles says strong, purposeful leadership, clear communication and trust helped here. Open University leaders have trusted employees to work effectively and employees have trusted leaders to lead effectively. “The results from a recent staff survey indicated that staff have and are trusting senior managers in the university to be making the right decisions and I think the university has displayed some fabulous leadership throughout this period.”

As a result, contrary to expectations, homeworking has been a very successful experience for the organisation as a whole.

Staff have been fantastic. They have responded in a way that has been quite incredible – they’ve been flexible, collaboration has increased and in many areas, productivity has increased.

Chris Youles, CIO, The Open University

Covid-19 has actually accelerated a revolution that was in the offing anyway – digital transformation. The OU’s shift to homeworking facilitated the adoption of tech-enabled ways of working throughout the university’s workforce. It also facilitated the adoption of tech-enabled ways of working with OU students, such as the rollout of chat bots, for example. “Some of that technology that we’ve piloted cautiously, suddenly became a lifeline for many of our students,” says Youles.

The OU has also helped students and organisations to build vital digital skills, through the provision of courses on [OpenLearn](#), [FutureLearn](#), and the [DWP Skills Toolkit](#).

## Purposeful leadership

Hudson-Searle agrees with Youles that purposeful leadership has been key to success during these times of huge and unprecedented change. “There needs to be more openness, more transparency, more about the relationship between the experience and purpose. I think we are in a very interesting era – I like to call it a listening and empathy era.”

He says organisations have to move away from the blame culture and focus on building trust - trust between employees and line managers and employees and senior management, right up to the CEO. When trust exists, organisations are much better placed to respond to change as it happens.

In order to manage a crisis of this magnitude successfully, Hudson-Searle says boards need to help management balance short-term priorities with long-term goals. He says they need to actively engage with shareholders and other stakeholders and support a fundamental rethinking of long-term strategies because the scale of change the pandemic may bring – social, political, economic and cultural – is immense. “Management teams may need boards to extend them a greater-than-normal level of trust so that leaders can rapidly respond to unprecedented conditions. While oversight and control remain vital, board directors’ wisdom, insights and experience have never been more important. Boards should seize this opportunity to step up their game and provide critically needed guidance to their organisations.”

Leaders need to display some key character traits right now – courage, wisdom, purpose and trust. Trust is absolutely vital, says Hudson-Searle.

Trust matters today more than ever before. In the era of fake news, online animus and political polarisation, trust is the lens through which people make decisions about what they believe in and value. Research has also proven the connection between trust and commercial success –the most trusted organisations experience better financial performance and build particularly loyal customer bases and workforces. Trust as a currency is valuable, measurable and actionable.

Geoff Hudson-Searle, NXD senior adviser, thought leader and author

Crewe from the Royal Mail talked about the widespread disruption experienced by his organisation this year because of the pandemic. To the outside world, it was business as usual at Royal Mail - letters have been delivered as normal and parcels have been delivered as normal, even if delivery times have sometimes been stretched due to the volume of parcels. However, Crewe says it’s been anything but normal behind the scenes.

It is business as very unusual at the moment. We're doing it in a very different way to what we were doing before.

Philip Crewe, IT Director at Royal Mail

Maintaining business continuity, particularly when it’s business as unusual, requires companies to be agile and adaptable, innovative and resilient. Organisations that display those traits are not just thinking about how Covid-19 is impacting business now – they are also looking to the future. “Have you been able to look beyond the obvious, these issues and these threats, embracing these

opportunities for growth and future survival?” asks Hudson-Searle.

Covid-19 has demonstrated how devastating disruption can be, particularly given the scale and longevity of the disruption currently facing business.

Many organisations have had to overhaul processes in order to maintain business, while keeping employees and customers safe. At Malta Freeport, for example, measures were quickly introduced to protect the company’s 1,500 employees, who operate on a three shifts system. “With hundreds of employees calling at our gates three times a day we had the issue of contacts,” says Baldacchino.

We previously used biometric hand readers and this was, of course, unacceptable in the Covid-19 situation. We changed from a biometric hand reader to contactless card, ensuring that the employee doesn’t actually have physical contact with any equipment.

Jesmond Baldacchino, CIO Malta Freeport

The company faced several other major challenges: an acute shortage of sanitising material and PPE equipment, open plan offices, remote working not being the cultural norm and the fact that 90% of all of national imports and exports pass through Malta Freeport, making it an essential service to the island and therefore, very important to maintain. To overcome these challenges, the organisation reconfigured its offices to facilitate social distancing. It regularly fumigates all offices and equipment. It has enabled remote working where possible, distributing and configuring laptops and training employees. It also uses thermal cameras to read the temperature of anyone entering the premises and provides vessel crew on-board thermal screening.

Baldacchino says the focus was on continuing operations in a Covid-safe way, whilst also maintaining productivity and ensuring the port could operate effectively.

Like many other organisations, Malta Freeport found that it is possible to revolutionise how and where employees work. Change can be implemented overnight and people will adjust. And now that the revolution has happened, for many organisations there’s no turning back.

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