

Transformation, Technology, and Teamwork: What Businesses Learned Navigating Through COVID-19

The effects of COVID have created seismic shifts in our business community, and organizations are applying critical lessons learned to build a stronger future. We recently touched base with Chamber members to find out what they've learned and some new approaches they have taken to survive, transform, and in some cases, thrive.

Throughout 2020, many businesses honed in on communication as the most crucial business tool in the toolkit. Mike Castle, Vice President for Western Virginia at Hourigan, a construction and development firm explained: "Maintaining open lines of communication was key to our success throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Regular communication between employees and senior leadership, as well as increased virtual meetings with clients and trade partners, ensured that everyone was on the same page at all times."

Anthony Woodard, CEO of Woodard Properties, agreed. "Frequent communication and selfless teamwork have been critical in navigating the COVID era. The uncertainty and challenges shined a spotlight on the individuals who make up our team, as it was their ideas that created the pathway forward and helped us get through it. There were no books or classes on how to push through the most troubling times. Still, we banded together and communicated well quickly, coming up with creative ideas to adapt and overcome. Then each team member executed their tasks with a team-first mentality."

Some organizations opted to transform at a time when there was already upheaval all around. Arlene Lee, CEO/Principal of R. E. Lee Companies, shared that their transformation includes "...a new leadership team and a top-notch team strategically integrated at every level... We are not the same company we were before the pandemic and are excited about the direction we are going and the opportunities in the future. I believe in

harnessing the power of challenges to make us better."

The events of 2020 compelled many organizations to address shortcomings and expand into new ways to operate through improved technology, internal productivity, customer engagement, and e-commerce. Depending on the industry, some of these changes are temporary, and some will be lasting. For example, once restaurants return to total capacity, will online ordering continue to be the norm, or a distant memory?

Melvin Burruss, Attorney at Law, identified various technical issues that challenged businesses transitioning to remote work. In addition to finding and purchasing the ideal hardware and software for home offices, a heightened risk for cyberscams and cybersecurity breaches will continue to be a concern. Disparities in broadband access also have made it difficult for businesses with employees spread across the region.

Increased technology suggests there will be a lot more remote working even after we bounce back from COVID. On the positive side, some individuals working from home will enjoy a more flexible schedule. But on the downside, Burruss says that staff burn-out has become a considerable concern. As we work longer hours and the clear lines between home and work evaporate, forward-thinking organizations will need to consider how best to retain staff members under often stressful circumstances.

The final frequent theme we are constantly hearing is all about teamwork, both within and across industries. Woodard Properties' Anthony Woodard explained, "We've worked hard to be ambassadors for our commercial retail customers whose businesses were hit hard. We have tried to market their businesses as much as possible and frequent their businesses as patrons. We're also trying to help people find work, as we recently launched our own "Job Connect" portal to pair Woodard Properties' residential customers with employment opportunities at



From the Desk of **Elizabeth Cromwell**
*President and CEO of the Charlottesville
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our commercial customers' businesses."

Albemarle County Director of Economic Development Roger Johnson heartily agrees with the emphasis on broad teamwork. "Partnerships are critically important to the work that we do, and the pandemic highlighted how in times of crisis, we could leverage collective resources to meet urgent needs. Through the Charlottesville Regional Chamber's Project Rebound, we were able to hear directly from businesses. Then we were able to work together to design and implement programs in response—including a Buy Local campaign to highlight the unique goods and services of our small business community that we will support beyond this pandemic and recovery."

As devastating as the past year has been for many of us professionally and personally, we can take pride in the overwhelmingly collaborative approach to our community's response. As we look towards a bright future, the dedication of the Chamber will provide the platform for businesses to continue engaging, innovating, and inspiring each other.

For further and updated information, visit cvillechamber.com.



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The Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce advocates, convenes, and engages to strengthen business in the greater Charlottesville Region.