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Digitising the packaging industry during the COVID-19 crisis: a startup co-founder's take

By **Peter Williams** - Jul 23, 2020

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One of the significant business trends to emerge from the current pandemic is that organisations who were talking about digital transformation suddenly had to embrace it.

It has demonstrated the adage that 'disruption happens slowly – until it happens fast'.

In my role at Deloitte, I speak to many large organisations and what I have observed, is that most of them were able to innovate at a pace they never thought possible simply because they didn't have a choice.

Many of them have long-spoken about the need to tear down internal barriers, trust their frontline staff and speed up the decision-making process.

But when the coronavirus hit, digital-ready companies were able to respond quickly, whereas those that were not, struggled.

Leaders in these organisations are also coming to the realisation that we won't be going back to 'business as usual'. Digital will increasingly be the driver of a new normal. As one client described it:

"We are not about bouncing back; we have to take what we have learnt and bounce forward".

Yet, while the transformation has been digital heavy, what we are seeing is not so much about the technology – which is widely available – but rather more about culture, leadership and the willingness to adapt.

Interestingly, we have seen that people – be they employees or customers – are more than capable of adapting to using new technology.

Granted, we still may have to remind people to hit mute on Zoom or give them a two-minute primer on how to use the whiteboard, there hasn't been the necessity to re-skill people.

Instead, businesses have made the tools that work available to them. The incredible rise of e-commerce in recent months is also another testimony to the digital readiness of customers.

I'm also hearing less from organisations about digital transformation as a long term destination and more on how to transition to digital now.

Digitally agile companies are thriving

As someone who regularly speaks about the future of work, I often use Packform as an example.

Packform was born in the digital era, so there weren't questions about whether we should be in the cloud, or the importance of mobile, or using social technology to collaborate or leveraging data.

Adopting an agile way of working was how everybody was already used to working; being digitally adaptable was inherent, rather than a goal for the company to transition to in the future.

Packform is a company founded in Australia with our sales and logistics focused on the US market and launching in the UK.

Our development team are spread across Russia, Vietnam and Australia, and our design and accounting teams in the Philippines.

You would think it would be hard to build and maintain a culture, but what we have found is the opposite. We use Telegram to share what is going on, and the community chat group is by far the most active.

While it may sound corny, it really does feel like a family. In terms of software, Packform uses open source where we can.

We plug in best of breed applications into our platform and take the view that we use what works. We also have an outstanding development team who can orchestrate fantastic experiences, fast.

The connectivity and capability of the team mean we can move like lightning.

Packform's online platform is the core of what we do.

The whole order lifecycle is now through one platform: discussing a new product with a dealer, coordinating quoting, ordering different packaging components from multiple suppliers, providing real-time visibility of quotes and order status, uploading delivery tickets and invoices and more.

Our Executive Chairman, Philip Weinman loves meaningful data, so our team, dealers, customers and suppliers all have what they need to know at their fingertips.

This is a new concept for the packaging industry, which has been slow to adopt digital technologies.

Dealing with change during global uncertainty

The true testament to Packform's standard as a technology-forward company was their response to the global spread of the coronavirus.

Rather than needing to transition to digital like many other organisations, Packform focused on helping solve customer issues, particularly accessing PPE and COVID-19 related supplies.

Packform has demonstrated that with the right framework, even startup companies can compete with large organisations when it comes to digital transformation.

Change is not always easy. As we head towards a new normal post-pandemic, the need to embrace change in the digital world is now greater than ever.

For me it has, it's been a wonderful opportunity to put into practice all those things I have been preaching as an innovation and digital thought leader.

The future is really exciting for Packform as more customers, dealers and suppliers are approaching us to be part of digitising the packaging industry.

Peter Williams was a Partner with Deloitte and Founder and CEO of Deloitte Digital, one of the fast-growing management consulting arms in the world that specialises in digital technology, with over 9000 employees in 29 countries. Prior to his time at Deloitte Digital, Peter founded Deloitte's e-business consulting group in Australia. Peter is one of Australia's key thought leaders on innovation and online, mobile & emerging technology. He works with many high profile organisations such as Telstra, CSIRO, Holden, Victorian & Federal Governments and Meat & Livestock Australia.
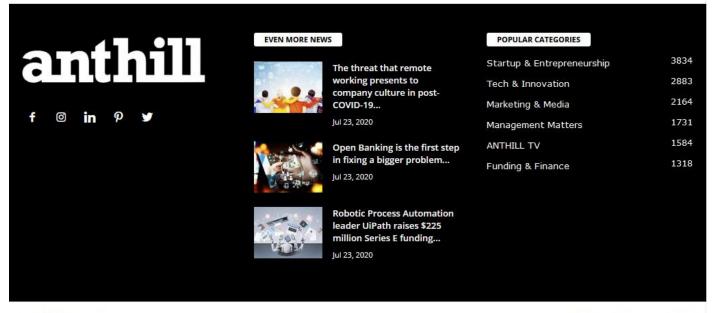
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