

A more flexible and fairer future of work beckons in 2021

 By [Nunu Ntshingila](#)

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Ways of working that go back decades were dismantled overnight in 2020 as the Covid-19 pandemic took hold of the world. South Africa was no exception, with companies forced to rapidly enable people to work from home where possible and embrace digital channels during the hard lockdown.



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For many South African businesses, this was an opportunity to look at their operating models and working practices through a new lens. Were they futureproof? Could they reach the customers and employees they needed to and engage in two-way communication? And could they keep those people safe in exceptional circumstances?

Now, as the dust starts to settle, organisations are evaluating what was effective, and what wasn't about the great work-from-home experiment of 2020. They're thinking about what they should do differently as remote work becomes normal. As we move deeper into 2021, leading companies are envisioning a new world in which advanced technologies merge with evolving philosophies of work.

A glimpse of a new world of work

Even as the first shipment of vaccines lands, many of us are asking when the world will be 'back to normal'. Yet studies

show that not everyone is so eager to revert to old ways. For many, this period has opened up new possibilities in terms of how, when and where we work - a glimpse into a more flexible and fairer future of work.



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One where the best talent can be recruited for the job, regardless of which city – or even country – they live in. One where we go into the office because something special is happening or because we want to connect, not because we have to. And one where we can build our work around our lives, not the other way around.

But it doesn't stop there. It's not just our physical work locations that have evolved, but also our experiences at work. We've seen organisations putting their employees at the heart of decision-making and a rise in employees feeling valued and committed to their organisations.

Putting people first

During this time, we've seen companies going the extra mile to keep their employees safe and informed. Look at our enterprise collaboration tool Workplace. From creating bots to check in on employee wellbeing to live leadership Q&As, we've seen companies innovating so that they can put people first. Absa has been using Workplace to keep its dispersed workforce connected throughout the year and ensure employees can connect with one another and leadership, no matter where they're working from.

We can expect to see a faster shift from employer-driven values to a new system that puts people at the centre of the business. It's a commitment for the long-term that forces businesses to ask the hard questions: What's working? What's broken? Who's engaged? Who isn't? What voices are being heard and brought into decision-making?



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Now that they've scaled tools such as collaboration platforms and video conferencing, organisations are also thinking about which technologies come next and how they can make work better for everyone. There are exciting opportunities emerging in fields such as automation and virtual/augmented reality (AR/VR) - including new consumer and employee experiences.

When businesses use VR and AR, employees can be more connected and productive, regardless of where they live. AR/VR may unleash a flood of creativity, new applications, and new jobs that we couldn't previously have imagined. Automation, meanwhile, will help take on mundane tasks, so employees can focus on more meaningful work.

Giving everyone a voice

While leadership has a vital role to play, the key to employee experience is a purposeful move away from the top-down communications that until recently have dominated the employer-employee relationship. It's a step towards communication that is employee-driven, connected and dynamic.

It means giving everyone a voice – and not just those that sit (or used to sit) in head office. Employee experience has to apply to every person in the business, from office workers to frontline staff and interns right through to leadership.

Connecting all those people shouldn't require expensive technology that demands intensive training and implementation. It

requires tools that are easy to democratise across the organisation, that people can pick up and use wherever they are - regardless of whether they have a work device or even a desk.

There are real gains to be made for the businesses that get this right. Research shows that organisations delivering on employee experience report higher customer satisfaction and are more profitable and innovative. But more than that, employee experience is an investment in your people. And if the pandemic taught us anything, it's that it pays to look after your people.

ABOUT NUNU NTSHINGILA

Nunu Ntshingila is the regional director of Facebook Africa.

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