The Digital Decade, the Pandemic and the New Normal
- How can Businesses and Societies Thrive in a Time of Global Challenges

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Respond, Adapt, Recover

Respond. Adapt. Recover: these three words sum up what we at [techUK](#) and our members did to confront the COVID-19 pandemic's first peak and lockdown, how we helped businesses and people adapted to a new normal, and what steps we believe must be taken for our economy and society in the UK and we contend elsewhere around the world, to recover and reinvent economies and societies.

But what you will also find is that this is not as simple as a 'before, during and after' narrative. There is no clear beginning, middle and end. We are living through a rapidly changing and complex time that requires an ongoing response, constant adaptation and long-term recovery plans.

The techUK response

Our first priority was simple. Like every business we had to look after our own staff and members.

With the cloud, we were able to move all of our operations online within days – enabling our staff to continue to work, whilst making sure we could still deliver value to our members and stakeholders.

To start with we were apprehensive. Normally our offices and meeting rooms have been essential to our work and with over 24,000 visitors every year we worried that closing the office and becoming 100% virtual could damage our relationship with members and stakeholders. Well we should perhaps have trusted ourselves and our industry's technology more because in fact we have seen up to 40% higher participation from members and stakeholders at our events – of which we have run almost 500 fully online since March, attended by nearly 14,000 people. And we have seen our value to stakeholders and government officials increase hugely.

However although we at techUK had the capabilities for digitisation, many did not. Lockdown saw a digital migration on an unprecedented scale – with massive disruption to each aspect of our daily lives, as well as the huge health consequences of the virus itself.

And so, our first questions were around how we could help public services move online. From the NHS, to Universal Credit and Inland Revenue, to schools – scaling up existing tech support was crucial to supporting people throughout the lockdown period. We supported our members in rapidly deploying solutions, working closely with the NHS, Public Health England, schools and directly with ministers to deploy solutions.

Our members such as Microsoft deployed Teams throughout the NHS, while both it and another member, Zoom's usage grew significantly to help keep people connected. Equally, apps such as Google Classroom were picked up by schools to assist with online teaching.

Identifying the challenges

Beyond the immediate response we had to look at the stability of the UK's digital infrastructure. There were some real question marks about how this would cope with a near universal move online, particularly the huge increase in online video, entertainment, and retail. How would our members get engineers out to those who needed them? How would we get equipment? How could we ensure data centres keep running?

With government, we set up daily interactions, meetings, and 'to do's' to help overcome these challenges. It was an unprecedented time of collaboration, which we want to catch, bottle and build on, because that's the way our country should work moving forward – a digital economy, supported by the public and private sector, taking on these challenges and delivering for the whole of the UK.

With the right infrastructure in place, the next question was around how businesses and their employees could adapt to their new ways of working and how you move through this to reinvent the economy for the new normal.

While financial and professional services as well as some educational services and tech companies themselves had the digital capabilities to adapt, lockdown revealed with clarity the parts of our economy that have not yet gone digital.

Travel, tourism, and hospitality – naturally predominantly physical industries – have been the hardest hit and require the most support moving forward. But even so you have seen restaurants particularly adapting and adopting technology, with increased home deliveries, online access to their recipes, and promoting of their supply chains directly to customers.

What comes next?

The Pandemic has been an unprecedented challenge to every aspect of society and business but for every company, in every industry, in every region, the challenge was unique and so we decided to go out and find out about this for ourselves on the ground.

Over the past few months we have held a series of national Digital Dialogues in all four nations of the UK and regions of England. The idea was to get businesses, communities, local authorities and other interested parties from investors to academics all together to discuss at a regional level what the challenges, opportunities and requirements are for each.

We are producing reports from these discussions that highlight where we, the tech industry, can play a part, and where techUK in particular can act as a convener for our members who want to help.

As we move forward, we can clearly see a massive change in the landscape – a massive move to a digital economy such as we have not seen before. In some ways there will be new and revolutionary changes, such as widespread remote working, but also trends that were underway already such as e-commerce, online banking and streaming entertainment have seen years of progress in weeks.

One of the clearest take-aways for me has been the importance of our existing capabilities in ensuring industries could respond, adapt and recover effectively. Without the digital infrastructure that we have, without the digital tools – mobile phones, laptops and tablets and the apps that run on them, many of which are relatively new – then that

ability to move whole sections of society and the economy online would not have been possible.

Even five to 10 years ago, we would not have had as wide an ability to service people digitally, nor to keep people connected in periods of isolation and lockdown.

Secondly the move to the cloud is now essential. The fact that large parts of our economy were already digital, particularly in financial and professional services and many educational services, meant they were able to pivot and carry on quickly. For others like our healthcare and social services, it was a case of scaling up existing capabilities to full capacity, a challenge to which they have risen. And we are quite good at this in the UK. The UK's digital infrastructure, the companies supplying digital services and the public in adapting to a 'new normal' have rated among the best in the world. We have been able to maintain our infrastructure and our communities very well and I would compare our response with best practice anywhere.

There is of course still so much more we can learn from others and there are still areas for us to focus on. Inclusion for one.

It is no longer acceptable for more than four million people in the UK to be digitally excluded; we cannot leave anybody behind and must ensure those who do not have access or do not understand technology, are given the tools to use it. If we succeed in doing this then the millions who are seeking jobs in the wake of this pandemic will find extended opportunities in a technology industry that is saying 'come on in'. This is a moment to make the tech industry itself more inclusive, to bring in more communities and demographics – particularly women and ethnic minority groups, who are currently under-represented.

This is a chance to change that, and so we are calling on the entire industry and government to rebuild the UK as a nation absolutely replete with digital skills – a country that is a producer of them, not just a consumer. The good news is that there has been a huge shift in attitude among businesses, government and public sector organisations, all of whom are embracing the new and finally entering the 21st century. I see that in businesses, as well as in our surveys of the public. It is clear they want to acquire these skills, become more digital and use them to be a part of and to grow new industries.

I see it also in relationships between countries. If you look at the recently signed trade agreement between the UK and Japan, there is a section that very explicitly commits both countries to say 'we are going to build a digital connection between us', as well as a connection through physical goods and trade. It is a signal of the future that a commitment to tech innovation is built into our trade agreements. This focus on digital is also clear both within the EU's recently announced Covid recovery plans which are suffused with the need for digital technology and also in the ongoing discussions about the future relationship between the EU and the UK.

You also see this in pronouncements from the UK government around investment and the commitment to increase the R&D spend in this country to 2.4% of GDP and very much focused on tech breakthroughs in Healthtech, Greentech, Edtech, Agritech, and others utilising AI, Robotics, new generation comms and space technology. And the UK is not alone in this quest.

But we must get this right

Which brings me to some concerns that we need to address and challenges to overcome to ensure that we are able to capture the moment and ensure that the Digital Decade we are entering is a good and productive time to be alive.

The first of these is the Geopolitical challenge we are facing - the standoff between two tech behemoths in the USA and China. At techUK we are realists and can see real issues that need to be resolved but we believe that other parties must stress the fact that the challenges of the future such as health and climate change need a global approach and multinational initiatives and collaboration.

The next challenge we see is clearly making sure that we use digital tech responsibly - future generations around the world are all focused on organisations with purpose. Future tech leaders must be able to say what their dreams and visions will contribute improving lives in their communities not just when they will become a billion dollar company.

At the heart of the challenges is the issue of trust. Trust that new breakthroughs will be safe and secure, that data and privacy will be respected and that everyone will be able to access and benefit from new technology breakthroughs.

For us at techUK now is the time to say we are going to do this and make sure that every region and person in the UK is a part of this transformation. The 2020s were always going to be the digital decade; the pandemic has accelerated that in a way we could not have foreseen nor would ever have wished, but if we get things right there are many reasons to be optimistic as we move forward.