



Thoughts on System Integrators Before and After COVID-19

BY LUIGI DE BERNARDINI | THU MAY 14 2020

I know! This is the most predictable topic to write about during these times. Whatever site you visit, magazine or newspaper you read, it's all about COVID-19—the virus that suddenly changed our lives and the world itself. It's common opinion that there will be a pre-COVID-19 and a post-COVID-19, similarly as there was a pre-9/11 and a post-9/11.

But because it was such a sudden and impacting change nobody was prepared for, I believe that sharing thoughts, ideas, and concerns is important to be able to face the future.

Our life will be different and so will our companies and businesses.

In Italy, everything happened very quickly, maybe because we didn't recognize the signals or underestimated them. In just a few days, we moved from normal life and business to an almost complete lockdown. We had to

quickly adapt to the new conditions and moved all our employees to remote working. This is nothing special as many companies have a business model based on remote working. The technology is widely available, and, after all, we are a software company, so we were used to use collaboration and remote working tools. But the problem isn't just technological! It's cultural and organizational. People need to be prepared and trained to work from home. The company needs different processes to organize and manage the business, which isn't something you learn overnight. But we did! Emergency helped and everyone put an extra effort to convert habits, home spaces, and daily relationship with relatives in order to work from home and be productive. Without a doubt, the big investment we made in a brand-new information technology infrastructure at the end of last year helped a lot in avoiding any technical issue. Same did the fact that we were talking about increasing remote working since the middle of 2019. Nothing was really in place just yet, but some awareness was already transmitted to the employees. For all these reasons the switch happened pretty smoothly.

After almost six weeks of lockdown and remote working, we now have a series of learnings and we start to look at the future trying to forecast what will happen and how we should move on.

Here are the learnings we've taken away from the COVID-19 lockdown thus far:

Remote working is good (but not perfect): For the kind of business we run (software) it's technically easy to work remotely. Productivity, most of the time, can be the same. And sometimes it can even increase, especially in technical tasks where concentration makes the difference. However, collaborative tasks tend to be impacted because face-to-face collaboration is more effective, most of the time. On the opposite side, the need of scheduling meetings made us more pragmatic and on time.

Long term remote working only can be difficult to sustain: After six weeks I started to hear from many people that they would like to go back to the office, at least partially. Working alone from home can be alienating. Maybe, this is just because we are in a lockdown situation, which makes it very difficult to separate work time from personal time. All our life is inside the house and there's no possibility to escape after a full working day. Maybe it's not remote working that is alienating, it's just quarantine.

If you plan to make a change...do it: We worked several months to prepare for what we needed to increase remote working adoption. I'm not saying we were wrong spending that time planning it. There are very serious implications (security, safety, labor law, performance management, etc.) that we needed to make sure were dealt with correctly. But we had the possibility (due to the government rules) and the necessity of the sudden transitions and it worked. It worked, and people reacted, much better than we expected.

So, what's the forecast for the future:

Things will be different: It's difficult to imagine that things will go back exactly how they were before. The change has been deep and sudden, and it lasted long enough to allow the development of new working habits. It's difficult to predict how we will be in six months. Companies and people will definitely want to keep part of the good that there was in this change, but they will not be able to keep all the good there was. As soon as we developed new habits, we will begin to re-develop some bad habits. Work will be a mix of new and old, but the percentage of each part is not predictable. We are thinking and planning to leverage the good changes we were forced to do and not lose the momentum we have. Though this has been a terrible situation, it's been a tremendous opportunity to reinvent ourselves and our businesses.

The manufacturing industry will be different: There's a common thinking that the manufacturing industry will need to change significantly. One of the things that show a dramatic weakness is globalization. Global supply chains were disrupted and deeply impacted; they will be the ones that will take longer to recover because the crisis is not evenly distributed throughout the world. Different regions are on different stages of the crisis and it's of common opinion that we will have multiple waves of this pandemic, so for a pretty long time there will be one or more areas of the world that will be in crisis mode. Since the strength of a supply chain is based on the strength of its weakest link, most of the global supply chains will be affected. Governments are already talking about restoring initiatives. Again, we will not move from black to white, and the final situation will not be the one that we foresee now—because that is based on a very emotional analysis. But it's reasonable thinking that the supply chains will change and there will be a tendency in being more local. This will require a redesign and reorganization of production and will bring significant investments in automation and manufacturing execution systems.

Humans are weak: We were dominating the world and were defeated by an invisible virus. For years, we prepared to fight against each other. We run to dominate nature. But in just a few weeks, nature defeated us, showing us what our place is on the planet. We have to learn a lot from this. What we already learned is that the human factor is as important as it is critical. In the next months, and probably years, the way humans will be present in the factories will change. It's reasonable to think that many companies will invest in technology to reduce the dependency from humans. This was already a trend related to gaining efficiency, now it could be a trend to preserve business continuity.

Digital is good: Digitization was one of the big trends of the last five years. There was a lot of talking of it in many different fields. During last weeks, we discovered just how critical it is. Not only have many businesses survive because they were already digital, or able to go digital quickly, our social life as well survived because

we could be digital—just think of the tremendous growth of web meeting platforms in our private life. We now look at digitization from a different perspective and give it a different meaning. It's reasonable to think that many companies will invest in speeding up their digitization journey or starting one. Again, this will not be a nice to have tool, it will be mandatory.

Cybersecurity (and continuity) is necessary: As the adoption of digital systems and remote working increases, the importance of cybersecurity grows. Protection from any kind of risk that could impact the availability and the performance of network connections is critical. Could you imagine what our working and private life could have been without a working and secure virtual private network VPN connections or internet connection in the last four weeks?

I know I just scratched the surface and maybe wrote pretty banal considerations. But I believe it's important to start sharing our own perspective and put it to a common factor. The potential changes this crisis will bring are so huge and impacting that we will need to work together and share any possible knowledge to get out of it and, hopefully, find ourselves and our businesses in a safe and (why not) competitive position. It's not possible to have all the answers today, and the uncertainty will last long. That's exactly the reason we need to keep communication and ideas sharing going.

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