

A year of upheaval: What businesses can learn from 2021

By  James Bayhack

10 Nov 2021

From lockdowns, third waves and vaccine rollouts to digital innovations, e-commerce booms and riot-related supply chain struggles, the year 2021 has been eventful - to say the least.



Source: www.unsplash.com

For many South African businesses, 2020 set the tone for what to expect this year, especially in terms of digital transformation and managing operations under lockdown restrictions. However, the last few months undoubtedly threw a few curveballs our way. It's fair to say that now, executive managers in almost every industry are prioritising ways to adapt and future-proof their businesses for what's sure to be an interesting year to come. At least, they should be.

With American humourist Evan Escar's words in mind – he claimed that while hindsight is good, foresight is better – what can we learn from our experiences during the last year of upheaval to better prepare for the one to come? Every setback, development, or achievement presents a host of opportunities for improved insight and better understanding. And 2021 was packed with all three.

Below are what I believe have been the biggest game-changers in the last 12 months. And a few lessons on how to use these disruptions to improve business outcomes and make 2022 the most prosperous year yet.

Digital transformation

This became an 'adapt or die' situation this year. With the pandemic showing no signs of slowing down, more businesses were forced to go online. A 2020 [report](#) by Deloitte found that while two-thirds of businesses had a digital transformation strategy in place, 46% of senior leaders didn't feel confident leading an organisation in the digital economy. Often, this comes down to not fully understanding a company's technological needs or even what it means to be truly digital.

This year, we saw how businesses that had already embraced digital transformation were better equipped to manage the 'new normal', transitioning teams and adapting to digital demands faster. Companies that struggled were the ones that had no plan in place, hadn't adopted the right technology to support their business and, understandably, had a limited budget for the transformation required.



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As we prepare for 2022, it's crucial that businesses align digital transformation with company goals and understand the core needs to ensure agility in the future. This covers everything from developing correct procedures and training staff to investing in technology and tools that support a decentralised work model. The digital age is upon us. Fortunately, innovations are taking place every day to make the transition to a digital environment a little less painful.

The hybrid workspace

A consequence of digital transformation and catalysed by the ever-present Covid-19 pandemic. One of the biggest changes to take place in 2021 was the rise of the hybrid workplace. After months of total shutdown in 2020, when teams navigated the perils of working remotely, this year saw a trickle of people returning to offices for a few days or hours a week. But a global survey by Statista suggests that 73% of employees want flexible, remote working options to remain post-Covid.

So, the hybrid workplace – and even the elusive 'third' working space, which constitutes anywhere with a plug point and internet connection – seems here to stay. This means the pressure is on for businesses that initially struggled to adapt to remote operations – those that battled with things like managing customer queries remotely, motivating decentralised teams, and staying on top of customer service.



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In 2021, we learnt how to run companies from home and, while productivity seemed to stay on track, the process wasn't without its challenges. Now, businesses must master both in-office efficiency and remote working. In my opinion, this means communication has never been more important. And we should expect concepts like cybersecurity and digital wellbeing to become a major focus in the next few months as more people spend more time online – Zoom fatigue is a very real thing.

Communication and innovation

Looking back at 2021, I'd say effective communication – internally and with customers – is what sets businesses apart.

Even though digital platforms and collaboration tools like Zoom and Microsoft Teams replaced the physical office, direct communication cannot be overlooked. Neither can the importance of upskilling team members with improved communication techniques and ensuring that everything from onboarding to year-end reviews is done in a way that makes every employee feel heard and valued. Good communicators will always be an asset to any organisation – whether or not you're sharing office space.

In terms of external communication, customer experience became the focus this year. We learnt to speak to customers on the channels they prefer, whether on WhatsApp, social media platforms or via SMS notifications. With the global rise in mobile e-commerce, it became crucial to build responsive, easy-to-navigate websites and ensure everything from marketing campaigns to payment methods was optimised for mobile users. In the year to come, customer experience and convenience will be key drivers in business decisions.



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And we can't ignore the disruptions that took place in July. During that period, when supply chains were compromised and the country was in a state of turmoil, innovative technology and communication platforms stepped up to mitigate damage. After that experience, businesses discovered the importance of operating on the cloud, investing in off-premise hardware, and always having a disaster recovery plan in place to ensure service continuity. In the most chaotic times, the right technology and communication tools can help businesses keep up with operations and meet customer demands.

Though there were unexpected challenges in 2021, the year before undoubtedly set the tone for developments and business changes to come. Now, looking ahead to 2022, it's the ideal time to extract important lessons from the last few months and devise a strategy to ensure your company is as prepared as possible for the future.

ABOUT JAMES BAYHACK

Director for sub-Saharan Africa at CIM.com

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