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How COVID-19 changed the way we work

Introduction: Prof. Dr. Alex Richter

- Since 2/2019: Professor, Wellington School of Business and Government, Victoria University of **Wellington**
  - **Academic Programme Leader: Executive MBA**
  - **Programme Co-Director: Master of Professional Business Analysis**

- 3/2016-1/2019: Associate Professor, IT University of **Copenhagen**
- 19/2013-12/2018: Head of research unit „Digital Work Design", University of **Zurich**

- Since 2012: CEO, uni.to GmbH, **Munich**

- 2009-2012: Visiting Researcher, The University of **Sydney** Business School
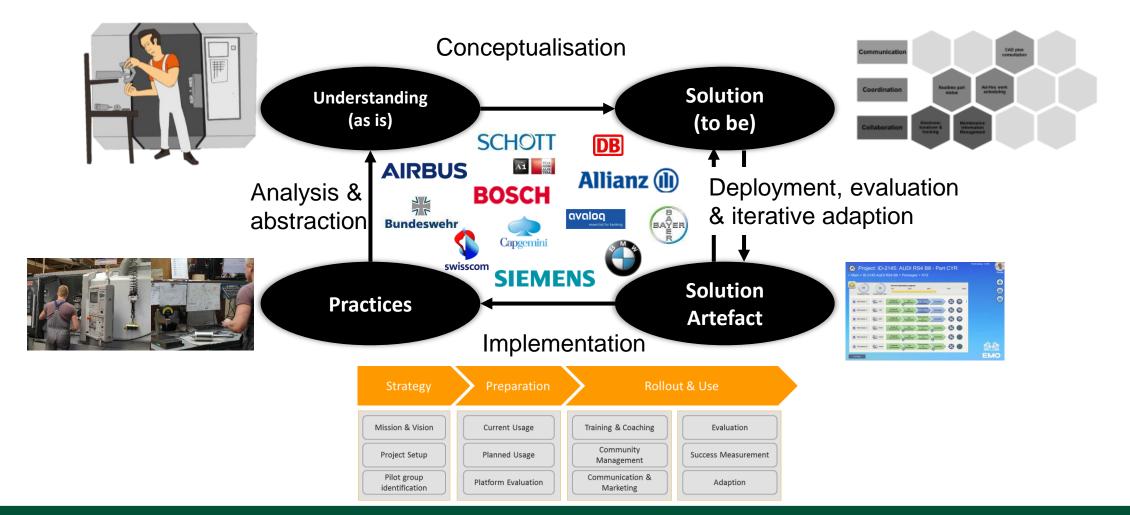- 2007-2013: (Senior) Researcher, Bundeswehr University **Munich**

What motivates me: Designing systems as if people mattered

Conceptualisation

Understanding (as is) → **Solution (to be)**

Analysis & abstraction

Deployment, evaluation & iterative adaption

Practices

Solution Artefact

Implementation

Logos: SCHOTT, DB, A1 TELEKOM AUSTRIA, AIRBUS, Allianz, BOSCH, Bundeswehr, avaloq essential for banking, BAYER, Capgemini, swisscom, BMW, SIEMENS

Strategy	Preparation	Rollout & Use	
Mission & Vision	Current Usage	Training & Coaching	Evaluation
Project Setup	Planned Usage	Community Management	Success Measurement
Pilot group identification	Platform Evaluation	Communication & Marketing	Adaption

DISCLAIMER: DIGITAL

The Road Towards Digital Work

Communication

- Increasing number of communication channels (**media choice**)

- Increasingly differentiated practices and IT support for them (**malleability**)

- Enormous amount of user generated data

- **Ubiquity**, changing personal interaction

- …

→ **Overload and insecurity**

(need for orientation & stability)

Organisation

- **Networks vs. hierarchies**

- New role of the employee: participating, responsible

- Redistribution of decision-making powers, **new forms of leadership**

→ **Re-Calibration**

Virtuality

- Rise of work done through digital media by spatially and temporally distributed teams

- Consumerization

→ **Blurring of boundaries**

The lockdown as a facilitator for digital work

Ad hoc adoption

Employees

- more adept at using digital work tools, new routines and habits

- experimenting and reflecting on emerging usage scenarios ("virtual morning teas", "after work (social) zooming").

Executives

- gaining comfort that work continues even when their employees are physically distant.

- Some misconceptions have dissolved, for example that

  - remote work would reduce the speed of getting things done

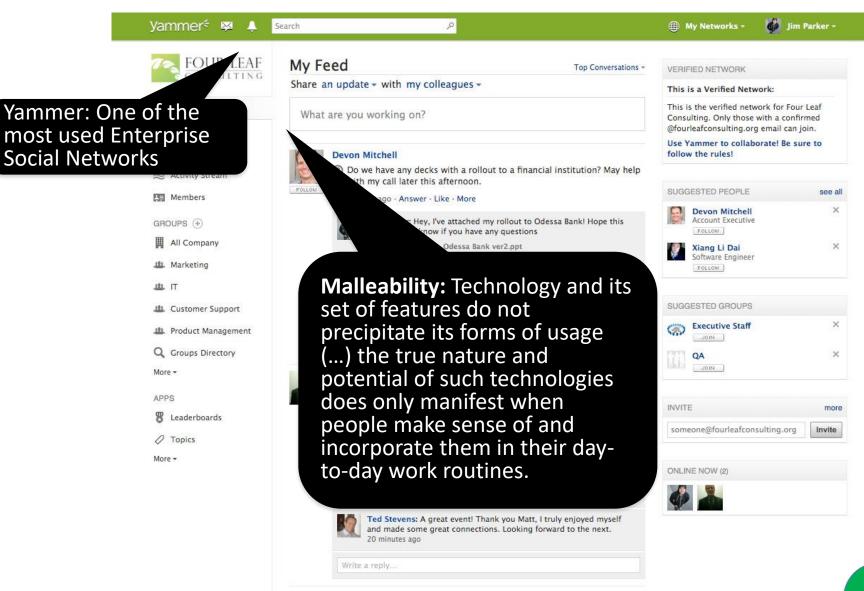 - workers who are not visible would be 'slacking off'

...but...

Yammer: One of the most used Enterprise Social Networks

Malleability: Technology and its set of features do not precipitate its forms of usage (...) the true nature and potential of such technologies does only manifest when people make sense of and incorporate them in their day-to-day work routines.
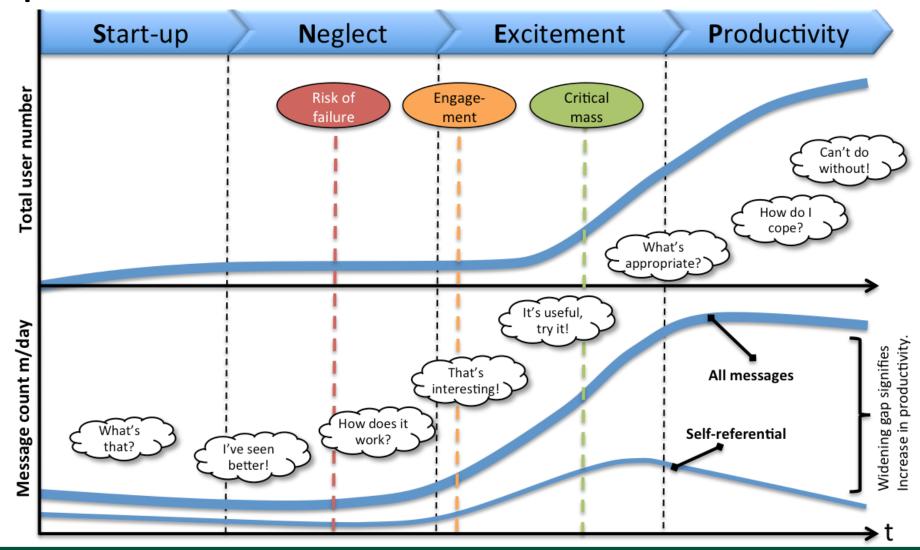
Appropriation

Insights from a little study on locked-down digital work

References:

https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0268401220308422?via%3Dihub

https://www.newsroom.co.nz/ideasroom/2020/04/24/1139687/work-but-not-as-we-know-it

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MAI I TE IHO KI TE PAE

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF
WELLINGTON
TE HERENGA WAKA

Misconceptions of digital work in the lockdown (1/4)

- **"Digital work is (more) stressful and tiring."**
- **Context:** Digital work is shaped by practices embedded in an organisational context.
- During the lockdown most organisations were in '**crisis mode**': High amounts of (often stressful) coordination work that involved a higher need for (online) meetings → For many employees digital work now means more time in meetings

Digital work does not only entail (online) meetings.
Solution: reducing the amount of synchronous communication to enable people to focus on productivity.

Misconceptions of digital work in the lockdown (2/4)

- **"The adaption phase is over."**
- **Malleability and appropriation:** Digital work tools are malleable: they incorporate inherent flexibility and openness, supporting a wide variety of work practices, digital work practices often only develop over time as a part of the employees' (open-ended) sensemaking process.

The lockdown was an extreme situation that did not give employees the necessary time.

Solution: Employees should be given more time to explore and experiment with the tools.

Misconceptions of digital work in the lockdown (3/4)

- **"Digital work means a lot of video conferences."**
- For many employees digital work = not being able to meet colleague
- However, digital work does not impose physical distancing. COVID19 did. Digital work allows focusing on bonding when meeting physically and for reducing travels to meetings that can easily be held online.

Online meetings are much easier to set up than physical meetings and hence happened more often.

Solution: Schedule online meetings more in an 'ad hoc fashion', if and when needed. Avoid online meetings scheduled weeks beforehand to accommodate bookings.

Misconceptions of digital work in the lockdown (4/4)

- **Autonomy and visibility: "Digital work means I have to prove my value."**

- It is reasonable for leaders to give their teams (and themselves) time to make sense of digital work, before they tried to align uses and cooperatively establish norms and rules, (e.g. how they expect their team members to check-in).

- During the lockdown, the newly gained autonomy backfired for employees, who felt they had be more responsive than before to prove they are "there" .

Employees were not less productive and were also not perceived as less productive. However, the missing social norms gave employees the feeling they needed to make up for the reduced amount of visibility (by communicating more than before).
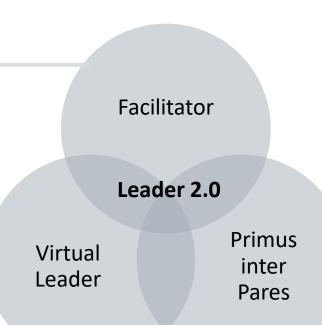Solution: Developing social norms for remote work.

The need for digital leadership

Promote open culture

- Being role model – to get employees on board (transformational Leadership)
- Live authenticity & transparency (not: uncontrolled openness)
- Demand openness and participation
- Provide guidance ("Complementary fit")

Ambivalent roles

- Balancing act between network & hierarchy ("colleague" but also "boss")
- Coach and mentor
- Allow self-organization

Leading on distance

- Building trust through electronic media
- Digital relationship management
- Intercultural competence

Facilitator

Leader 2.0

Virtual Leader

Primus inter Pares

Wrap up

- COVID-19 acted as a facilitator for digital work:
  - Employees: more adept at using digital work tools, new routines and habits, experimenting and reflecting.
  - Managers more comfortable with their employees being physically distant.
- The COVID-19-induced "ad hoc adoption" lead to some misconceptions
  - Digital work does not have to be (more) stressful and tiring
  - The adaption phase is far from being over
  - The crisis made a lot of video conferences necessary, not digital work
  - We need new social norms
- We need a better understanding of digital leadership