

The myth of certainty

*Creating agility in the workforce and developing
meaningful business plans*



Questionmark Viewpoint

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Introduction: business planning in an uncertain world

Every business and organization shares two recent experiences. Their 2020 business plan became redundant quickly and writing a meaningful strategy for 2021 was almost impossible.

Even the medium-term future is unknowable. How long social distancing measures will last is a mystery. No one can be sure whether new strains of Covid-19 will further disrupt daily life. How consumer habits will adjust and settle for the long-term remains impossible to predict.

These uncertainties create frustration. They also help employers realize or remember an important truth. Certainty has always been a myth. Now it is a dangerous one.

Companies have always had to plan, as best they can on a future they believed would come to pass. The results have, at best, been mixed.

From Digital Equipment's prediction that the personal computer would never "catch on" to Microsoft's belief that Apple's iPhones would never be popular, business planners have often endured a complicated relationship with the future.¹

Firms that thrive are not those that have discovered the art of fortune telling. They are the ones that ask the right questions about the way the world is changing. They obtain the best information about it.

They move quickly to adapt, knowing that it will only be a matter of time before they need to adapt again.

Recent weeks have shattered the illusion that while 2020 was a year to "survive", 2021 would be a chance to understand the "new normal" and begin to "thrive".

Instead, business plans must anticipate the need to constantly rotate between surviving, adapting and thriving. Employers must develop plans that:

¹ <https://www.americanexpress.com/en-us/business/trends-and-insights/articles/8-legendary-business-predictions-that-missed-the-mark/>

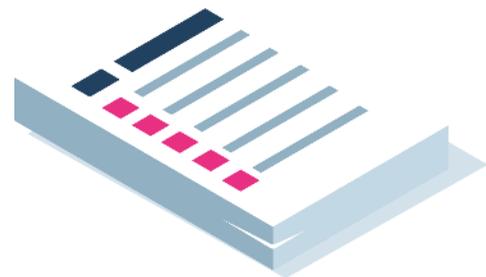
1. Survive: create the capacity to respond to a crisis – by ensuring they can quickly identify issues and make better decisions around responding to them
2. Adapt: develop the agility to adapt – by building “agile infrastructure” that helps teams and systems move quickly
3. Thrive: lay the foundations to thrive – by nurturing the talents, strategies and approaches which will help the workforce reach new levels of success

People are central to effective business planning. Strategies are worthless if the workforce doesn't have the capacity to deliver them. Objectives are meaningless if workers do not possess the skills to achieve them. Agility is only possible if people have what they need to adapt quickly.

This report sets out how employers can form each pillar of this approach. It explains how our assessment platform and content can help employers get the information they need about their workforce to ensure that their business planning is relevant and reliable.

Questionmark Viewpoint

Questionmark Viewpoint is a series of white papers and reports that we produce to explore the challenges that our customers are facing, and which we help them address. These papers are based on what we are hearing from customers, and on research from other experts.



Surviving: making better decisions about each new crisis

Before 2020, crisis management was an event. A year ago, it became a business plan.

Situations moved quickly. While employers relied on aspects of their crisis management plans, many were only of limited value. HR industry analyst Josh Bersin said that less than 50% of employers had remote working policies in place.²

As the world continues to change, employers will face new challenges that require them immediately to adapt. In these moments, a series of questions, with answers informed by meaningful data, will help employers quickly construct a strategy. They can make better decisions about surviving.

Core questions to establish the facts

Three-quarters of leaders who felt they responded well to the Covid-19 crisis believed it had been crucial to take the time to establish the facts, according to research by PwC.³

This involves asking crucial questions.

- **What are the specific and immediate problems?** Taking the time to understand exactly what the problems are is crucial. It helps form an effective diagnosis, leading to a better response.⁴
- **What helpful resources, skills and data do employers already have access to?** During 2020, many employers found they could rely on a group of “change makers” within their teams. These employees had a range of hard and soft skills that helped manage the disruption and meet the immediate challenges.⁵ They were not necessarily previously identified as “leaders” within the chain of command. But they quickly showed they had the skills to help lead change.

² <https://blog.smarp.com/ultimate-coronavirus-crisis-management-checklist>

³ <https://www.pwc.com/us/en/library/covid-19/crisis-management.html>

⁴ <https://hbr.org/2018/03/how-to-prepare-for-a-crisis-you-couldnt-possibly-predict>

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/sponsored/change-makers-step-up>

- **What resources, skills and data do employers lack?** A survey of global CEOs by PwC found that 74% were concerned about the shortage of people with crucial skills during 2020.⁶
- **What resources and skills can employers obtain quickly?** Research by the Open University found that businesses that continued to invest in training during the pandemic expect to recover more quickly.⁷
- **What resources and skills will it take longer to develop and obtain?** Any crisis will expose issues that cannot be dealt with quickly. These should be recorded so that they can be addressed when the immediate need has passed.

How measuring skill development with the Questionmark assessment platform can help

- ***Audit worker skills*** – assessing the strength and nature of skills across the workforce will reveal which people have them and where employers must provide support. Assessments identify who has the aptitude to develop new skills quickly.
- ***Create bespoke training*** – a one-size-fits-all approach to training is unlikely to develop new skills quickly. Measuring worker skills will give leaders information on the skill-base of each employee so that they can create relevant training plans.
- ***Check the effectiveness of training*** – when new skills are needed quickly, it is critical that the training is effective. Testing participants during and after training will show whether they've learnt what they need.
- ***Make better recruitment decisions*** – new staff must have the skills to make the difference. Assessing candidates before deciding to hire them ensures they have what is needed.

Identifying what needs to change is crucial. But understanding the need does not solve the problem. First, employers need to understand what is slowing them down. They must decide whether they have the right infrastructure in place, including “people infrastructure” to become more agile.

⁶ <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/ceo-survey/2020/trends/pwc-talent-trends-2020.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.open.ac.uk/business/apprenticeships/blog/business-recovery>

Adapting: building a more agile workforce

Bouncing back is not just about changing. It requires an understanding of why change didn't happen sooner.

Many employers recognize the need to adapt. That doesn't mean they are able to. Almost half (47%) of organizations claim they lack the skills to be as agile as they need.⁸

Once a crisis has passed employers should determine what slowed them down. They can then build the "agile infrastructure", both physical and human, that they need.

During the Covid-19 crisis, employers identified four "drag factors":

1) Insufficient digital skills

"Digital transformation" has appeared in countless business plans for the last decade. Even if it's not always been clear what it means. Research by McKinsey found that the Covid-19 crisis forced employers to accelerate their digital plans by three-to-four years. Over 60% of those surveyed believe the changes will stick.⁹

But there's still a big gap between where employers want to be and what they've been able to achieve. A survey of employers by TalentNeuron found that 53% believed that the inability to identify exactly what skills they needed was the biggest barrier to "digital transformation".¹⁰

2) A lack of problem-solving skills

Within months of the crisis breaking out, employers sought out transferable problem-solving skills, such as critical thinking, research and analysis.¹¹ Technical skills risk irrelevance when the world changes quickly. Transferable skills can help employers navigate a range of obstacles.

⁸ https://www.edge.co.uk/sites/default/files/publications/skills_shortage_bulletin_2_final.pdf

⁹ <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/how-covid-19-has-pushed-companies-over-the-technology-tipping-point-and-transformed-business-forever>

¹⁰ <https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/lack-of-skills-threatens-digital-transformation/>

¹¹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/covid-19-jobs-key-skills/>

4) A struggling “work from home” culture

Working from home has typically been deemed a success. But some are struggling.

Research conducted by the Harvard Business Review found that many managers are struggling to effectively manage remote workers.¹²

Many employers must build a better remote working culture.

5) Staff engagement and welfare

Maintaining engagement and productivity within the workforce has been a struggle. Low staff engagement can damage morale and reduce productivity

Research by Gallup found that only 36% of the US workforce is engaged with their work. While this needs urgent attention, just 22% of employers understand what’s causing the problem.¹³

How measuring workforce skills and attitudes with the Questionmark assessment platform and ready-made content can help

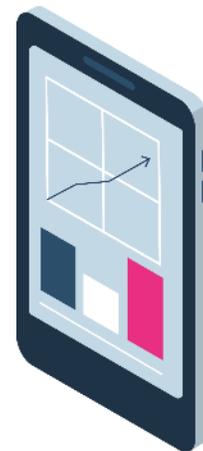
- **Test the digital skills of workers** – finding out what digital skills staff have can identify where strengths lie and what further training is required. Our ready-made [“digital marketing knowledge” test](#) makes it easy for employers to test the digital skills of workers or potential recruits.
- **Monitor levels of problem-solving abilities** – it is easy to check what thinking skills and problem-solving abilities people have using the ready-made [“thinking skills by Cambridge Assessments” test](#). This test can also identify high-potential candidates in the recruitment process.
- **Understand the attitudes of home workers** – find out what further support home workers might need by assessing their understanding of what is expected of them. Our report [“Remote success”](#) identifies five different types of remote workers. It sets out the nature of the support they require.

¹² <https://hbr.org/2020/07/remote-managers-are-having-trust-issues>

¹³ <https://screen.cloud/blog/employee-engagement-statistics-2020>

- **Better communicate with staff** – monitor current staff wellbeing and identify anxieties and concerns. If employers can understand the issues that cause disengagement, they can adapt their strategies and internal communications accordingly.

Building a more agile workforce will help employers continue to adapt to changing circumstances. But agility is not the sole requirement for future success. Employers must ensure they are laying the foundation to thrive in the future, even when they cannot be entirely clear about what business environment they will encounter.



Thriving: laying the foundations for success

Creating a successful strategy for an uncertain future is challenging. Employers cannot know how customer habits will adjust post-Covid. It remains unclear whether staff will continue to work remotely or demand a return to offices.

Employers cannot know exactly what “building back better” will look like. But the building blocks are already becoming clear.

To thrive in the future, each employer must ensure that the workforce has the right people, with the right skills.

This must involve:

- **Retaining the best staff** – even at the height of the uncertainty in the pandemic, 24% of workers were searching for new opportunities.¹⁴ When things look brighter, it will be the staff with the most sought-after skills that will be likely to move on.
- **Recruiting the best staff** – securing adaptable and agile staff will be vital. Once again, those with the most sought-after skills will be in high demand.
- **Committing to worker welfare and social responsibility** – a survey for Cone Communication found that 75% of millennials would be happy to take a pay cut to work for a socially responsible employer.¹⁵
- **Emphasizing career development** – the “lack of career development” regularly tops the reasons people leave their jobs.¹⁶ Offering meaningful opportunities to the best employees will help improve retention.

How measuring staff skills and attitudes with the Questionmark assessment platform can help

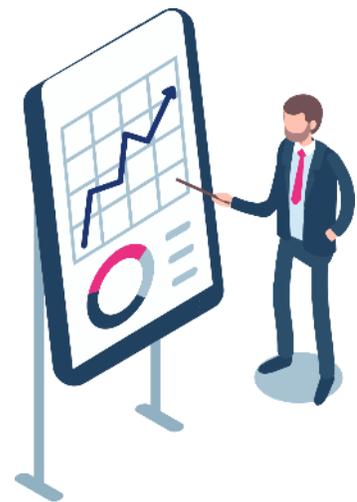
- **Increase staff retention by creating individual career development plans** – employers must understand a team member’s aspirations. By comparing that to their current skill base, they can craft a meaningful personal development plan.

¹⁴ <https://www.thehrdirector.com/preparing-for-the-next-new-normal-how-to-retain-and-attract-the-best-talent-post-lockdown/>

¹⁵ <https://www.conecomm.com/research-blog/2016-millennial-employee-engagement-study>

¹⁶ <https://www.workstars.com/recognition-and-engagement-blog/2020/03/19/why-employees-quit-11-evidence-based-reasons/>

- **Check potential hires have the skills needed** – the skills employers need may be different from those of the existing workforce. By testing the skills of candidates before deciding to hire them, employers can ensure they have what they need to add value.
- **Assess and survey staff attitudes** - finding out staff attitudes toward their jobs will help employers understand the levels of engagement. They can use this information to make better decisions on communicating with and supporting workers.



Conclusion: creating the agility to succeed

The future remains unknowable. Traditional business plans will only have limited value. They must be in constant change. But the notion that employers can be certain of the future has always been a myth.

Employers can only develop meaningful plans for success if they are constantly looking at how they adapt to changing circumstances. They must develop the skills and infrastructure to become more agile.

Getting a clear picture of the skills of workers will help understand how change-ready their workforce is. It will show what changes they need to make to become more agile. It will help them form robust strategies to thrive, regardless of the backdrop.

We work with employers around the world helping them increase their resilience, agility and success. If you would like to speak to us about how we can help, please get in touch.





About Questionmark

We help organizations and their people unlock their potential to deliver better performance.

Questionmark provides a secure enterprise-grade assessment platform and professional services to leading organizations around the world, delivered with care and unequalled expertise. Its full-service online assessment tool and professional services help customers to improve their performance and meet their compliance requirements. Questionmark enables organizations to unlock their potential by delivering assessments which are valid, reliable and fair, which can be defended.

Questionmark offers secure powerful integration with learning management systems (LMS), learning record stores (LRS) and proctoring services making it easy to bring everything together in one place. Questionmark's cloud-based assessment management platform offers rapid deployment, scalability for high-volume test delivery, 24/7 support, and the peace-of-mind of secure, audited U.S., Australian and European-based data centers.

Working with Questionmark

To further explore how Questionmark could work for your organization, or to book a free consultation and demo, please see: <https://www.questionmark.com/request-demo/>

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