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SEARCH & INTERIM

THE CHALLENGES OF STARTING A TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME REMOTELY

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About Aston Fisher

Executive talent is the lifeblood of any business; setting strategy, motivating teams, delivering growth and driving change. So hiring the best, whether permanent or interim, in a timely fashion can set your business apart.

Aston Fisher understands this and applies its extensive resourcing experience in an agile and collaborative manner to identify the very best candidates with the right skills, experience and chemistry for its clients.

We are a driven, highly collaborative team, passionate about what we do. We pride ourselves on being genuine partners to clients and candidates, pro-actively delivering outstanding results, over and above expectations every time.

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Transformation programmes. Challenging at the best of times, positively daunting when the company you are trying to transform is a scattered crew of stressed-out people in their pyjamas.

So how do you even start a transformation programme remotely? How do you deliver the content? And how do you gauge who is on board? We asked HR& Transformation leaders across a range of industries to share the secrets and challenges they've been facing over the past 12 months.

Industries covered:

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1. Software

Our first HR contact in the software industry is leading a programme to restore the customer focus his company lost during pandemic survival mode. Doing this online has brought up two major issues.

First, it makes it harder to spot and cater to the three different groups that inevitably emerge at the start of a transformation programme: early adopters who will jump on board, cynics who need persuading, and laggards who will only come on board if they're forced. He's handled this by focusing on the early adopters to build momentum, and letting them spread the excitement to the others.

Second, he's been doing this with no budget, relying on colleagues to spend time on it on top of their day jobs at an extremely busy time. To his surprise, people have still been excited about this idea. It's something that's so important to them, that the customer really gets the benefit, that they're prepared to do the extra work.

“If it was about reengineering a process, or something less humane or less tangible, I wouldn't have got this buy-in. But because it's something so fundamental and so important to the business, and for each of us as colleagues of the business, I think that's how we've managed to get the buy-in.

Another success factor was that he invited every single participant to choose two photos at the beginning of the programme, representing the current situation and their hopes for the future. “Pictures invite you to connect with your heart rather than thinking with your head. What do I feel, what do I want, what do I dream for and aspire to? Because then you're connecting more deeply, and you're able to have those conversations.

“He asked participants to describe the gap between the two photos, and what they thought it would take to get from photo 1 to photo 2. “That conversation, if you get somebody to start it well, you get much more depth in the conversation. You get to tap into people's emotions, albeit in a formal way, but it helps people to feel like we're all in it together. Seeing the similarities and differences between each other's views can create a spark and create interest.”

Another contact in the same industry found an ingenious way around the lack of feedback, although for him it wasn't so much the lack of watercooler talk but the way less confident team members' voices went unheard.

“I've been doing an HR transformation. So a bit more internal, very technology-driven, but also a lot of hearts and minds stuff to actually change processes. So a little bit of black-and-white, yes or no, ‘Do you want to configure it this way?’ Very, very direct, but also a little bit ‘How are you feeling? We're doing it this way. Are you comfortable?’ That sort of thing.

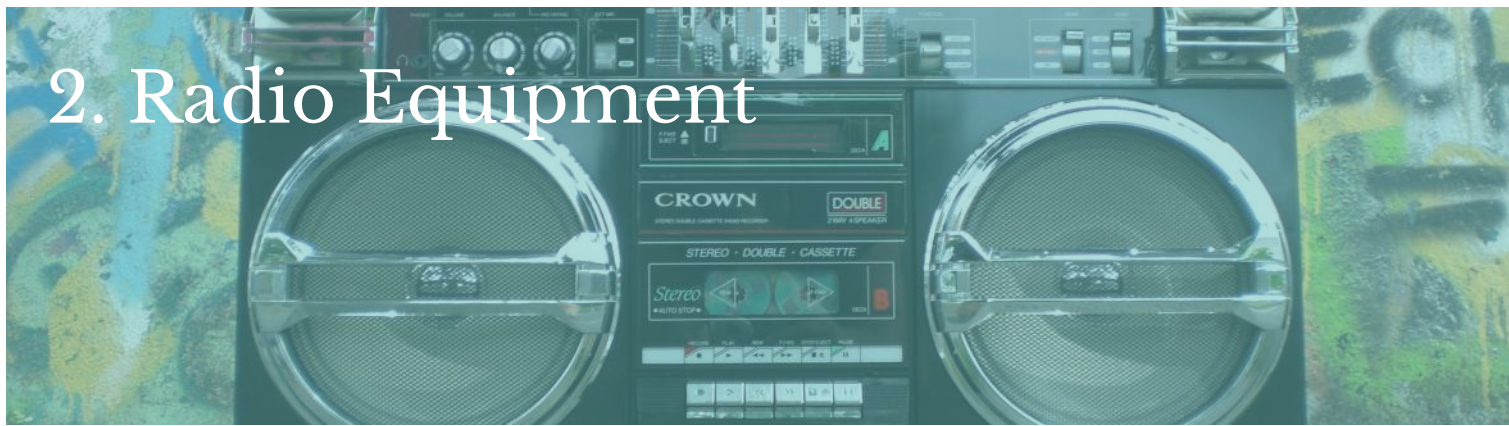
One of the things we suffered from is we had some people that were very quiet on our calls, just didn't volunteer, other people spoke over them, other people were a lot more confident. So we put in what we called “mentoring”. We said we wanted their advice rather than asking them to sign off on things or agree with things. We said, ‘We're not feeling we're engaging the right way. What do you think? Can you help us?’

“It was almost like a trusted confidant. And so we even offered to say, ‘Look, if you don't want to talk, talk outside where the concerns are or give your input anonymously. We can mix teams up so you can say it to somebody you've never met before. So you're going to be rude about what we're doing? That's brilliant. You can do that.’”

One important trick he's found is that even when some people are in the office, if some members are online, it works better to get everyone online. You can hear everyone better, and you can use tools like virtual pinboards to simulate the IRL experience.

However, large team-building events with more than four or five people work less well because that's not a number of people that would naturally have one conversation together in real life. Task-oriented events are fine, but just chatting tends to end up stilted and formal.

2. Radio Equipment



Our contact in radio technology has been working on a change programme to make his company agile enough to keep pace with innovation as the radio industry transitions from narrowband to broadband.

He managed to get a few productive face-to-face meetings in before the second lockdown and succeeded in getting buy-in from senior management and setting up some project streams. But when lockdown hit, he found those projects weren't moving forward as they should have been.

As the company provides critical infrastructure, they've had about 30% of people working throughout lockdown since the start. However, most of their software engineers and hardware engineers are working remotely, which has been a challenge.

“Normally with a project, you might have your stakeholder meetings, but a lot of the benefit and the actual work happens when you go, ‘Well, let's head up for a coffee, let's have a little chat here.’ And that's not happening. And we're missing that. I'll be honest, we've lost quite a bit of momentum at the moment, and we're all frustrated. We all want it to happen.

“There's no cynicism about this change initiative like we've had in the past. We know we need to do this. But we're trying to figure out now: how do we force it through when we're not going to see each other for another properly for another two, three months, if we're lucky?”

3. Publishing



“Nobody's been in the offices for almost for a year now,” who's currently leading a global reorganization in a major publishing company.

“On an emotional note, I'm losing touch. I don't feel confident anymore about the process that I'm steering, because I don't get the echo. I don't see the watercooler talk, the coffee talk. Nobody has an idea of what's really going on. I feel lost – the momentum is there, but it's all project-based, plan-based assignments, contracts, meetings. The human element is really hard to bring together.

“Even though we are having great board sessions online, it's hard to get the real feedback on what's going on, especially since people are quite stressed out, very busy, and have their kids just behind them running around the desk. I just feel less secure and safe and on top of things.

However, there are things that she's found helpful. “We have a pulse check twice per week, asking simple type questions that at least give leaders an idea of whether we're moving into rougher waters in whatever part of the organisation. And that has been really good on simple questions like how are you doing personally? You really see changes in outlook and how lockdowns impact people. But then you have a talking point. As a leader, you can go back to teams and start a conversation that works well.

“Another thing I wouldn't have expected to be so powerful is major online offerings like training, open courses, seminars, webinars. There are such good consultants out there who offer virtual journeys, very different topics for leaders, for personal fitness. I've seen another company that sent ukuleles to every staff member who wanted one and had an online trainer teach them to play them together.”

4. Media



“I've been running a digital transformation programme with our editorial colleagues,” says our media HR leader. “Not contagiously, because we had to pause when the first lockdown hit us. It took a while to convince the board to get going again.

“It's a very extensive conservation programme, culturally focussing on our content creators, on putting the audience first, writing what they want to consume and will pay for. But actually, more importantly, taking a completely digital-first approach. It's a fundamental operating model change in every regard. So for this organisation it's probably the most fundamental transformation ever undertaken, because we're changing the systems environment. We're changing end-to-end processes. We're changing work design and ways of working. Every single job has been redesigned. Completely changing everything you do makes it very complex.

“The good news is we've already done it successfully at a regional level before attempting it at a national level, and we've got some useful feedback from that. But clearly, doing a fundamental operating model change with everybody working remotely, to use the technical term, is bloody hard. The degree of difficulty in workshopping things virtually versus getting everyone you need in a room for a couple of days is just night and day.”

He's handled this by breaking it up into bite-size chunks, creating small groups to tackle problems and trying to bring the pieces back together. “Some of it went swimmingly, so for the digital part of the organisation, we're going to get very strong digital audience growth very quickly.

“The bit we knew would be difficult was in pre-production, where we've changed absolutely everything. It was really difficult to handle that remotely instead of being in newsrooms with everyone. With face-to-face contact you can move people along the curve very rapidly, you can spot and solve problems quickly. If you're not there with them, it takes months of hard drive to eradicate those problems and get them to do the right things all the time.

“So I don't think we've come up with a perfect solution for managing these difficult challenges remotely. I tell you, it's just so difficult.”

On the upside, he believes lockdown has accelerated our thinking about mental well-being by about five years, although he admits that he still feels he has a lot to learn on the topic. “I think it's important to lead by example. I've seen a lot of people talk about emotional well-being at the top. Right. And they are still sending email at 10 p.m., 11 p.m. and night, sending emails all throughout the day. And I'm thinking, you know, you've got to walk the talk.

5. Headhunting



Our headhunter is very aware of this issue. “If people are staying in roles they're stressed and unhappy in because it's too risky to look for anything else, we could see an exodus of talent at the end of this year when the job market picks back up.”

And from a head-hunter's point of view, I think when you are updating your CVs, as should be happening constantly, the engagement piece is what's really going to be helpful. So when you talk about your experience, how have you involved employee engagement and mental wellbeing measures to prevent future turnover, risk mitigation in the transformation projects you've done? Because there's bound to be a question about that at some point in the coming years.”

6. Coffee Shops



Our Transformation leader in the coffee-shop industry has been overseeing a large-scale transformation journey to make a very physical product more digital. “The challenge we've had with starting up new projects and new transformation initiatives, when we're working with external suppliers, is getting to know people and getting them to understand how to work together effectively when you can't go to the pub with them after work.

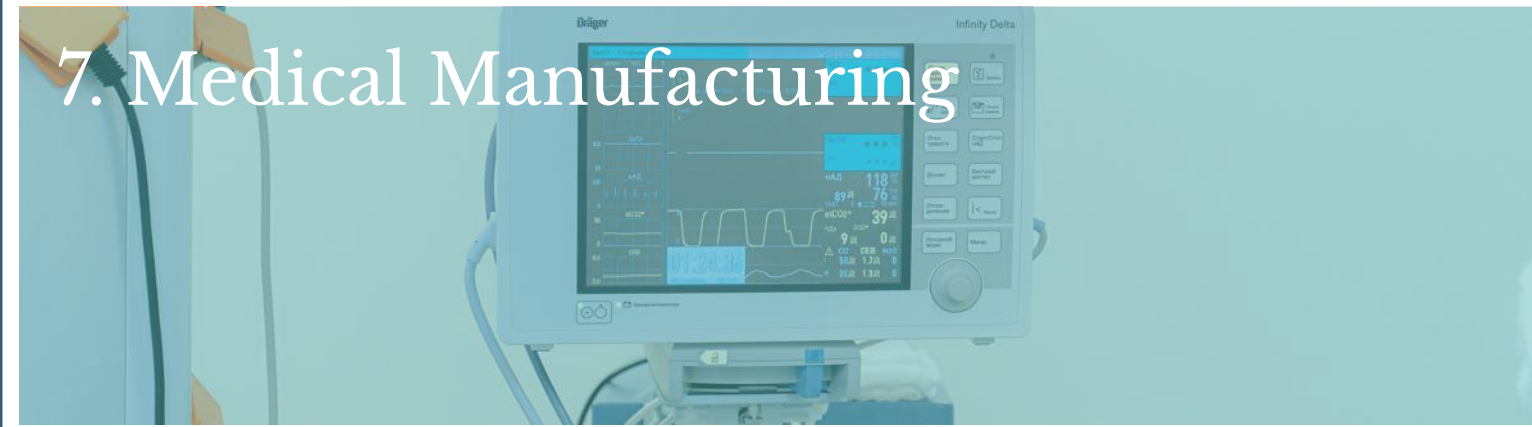
“So we've artificially put in “get to know you” sessions, but just getting to know people on a non-professional level has been the hardest challenge. And it's always the thing that then enables you to be most successful on a project or programme delivery.

“The other thing that we were challenged with initially was especially in a workshop scenario, people are very used to getting a bit of brown paper on the wall or the flip charts up and getting the posters up just working collaboratively like that. So our challenge was finding virtual replacements that people felt comfortable using. In a physical meeting where people are just scribbling on a Post-It note, it's easier to read the room and get the shy people to come forward. An online whiteboard called Miro has been very useful.

“You also need to break people into smaller groups. If you have the 20s or 30s, you have the people that just hide behind the screen and don't engage properly. So it's definitely about having smaller subgroups of people to get to know each other better. And keep moving them around so people get to know everyone across the whole programme.

“It's all about having a clear idea of what we want to achieve and the roadmap to get there. When government legislation and lockdowns are changing all the time, it makes it very difficult to have a clear message. So having a kind of North Star absolute direction as to where you're going and anchoring things back to that has definitely helped in terms of our communication.”

7. Medical Manufacturing



Our HR leader in the medical industry was already wrapping up the final stages of a finance transformation when the pandemic hit. This made the tricky finishing-off stages even trickier. “We're used to getting people together, and we had to think differently on how we were going to do that. We've had to work harder in terms of picking people off one-on-one to make sure the engagement is there and address issues that they may not be comfortable in discussing in a larger group format. If you were in a room, you would just go to one side and have a coffee break and talk about it.”

She's now leading another massive transformation on the shared services side of the company, made particularly difficult by working with a team so global they have to split meetings into two time zones. However, she says the level of attendance and engagement has impressed her.

8. Travel



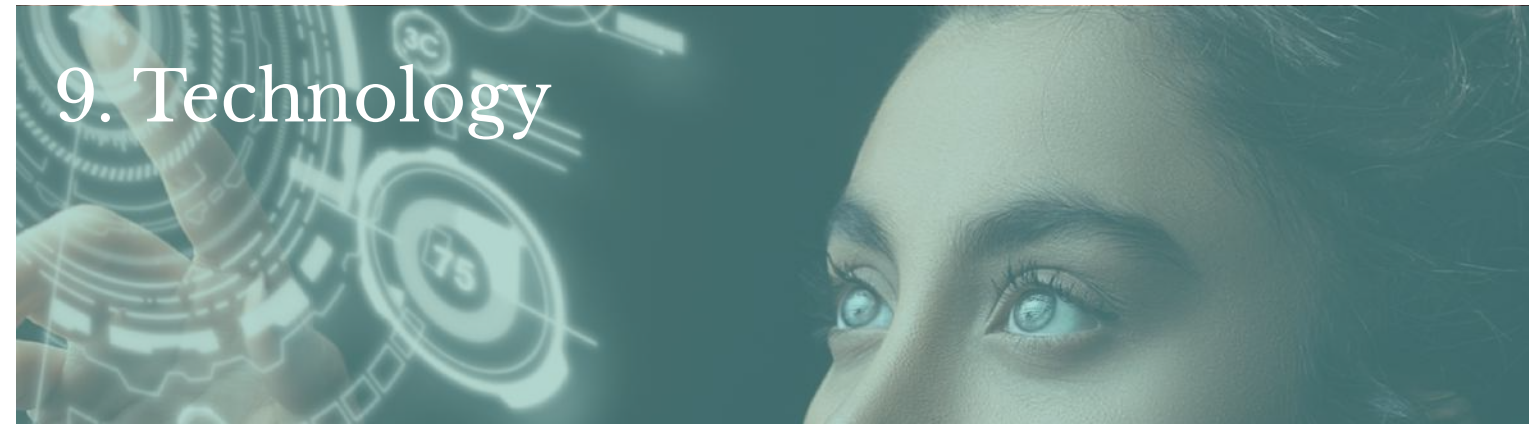
“The luxury travel sector got hit extremely hard last March when the pandemic hit,” says our travel contact. “And we are a global company, and we could see it coming from our Asia offices as the wave progressed across Europe and then eventually to the UK and the US. And like many companies in this work, we’ve had to pivot and think differently and do things differently. We just immediately started to change the way we worked. And I would say first we were in crisis management mode, and we put everyone into swim lanes: they may not be doing their normal day job, but it was really for the survival of the company at that point in time. Things stabilised over the summer.

“We did do a major restructure and they had to lay off about 40 percent of our global workforce, which was challenging. But it was interesting at the same time because, you know, funnily enough, people are still booking holidays. People want to travel. They're just pushing them further out into the future. Over the summer, we saw a spike of people going over to Europe and whichever travel corridors were open. And so we were in a strange place where we could see that the demand was there and that people wanted to travel. And because we're at the top end of the market, our guests are a bit more resilient than at the other end.

“We took advantage of the time, though, because we had some extra capacity to accelerate a lot of the key initiatives for the company over this period. And we went from this swim-lane way of managing things to a variety of secondments around the business. So, for example, we accelerated our rebranding initiative and that dovetailed with a website overhaul. And so we took people from different parts of the business who wanted to get career development, and put them to work on helping us become more digital, whether that was writing content or doing data analysis or what have you. So it was a real opportunity, I think, for people to help accelerate things but also learn a new skill.

“Again, the challenge is how do you get the informal collaboration that would just naturally happen if you were face to face? But the fact that everyone's virtual, in some ways, is a benefit. We can do things in three months now that used to take four or five.”

9. Technology



“We’re going through a global cultural transformation,” says our tech HR leader. “The business was acquired by another company last year. Now we're trying to embed quite a lot of methodology that the parent company uses, which is very different to any ways of working that I’ve done traditionally. So we’re going for cultural training at the moment, a series of HR workshops. It’s on a very large scale, and you get the same people talking every time and a lot of people silent, so I agree that smaller teams are better. I worry that not everyone’s understood what they’ve learned.

“And then I'm going to be involved in rolling out an HR business partnering programme, moving our HR functions from regionally aligned to business-aligned. I’ll be giving a series of workshops, using smaller groups.”

“I think sometimes because the switch to remote work has been so quick, people just needed a bit of help with permission: permission to take some time out to go outside and get some fresh air, permission to say hi to each other on Teams without scheduling anything. Also, we do a coffee break hosted by the leadership team once a month. We don't talk about work at all in those sessions. We do quizzes. We've had somebody with an acrylic paint pouring demonstration. We've had people singing. People play an instrument. And it's been really, really good fun. It feels a bit strange, you know, standing in a kitchen, in the sun, singing your heart out through your laptop. But at the same time, I think showing our vulnerability really helps people connect with us and realise that we're just the same.”

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