

## The Memo: Episode 13

### Lockdown: Can all jobs become virtual?

Dr. Mandip Thiara is a family doctor based in Watford, England. With the onset of social distancing, he figured his work was about to change. What he didn't know was how much. Within a few hours, the British start-up AccuRx helped him set up its latest video software for remote consultations.

He told CNBC: "It's just funny how, when we're in a crisis situation, over the course of 24 hours they can press a button and turn this thing on for us."

You can read plenty of stories like this as the fight against COVID-19 has disrupted professions everywhere. In a working world where physical proximity needs to be limited to essential activities, many have gone digital. But can it last? And above all, can all jobs become virtual?

Chloe :

Hi Joe !^Joe :

Hello Chloe and hello everyone! Welcome to the Memo. Today, we're talking about transition, specifically, digital transition. I mentioned this family doctor and the British start-up, which is a fairly specific example...but Chloe, the medical profession in general is a good place to start looking at this change...

Chloe :

Yes, with the lockdown, going to a medical appointment has become...complicated, to say the least. It's easy to see why being able to consult a doctor through your phone or computer, without having to take any public transportation, might be appealing. In France, we're seeing a real spike.

Before the crisis, fewer than 10,000 telemedical consultations were taking place per week. During the week of March 23rd, no fewer than 486,369 teleconsultations were recorded. That's 11% of all medical appointments that same week, according to figures collected by the national health insurance system, quoted in the French weekly, Le Point.

Joe :

That's an impressive number when you consider how cautious the health sector usually is with new technologies.

Chloe:

Quite true. Let's keep looking at France: remote medical services were authorized here back in 2018, but in the last two years, teleconsultations only made up 1% of all appointments. Until recently, these consultations were covered up to 70% by national health insurance, but in mid-March, a policy change set that coverage to 100%-- which accounts for the current surge. But there is also another explanation, given by the director of that start-up you mentioned, AccuRx.

According to him, innovation in the health sector is often seen as a risk-factor, rather than an opportunity. It's met with the question: "what are all the things that could go wrong with this new technology?". This leads to significant hurdles in adopting new solutions. But in times of crisis, the perceived risk has shifted elsewhere and innovation may come as a relief...

Joe:

Yes, but the risks themselves haven't disappeared, have they?

Chloe:

No, they haven't. When it comes to telehealth, many have called for caution, raising concern around protecting patients' data. Among them, legal expert Nathalie Devillier, writing in the French magazine *Usbek and Rica*. She probes how secure private health data can really be when handed over to private platforms that connect patients with practitioners. This does not stop her from hoping for a boom in remote consultations, thanks to doctors who are often learning how to use the tools on the go. Here I quote: "It's in the national medical order's best interests to keep an eye on how practices are evolving around COVID-19, because these changes may remain and be applied at a national scale."

Joe:

So the measures we're putting into place now may set in motion shifts that will continue even after the crisis ends?

Chloe:

Right. Especially since we know that ending the lockdown is by no means an immediate return to normal. The crisis has sparked transformations that are likely to last, which is why this period of time is so exciting. When it comes to these changes, I recommend an article from *FastCompany* called "All the things that Covid-19 will change forever, according to 30 top experts." One of these experts is Jared Spataro, corporate VP at Microsoft 365. According to him, we'll look back at this time as a real turning point in the way people work and learn. He mentions China, where people are starting to return to work. But his company's video-conferencing tool is being used there just as much as before. "People are carrying what they learned and experienced from remote work back to their 'new normal.'"

Joe:

But these experiences were made during an emergency. Sociology professor Antonio Casilli even dubs it a "fast and dirty" digitalization in an interview with the French media outlet AOC.

Chloe:

Everyone agrees that being in an emergency health crisis complicates these transitions. But there's another way to look at it. First, without speedy digital solutions, it would have been very difficult to maintain strict lockdown measures.

Second, according to many experts, this crisis has only accelerated a digital transformation already underway for years. *Forbes Magazine* points out that the digital transition we're seeing because of COVID-19 could only happen because existing infrastructure, like cloud computing, was already in place. In short, Michael

Hendrix from Ideo makes the same observation as for telehealth: The same digitalization that some companies have resisted for a decade has suddenly become essential to their survival, lifting the last barriers for adopting useful technological solutions.

Joe :

You could even think of it as a wake-up call: businesses and organizations are realizing just how important digital transitions can be.

Chloe :

At least that's what I read in Tech Radar, which reports on three positive impacts listed by 32 business leaders surveyed in China. The most important one being of course the ability to work collaboratively at a distance; the second after that is improved online marketing strategies and finally, third in the running: a wider awareness of the importance of digital transformation among all employees.

Joe:

Yes, we've been hearing a lot about how online sales are booming, with businesses opting for online orders and house deliveries - like restaurants. But someone still has to shoulder the responsibility of actually making the deliveries, right?

Chloe :

Yes, we're talking about those kinds of jobs that are considered "essential". They remind us that to actually run many digital services, you need people whose jobs cannot be digitized but who are often poorly paid. This is what the New York Times reports in an article on the surge of food delivery orders in locked-down New York. While apps do their best on the marketing front and restaurants adapt for take-out, the entire system relies on a precarious workforce largely made up of immigrant workers who have no choice but to keep working despite the risks.

Joe:

That explains the tensions we've heard around other delivery services, like Amazon.

Chloe:

That's right. An article in the Harvard Business Review says as much: not all jobs can become "virtual". While Wall Street may be run from the apartments of its traders, data on the American job market reveals something else: the divide between sectors that can continue online and those, though deemed essential, that are risky and, above all, poorly paid. Not to mention those jobs that have been hit hardest by the crisis because they can't be done at all.

Joe :

Especially since many of these same jobs were facing another pressure point: automation.

Chloe:

Yes, the use of increasingly sophisticated machines is also on the rise. Obstacles that slowed the shift to machines until now have been swept away with the health

crisis. More and more businesses are encouraging automated work to avoid exposing their employees to the virus, or grinding to an economic halt.

Finally, as the economist Daniel Cohen reminds us in an interview with Le Monde, we're at a crossroads that requires us to re-examine the systemic ways we use digital tools. Digitalization may be an opportunity for better communication and staying in touch, but it can also be the harbinger of a digital capitalism that leaves us, humans, at the door.

Joe:

Thank you, Chloe, for enlightening us. And thank you to our listeners. If your interest has been piqued, I recommend the articles we mentioned: you'll find them in the description below the episode. As always, don't hesitate to subscribe and share the Memo with those around you. Stay tuned for next week's episode - until then, take care!

Sources :

- [Demand for telemedicine has exploded in the UK as doctors adapt to the coronavirus crisis](#) (CNBC)
- [Face au coronavirus, le boom des téléconsultations](#) (Le Point)
- [Covid-19 : « Les applications de télémédecine doivent être plus transparentes »](#) (Usbek & Rica)
- [All the things COVID-19 will change forever, according to 30 top experts](#) (Fast Company)
- [Antonio Casilli : « Cette épidémie s'avère aussi un signal d'alarme à propos du numérique »](#) (AOC)
- [How Covid-19 is shaping digital transformation](#) (Tech Radar)
- [Covid-19 is a before and after moment in the digital transformation](#) (Forbes)
- [The Delivery Workers Who Risk Their Health to Bring You Food](#) (New-York Times)
- [Coronavirus Is Widening the Corporate Digital Divide](#) (Harvard Business Review)
- [Robots Welcome to Take Over, as Pandemic Accelerates Automation](#) (New-York Times)
- [« La crise du coronavirus signale l'accélération d'un nouveau capitalisme, le capitalisme numérique »](#) (Le Monde)