

The Future Of Digital & Its Impact On Flexible Working

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BRADLEY HOWARD (BH): Hello, everyone. I'm Bradley Howard and I'm happy to welcome you back to another episode of Tech Reimagined. Today, I have the pleasure of welcoming Dave Coplin to our podcast. He's best known as the founder of The Envisioners, a best-selling author, alchemist and a catalyst. Dave, how are you today?

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DAVE COPLIN, CHIEF ENVISIONING OFFICER, THE ENVISIONERS LTD (DC): I'm doing great, Bradley. How about yourself?

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BH: Very good, thank you. Can you give us a few words about yourself?

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DC: Yeah, sure. The thing for me, technology's lovely, but it's what you do with it that counts or it's the opportunity it creates. And so the alchemy bit, again, was a bit tongue in cheek. Alchemist's, you will remember from your history lessons were these often slightly eccentric, if not completely barking mad people who believed that they could transmute base metal into gold. And I actually think that's what technology is all about, right? It's about turning - making value out of nothing because you can create opportunities through that. So that's for me, this whole process of envisioning is helping people understand the value that is present, right, but hidden in what they could do with technology that would transform their business or transform the approach to how they do business.

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BH: Well, that sets us up really nicely, because today's big question is all around the future of digital and digital acceleration from a business aspect. So what do businesses need to do in 2021 to leap ahead of the competition?

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DC: I think so much of this Bradley, really comes down to how they internalise the opportunity of digital. And what I mean by that is, to me, if you really understand the opportunity of digital, it transforms the way that you see your business. There's a very personal story that relates to me. So I'm on the board of a big pub and restaurant company in the U.K. And the reason I'm there is I had a lovely conversation with the chairman who, you know, I'd made my big pitch about the transformational nature of technology and how it creates new opportunities to do your business differently. And we had this conversation then later on and, you know, he sort of said, look, Dave, I've been in the pub and restaurant business my entire life. But what you're really saying is that I'm not in the food and drink business. I'm actually in the entertainment business because the purpose of me is to deliver a venue and experience, such that you enjoy yourself when you come and see us wherever, whether it's a pub or a restaurant. And that's exactly right.

And so the lens of how he saw the business fundamentally shifted as a result of him really engaging with the opportunity of digital. So it's no longer about, you know, the quality of the food and the beer, although those things are important. Don't get me wrong, they're your entry ticket to be in business. It's how you provide the service that matters. I call it the Fun Boy Three principle of technology because it ain't what you do is the way that you do it. Haha, That will only work if you're a certain age and from the UK. But the point is, if you think what makes you special is your product

and service, you're dead wrong because I guarantee you, whatever your product is, whatever your services, I guarantee you I can go somewhere else in the world and get it for more or less the same price. What makes you special is the way in which you choose to provide that product and service, the way that you engage with your customers, the way that you engage with your employees, that's digital transformation.

And so for me to be successful in the 21st century, in 2021, the businesses that see digital in that way, they see that as a way of providing the experience rather than necessarily the product itself. They're the ones that I think are really going to thrive, not just now, but for the foreseeable future.

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BH: How do medium and large companies get to grips with that? How do they change the culture to address some of the outputs that you just said?

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DC: The most powerful way I found of doing that, Bradley, is to remind people that each of us we're all consumers. You know, we're all engaging with technology on a daily basis. And this is getting better over time - when I, I was going to say when I started out, but it has been for the majority of my career, I've been knocking on the door of the CEO or the business leader or wherever, just trying to get them to care about what technology might do for them.

And typically they're like "Don't - oh Dave, just go away, take a ponytail and your goatee, just no. Go and talk to the CIO. You know, I'm doing business here. Technology can't help me." And what's happened certainly over the last few years, but specifically over the last 15 months is those business leaders have now started to have a really rich experience with technology in their personal lives. They have survived the pandemic. As a result, they've helped their kids be educated. They've, you know, been able to work. They've been able to get food, or to see their mum and dad and all these things. And so now the opportunity is, as consumers, we know what a great experience feels like. We know what it feels like. And even though the experience might not translate necessarily to my career or - sorry, my business, we have an aspiration to deliver it. The example I used to use sort of pre-pandemic was about six months before the pandemic. I made this amazing discovery, which was the distance between my son's school and the nearest Starbucks was exactly the same amount of time it took for Starbucks to make me a sausage sandwich and a coffee. And so what I would do is I drop my son off in the morning and as he's you know, getting out the car, and I'm like, you know, "Have a great day."

I'm on me phone and I'm like "Sausage sandwich and a coffee. Thanks." And then, you know, eight minutes later, as I walk into the Starbucks and I walk in past the first queue of people waiting to be served, and then I walk past the second queue of people waiting to get their food and there on the counter is my, you know, sausage sandwich and a coffee. I walk away thinking, 'OK, I've won the Internet'. And every day I'm like, 'this is what is about.' Right? And as a consumer, what that does to me is I say 'That experience is amazing. I want more of that.' And in every other interaction I have with and it's not just coffee shops, it's every other interaction. I want something that is a slick as that, as frictionless as that. Now, that mindset of having a great experience in one place and then wanting to see it elsewhere, increasingly, I think, is the lens that business leaders are looking at their own business. And I think that's really, really important. This is the thing that they've got to do and they've got to. Wean themselves away from this sort of old Victorian approach to work, which is it's about the process of work, we believe in efficiency and efficiency is output divided by input. And it's all about process. And actually effectiveness is what it's all about in 2021. It's about, is the outcome we produce worth having? And if it is, we can back pedal, we

can backtrack from there and think, well, what's the most appropriate way to deliver that outcome to be effective in that way?

So all of these things come together at this amazing time and again, for the worst possible reasons. But give us this great opportunity to drive digital transformation, not for the sake of transformation, not because we think technology is exciting, but our bloody customers are looking for it. They are knocking on our door. And they said, well, if I can order a coffee and a sausage sandwich from Starbucks, why is it so bloody hard to work with you? And that's the bit that I think business leaders, if they start to understand that and they start to, you know, pivot their view of what the business is here to do starts to get really, really powerful.

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BH: Yeah. And in the examples that you gave, it's very difficult for competitors to see the behaviour they're not delivering because they won't necessarily be in the data, because data is only good for really successful part journeys. But if no one's even coming to you, it's really hard to know that Dave always orders the sausage sandwich and coffee from a competitor.

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DC: Yeah. But this is why, you know, often with clients, what I like to do is just ask them to open their eyes when they're out and about or even just in their own lives. Look at how other people are engaging with technology. Look at what they do. I mean, it's one of my favourite pastimes. Again, pre-pandemic. I'm really looking forward to getting back to this, it's kind of like a technologist's people watching. So you just travel around and, you know, I'm lucky enough to be able to travel the world and so I can see it happening in different geographies and everything. But look at the devices people are using. What are they doing on them? What are the apps that they're doing, how are they ordering food? What's the restaurant like? What's the shopping experience like? What's the interaction, the B2B interaction like? And forming this picture of actually how we're evolving as a society. And for business leaders, that really means getting out of their business. Right. You've got to get out of your individual business and you've got to get out of your industry and you've got to look left to right and think, well, what's going on? What have Starbucks got in their ordering system, that actually could add value for what we do with our customers. And it's being able to think like that, that I think becomes really important.

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BH: Definitely. I could not agree more. So to those business leaders, do you give recommendations about how they can change their organisation, their hierarchy and how their organisation is organised?

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DC: Yeah, that's really tough, and the closest I get to that is, it's about alignment behind the purpose. And I think this is one of the really difficult transformations we're going through in the workplace right now. And we're moving away from this sort of industrial management model where it's about quotas and timesheets, and you know, have you fulfilled everything in a certain amount of time? And it's moving to something much more nebulous, you know, into these sort of outcomes.

Did the customer get the outcome that they were looking for? And the reason I sort of position it in this way is, is you have to motivate your people in a slightly different way. So, yes, you need to pay them for what they do and what their team do and the success of them and their team. But you've also got to incentivise them to be invested into the overall outcome of the company. So I always use a really you know, it's a really rubbish example, but it helps people sort of engage with

the point. If you go back to sort of the industrial revolution and the whole thing about sort of the factories, and let's say I work for a car manufacturer in the days before robots, I'd be there on the production line. And there I am, I'm making widgets. Right, and you're going to pay me to make widgets and if I make really great widgets you'll maybe give me a bonus, right? And I'm there fulfilling my part of the process that goes to make the car.

I don't give a stuff whether the car that comes off the production line is good or bad. As long as I've made great widgets. Happy days, I'm done. I've got no vested interest. The car can be a piece of junk for all I care about. What I think good businesses are doing today is they're realising that that can't be right. So I have to be invested in the quality of the car. And you'll see already today companies like Toyota and, you know, using the automotive manufacturers as an example, they're starting to deal with that. But big companies, you know, are starting to engage with this, too. I mean, I witnessed Microsoft, when I started at Microsoft. We were compensated on the performance of our team. By the time I left Microsoft, we were still compensated on the performance of our team. But we were also, we also had a measure on our individual contribution to the company as a whole.

Such a powerful difference because it all of a sudden gave people an excuse, an opportunity to be interested and engaged in any other part of the business, and it drove engagement, you know, in a really, really positive way, it drove connection in a really positive way, and it's not just Microsoft. I've seen it happen in organisation after organisation. So for business leaders to really achieve this, I think it's about how they get their people behind the purpose of the organization as well as the day job. That's the bit that becomes really crucial.

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BH: Well, we've talked quite a bit about the pandemic so far. So the future work, we keep on using the word 'hybrid' all the time. So what do you think the future of work is going to look like? And I have a feeling you've got quite a bit of preparation for this.

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DC: Yeah, I may have written a couple of books on this topic. Look, this is really difficult because what happens, you know, we struggle with terminology, is what we struggle with. So I used to talk about flexible working a lot. And the conversation I used to have about flexible working always ended up and this is again, is pre-pandemic: "Yeah, yeah, yeah. We do flexible working. We have work from home Fridays." And I'm like, that's not flexible working, because every Friday you're working at home, you know, and you look at now, "Well we work flexibly now as a result of the pandemic." No, we're working from home. That's not flexible working.

So let me stop being an arse and instead let me help you understand the solution. Flexible working is about where we're able, where it's appropriate, to be able to choose not just the most appropriate location, but also the most appropriate time for the work that we're about to do. So, for example, if I need to get my head down and write a report, do something that is deeply productive. I'm going to create something. The last place I should be is probably either at work or at home, because those are the two places, I'm just – it's going to be really easy for me to be distracted. I need to be in some quiet space where I can sit down.

If, however, I need to do some shallow sort of collaborative work, shallow productivity. So I need to see Bradley. I've got to communicate with him. We've got to talk to the team and all that sort of stuff. I may say, "Well, actually, I should be at home in front of a video call or in the office where I know that the team might be" and being able to make that choice, that is flexible working. And that

is where all of the benefit lies. The key, and again, because people often misinterpret this: “So we're never going to go into the office again”.

No, I never said that. Right. Well, what we're going to do is we're going to choose to go into the office when it's appropriate for us to be in the office. It's not going to be our default position anymore. I only want - I've been very lucky that I've been living this life for well over ten years. You know, I would only go into London, even when I had a proper job, I would only go into London if I was going to see specific people. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was to go into London and stare at a piece of plastic and glass that I could have stared at from anywhere else on the planet. It would be pointless. Why would you waste your time and your money doing that? And this is the thing that we've got to come to terms with. So we need offices. We need a place, a communal space for our organisation. We probably need a communal third space shared by many organisations that's maybe a bit more local to us. So I live in a town called Banbury, which is about let's call it, you know, It's sixty minutes on the train into London from where I live. Well, some days I don't want to go to the office. Some days I just need access. I want the noise of an office.

I need a white board and somewhere that's going to have decent coffee and somewhere where I'm not going to get interrupted by all of the things that I need to do at home. Well, why isn't there a place on Banbury High Street for me that is a shared workspace for all of the people that used to stand next to me on the platform heading into the station at nine o'clock on a Monday morning. So these are the sorts of things that start to change and then underneath this, and again I'm gonna be specific about, we talk about location a lot when we think about flexible working. But I want us to think about time, too, because if you think about the ridiculous nature of the nine to five, this was something that was built off the basis of factories, about getting us all in the right place in the right time to make it easier to manage the massive - well, we're not in that world anymore.

You know, unless there is a specific reason for me to be in front of a customer or in a certain place at a certain, you know, date and time, why should you care? Why should you care if I do the report at three o'clock in the morning or ten o'clock in the morning when it's more convenient for me and my lifestyle in the way I want to live my life? And, you know, this again, comes back to the challenge that we're going to see in leadership is you can't manage people the way that we used to manage people, when we work flexibly, when we're dispersed. I can't measure people based on whether they're sitting in the seat, whether I can see the whites of their eyes. I can manage them, however, on whether they deliver their commitments, whether I get great feedback from their customers and their peers, you know. So it's this pivot into, I think it's more about coaching rather than management. It's more about that style of leadership becomes really important because it encourages and empowers people to harness the benefit of flexible working in a way that suits them best.

That's the final part of flexible working, is flexible working is a massively personal choice. And you've seen it play out in the media throughout the pandemic. Well, what about the young people? The young people? They want to be in the office. They don't have a nice home like the older people. You know, they want to be. But of course, they bloody do. You know, and I've had jobs where, you know, actually, I'd rather be in the office than be elsewhere or now I, I mean, you know, I well, it's easier to work for myself, but when I work for Microsoft, it was better for me to be with my customers than be in the office. Flexible working is a spectrum of solutions. And the organisations that will do it well understand the spectrum and will empower their people to choose where they want to be on that spectrum, based on where they're at in their career, their age and all those sorts of things.

So it's a leadership change. It's about change of location as well as change in time. But it's really about empowerment and it's about enabling people to do things that work best for them.

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BH: Yeah. So I completely agree again, with a lot of what you said. My concern about the nine to five is that you can easily get into a habit of just working around the clock all the time, so if you want to produce your reports at three o'clock in the morning, then is there, because you're super senior, is there an implicit acknowledgment from more junior people that they need to reply to you as soon as you send to three o'clock in the morning and you get these really strange behaviours?

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DC: That's really important, Bradley. And I think for me, a big part of this, this is the employee's responsibility. Admittedly, it's enabled by the culture of the employer. But we have to take responsibility for our actions.

If I choose to do my report at 3:00 a.m., that means unless I really need to, I shouldn't be at work 9:00 am the next morning or 6:00 a.m. the next morning or even 12:00 p.m. the next day. You know, I need to manage my contribution by 40 hours or whatever I have agreed it's going to be, and I need to deliver on that. My biggest fear over what's happened with the pandemic is we've transferred the platform of busyness. So there's a lovely guy called Tony Crab and he wrote this fabulous book called Busy and basically explaining that to be busy is one of the worst possible cognitive states because you actually get nothing done. And we saw this, first of all, in the late '90s with mobile email, and it was specifically BlackBerry devices, because although you could get the Windows, what were they called, Windows CE devices or Palm Pilot, there was no iPhones then.

And we would see people who were emailing at 10:00 o'clock at night, not just because they could, but because they wanted to test to see which of their team was the keenest, you know, all that really horrible toxic culture. And that's pervaded, it pervaded through the early days of, you know, flexible working. And we had employers or teams that would send the bums on seats memo. You remember brilliantly the Marissa Mayer at Yahoo!, you know, if I can't see Dave, Dave's not working, you know, bizarre behaviour.

And now we're into this concept of presenteeism by camera. You know, I'm going to spend my entire working day back to back in front of this camera just so you know that I'm still here and I'm still working. I'm getting nothing done. You know, but I'm on this platform. So what employers have to do is to figure out how to measure by outcomes, how to empower their staff to be, their people to be successful and to take the role of a coach rather than a manager. So you can't command and control a dispersed workforce. You can't just leave them to it either. So you've got to be that great coach, you know? How you doing, Bradley, how you getting on? How can I help? Is there anything that I can do? No, brilliant. I'll catch up with you some other time. That's the sort of stuff that we need to do.

But then again, as individuals, we have to take a responsibility for being able to manage our own behaviour about how we work. We should. It's something that I've learned to come to terms with certainly – and it's hard, it's taken me about the last decade of my life to really and I'm not even close to perfect yet, but it's getting better where I can feel comfortable to say, you know what, I've just worked six days straight. I'm going to take a few days off. It's not 'on holiday'. I've just been working for six days straight. I've done, you know, eighty hours in six days. So actually I don't need to work again for another few days.

It's being able to live with the sort of the elasticity of an approach to work, which is, you know, we have spent the last hundred years or so being very normalized to this Monday to Friday, nine to five. This is a big habit for us to break. So - but we can break it. And when we do, it's incredibly empowering for us. It's also much more productive, I would argue, for the organization. You get greater employee engagement. I think you get greater results. And I think your customers can see the difference, too.

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BH: And finally, what's your view on collaboration tools in this new world that we live in or work in?

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DC: 3 Well, collaboration tools have never been more important. And what I love about this is I have spent a great part of my career basically ranting about how much I hate email and what I actually appreciate now about email, is that I don't hate email at all. I just hate bad email. So the reason for picking on email - email in a flexible working scenario is the king of collaboration tools. Right. And I'm looking at you slack and I'm looking at you, Microsoft 365 or whatever.

The beauty of email is, it's asynchronous in nature. Right? So I have no expectation of a response unless I explicitly ask for it. And so to a flexible worker, email is this wonderful thing where I can batch process work and I can then send it off and it's going to get processed at a relevant time. Now I have to do some work in order to achieve that. I need to, to your point, I need to set your expectation just because you've had an email from me at three o'clock in the morning, I don't I don't need an answer at 3:30. I'll have an answer whenever it's appropriate for you to give me an answer. You know, you fit it into your - so you get this lovely asynchronous sort of progression of productivity.

So that's why I think email has been much maligned, but will be one of flexible working's superpowers, but also, I mean, you know, let's not kid ourselves. Tools like Slack and others like them are just wonderful for being able to stay connected and to build the collaboration, to have the buzz of the office in that sense, to be there and present with you as you're working whenever that sort of period of working is there. And I know they have an element of asynchronous to them, but I think they're also great as this sort of much more connected network of the organisation. So they, too, have their place. The bit that I think becomes important, and I think this is the bit that we've all learned with video as an example, is we just need a bit more practice of using them. You know, do you remember the beginning of the pandemic? You know, the only people who had video calls were basically teenagers or friends and family. You didn't have a video call at work. You would be like an oddball. If you have to watch - "why's Dave put the video on, what a weirdo, just put the phone on like everybody else."

Whereas now, if you don't put the video on, I'm like, "Dude, what's going on?" You know? And, you know, we've got a bit better. We've got better, you know, backgrounds, you know, maybe invested in a couple of lights or whatever. This is really important because this is what makes video work. Well, I have this with business leaders a lot. And I'm like, so what car do you drive? And it's like, well "it's a Range Rover" or "a BMW" or something like that, and I'm like, "So why have you got the world's shittiest webcam and no light? This is how you connect. This is how you commute to work today. Go out and buy a bloody, you know, twisted pair cable, connect to your router properly, get a light so we can see you and a decent camera," you know, and it's like, "Oh yeah, I didn't think about it like that". So, you know, easy for me to poke fun, right.

But the point is, this is how we work now. These are as important a platform to the way we work as standing in a queue for the coffee machine, you know, in the office. Or sitting next to a mate at

lunch or sitting in a meeting. So we are going to make sure that we, you know, use all of these platforms and that we celebrate the opportunity that they give us. They're not perfect. You know, I'd much rather be sat with you in person, Bradley. Of course I would.

But this is not a bad second best if I'm honest. And so be able to deal with that, be able to flip just like our kids do. If you ever watch your kids, you know what I love, and again, all right, teenage boy. So all of those stereotypes, he's there, you know, playing his game. He's connected to his mates on a completely separate platform, you know, talking to them, having a laugh. He's probably got another screen where he's thinking about his homework and all that sort of stuff. If our kids can do it, well, surely, come on. Why can't we? You know, that's the opportunity for us is to really celebrate the opportunity of technology and to help us, you know, empower us to be great at what we do and what we enjoy doing.

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BH: With four teenage kids, my one caveat on that is that they're on video calls till about 4:00 in the morning at the moment, so I really don't want to go there. But there we go. Dave, thank you so much. It was a really entertaining conversation. To all of our viewers. Thank you for spending time with us. It's always a pleasure to have you with us. If you haven't already, please, can you subscribe to the channel? And please stay tuned because we've got some more interesting conversations coming up. Until next time, thank you.