The Future of Resilience:

What did we learn from the global pandemic?

cutover

As the world is beginning to look slightly more ‘normal’ every day, the questions, discussions, and concerns centering around what the future of work will look like are coming to the forefront, specifically relating to the long-term, far-reaching legacy that Covid-19 might leave behind.

Of course, the speculation on this topic is extremely expansive - spreading across every business function and covering crucial components like people, premises, processes. ‘What will offices look like?’, ‘What is the impact of remote work on team-building and collaboration?’, ‘What are the ongoing technical challenges of remote team enablement, or technical demands of bringing people back into their place of work?’

In this white paper series, we’re going to explore some common questions and considerations on the future of ‘work’ as it relates to the following vantage points:

- **Preparing for the improbable.** What will the future of operational resilience look like, and how will this serve to enable the continuity of work?
- **Work without ‘war rooms’.** What does the future of executing complex programs of work look like?
- **Remote working is here to stay, for now.** How can organizations mobilize and equip remote teams for success in the mid/long-term?

Operational Resilience

It has long been the case that large organizations have prepared for events that seem unlikely, if not impossible, to ensure the minimum possible disruption is achieved. Scenarios like cyber attacks, cosmic events, natural disasters, as well as global or localized political or social events all have the potential to cause large-scale disruption to operations. Many industries, including financial services, are obliged to build resilience plans for these scenarios by the bodies that regulate the industry.

There are two main reasons that Covid-19 quickly exceeded many organization's planned responses:

1

It was a global event with localized complexities.

Not initially, but in a matter of months (weeks for some), most of the world was in some form of lockdown or government-restricted existence. Each country's response varied significantly, with everything from the warning period prior to lockdown to the rules about what these restrictions actually meant being different. This posed major challenges for organizations navigating multi-geo remote team enablement, or relocation of key services.

2

It highlighted the insufficiency of technology resilience

No matter whether you were heavily affected, or not, the pandemic impacted all people, all premises, and all processes. Many organizations start with building an appropriate response to technology resilience and recovery events - even when planning for more unlikely events - but this approach can be fatally short-sighted. The shift in focus to organizational resilience, taking a more holistic approach to event response and recovery, was beginning before the pandemic but is only going to become more prevalent now.

Future impact

Will ‘unlikely’ resilience scenarios, and their plans, be taken more seriously from now on?

While many organizations do plan for unprecedented or disastrous events, due to their perceived unlikelihood, and the challenges of actually simulating realistic impact for testing, true preparedness can be a sliding scale, or worse, not representative of real-life impact.

In a recent HSBC paper ‘Resilience: Building back better’, organizations were surveyed on their preparedness for the pandemic, and the findings were was follows:

‘Around 3 in 4 felt either strong or very strong impacts, reflecting the severity of the crisis. Yet 9 in 20 businesses felt as well prepared as they could be. And only 8% felt completely unprepared.’

The discrepancy between strongly impacted and preparedness couldn’t be more clear. Not only that, but even the >50% who felt ‘as well prepared as they could be’, are identifying with a personal statement that isn’t universally defined: ‘as well prepared as they could be’ is hardly a definitive benchmark to align to.

In the wake of COVID-19, and the varying degrees of scrabbling that all businesses faced to respond, will we see more rigorous testing for these unlikely scenarios? Or, due to the globalized nature of this event, will we see industry regulating bodies mandating higher standards or even proof of preparedness?

We don’t yet have the distance, or data, to confirm that resilience approaches have changed, or will, but given the shock that COVID-19 gave all industries, it seems highly likely that the future of resilience will be shaped by this event. Interestingly, the HSBC paper also references Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s ‘antifragile’ approach as something to aim for - whereby organizations ‘thrive on disorder’.

‘The resilient resist shocks and stay the same; the antifragile build back better.’

Given the poor preparedness that many organizations will concede to pre-COVID-19, many will undoubtedly assess and develop their ability to be shocked but unchanged.

But what if they took it instead as an opportunity to ‘build back better’, or simply build better when it comes to resilience?

Build back better or build better?

We all know it doesn’t take a pandemic to bring business to a standstill, and there are countless events with the potential to take critical services down - poorly managed change being one of the biggest culprits. In his white paper on Operational Resilience for FS organizations, Special Advisor to the Treasury Committee Gareth Lewis explains the risks and associated pressure that modern organizations have to ‘manage a larger, more diverse IT

delivery model than ever before' due to the 'explosion of new platforms, apps, devices, data, microservices, and the cloud'. The unsurprising rush towards cloud adoption, prompted by the pandemic, is only going to compound the intricacies that arise with this way of working.

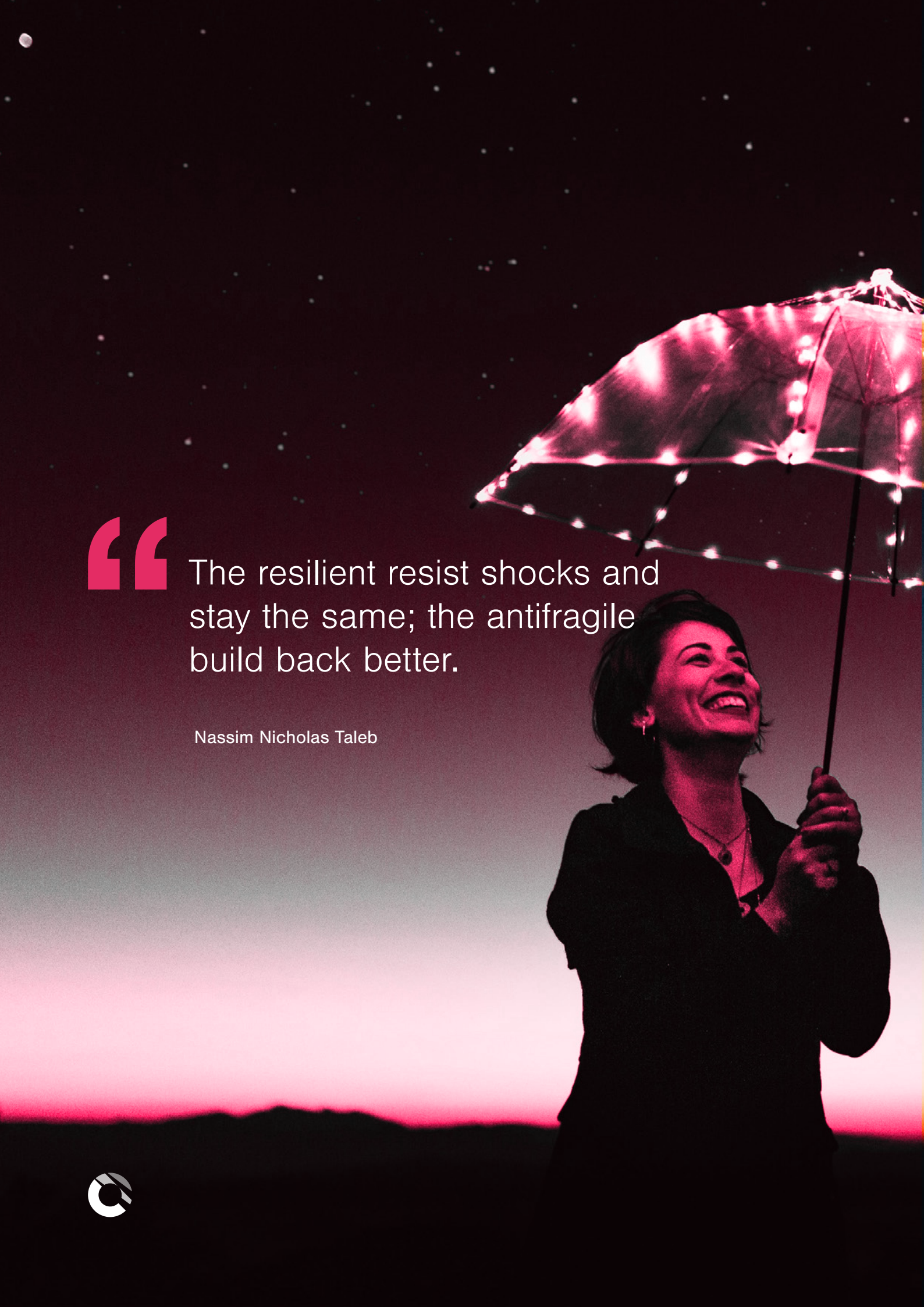
When it comes to 'building back better', the architectural complexities of built-in resilience are hard enough for those with a 'cloud-first' IT model, but for the majority who have layered cloud services over existing infrastructure, or plan to migrate workloads, it's even more challenging. Make sure that you leverage the benefits of the architecture you're using, for example, one key benefit of the cloud is that you can design for failure (with fast recovery).

Another key trend we're seeing with resilience is organizations moving from business continuity management (BCM) to business as usual (BAU) models, enabling a faster and more effective response. If your recovery plan only comes out when there's a test, outage, or a major incident, its ability to recover is likely to be impaired, slow, or completely ineffective. If your disaster recovery plan is highly similar to your production plan, or your release plan, therefore making it part of your regular process, and located at your fingertips, it will be far more effective. Ease of accessibility, familiarity, and regular usage are key to 'business as usual' resilience models. A cloud-based, central repository for service recovery, release, and production plans, with templating, and rapid time-to-test can enable you to build a BAU model for operational resilience.

Does this pandemic equip organizations to better deal with another event?

From a literal perspective, it's easy to expect the answer to this question to be 'yes'. All the organizations that rushed to coordinate and ship laptops, devices and critical equipment and software to enable remote work will inevitably feel like they're on a better footing than before. But the key point here is that these actions put them in a better position for the type of event that requires remote work. If that is not the primary requirement, or doesn't even make the list, then how much progress has actually been made?

This question taps into the concept of preparing for the improbable. Alongside planning for possible scenarios, it's also important to identify what will work no matter what and what won't. For example, COVID-19 did not cause any disruption to the service our customers experienced: the Cutover platform could be used in exactly the same way it always has been, right from the start. Initially, we saw scheduled resilience tests and regular releases paused as teams rallied to respond to remote team enablement, but the fundamental point is that, when needed, Cutover was there. For a resilience use case, this is critical. It's common practice to put service recovery plans in multiple locations online and offline, in order to ensure accessibility. But hosting these plans in Cutover means that in order to access them all you need is an internet connected device. Whether it's leveraging Cutover to do this or not, it is important to have a plan for this kind of availability when it comes to resilience.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The resilient resist shocks and stay the same; the antifragile build back better.
Nassim Nicholas Taleb

Having an understanding of the requirements for any service that could be impacted, and by what event, can be a good starting point for 'building back better'. Better still, from an antifragile perspective is the concept of 'substitutability' of services, whether internal or third-party: if service A goes down, how quickly and seamlessly can I swap it for the comparable service B? The HSBC paper makes the point that, as 'sources of potential disruption multiply' in our environment, 'resilience must be built into businesses' DNA to prepare for crises'. More and more, we're seeing substitutability and rapid recovery architected from the start, with organizations building resilient foundations into their applications and services, rather than treating recovery as an afterthought.

Summary: 'so, what now?'

Right now, it's very common to hear an industry, activity, or social norm being discussed in the context of how 'it's never going to be the same'. Without using too many of the 'unprecedented' buzzwords associated with this pandemic, the truth is that we don't yet have the distance or data to say with certainty how our 'new normal' might look when it comes to resilience.

Our advice, based on what we've seen and experienced during this time, is to use your learnings to build better - whether you want 'shocked but unchanged' resilience, or whether you're aiming for an 'antifragile' approach.

- Take the time to evaluate the 'true' preparedness you had, and be honest about it.
- Critique your response in detail: what was easy, what was difficult, what worked, what broke, what was fast, what took more time?
- Use your findings to compare responsiveness to adjacent and dissimilar scenarios: what are you more prepared for now, what events require completely different capabilities.
- Start at the beginning. Review your resilience capabilities and plans for critical elements and your core business services as a starting point, and branch outwards to third-parties, or extraneous factors.
- Think about what you want the future of operational resilience to look like to your organization. Maybe it's high levels of substitutability, or better availability of recovery assets, maybe you're more focused on streamlining your responses, with easier customisation or templating of recovery plans for speed and scale.

Proximity to a major event brings clarity and perspective. Now's the time to use these insights to map out foundations for a sturdier resilience model that can withstand the unexpected.

Cutover is the leader in Work Orchestration and Observability, a new model of working that delivers dramatic transformations in process efficiency, speed of change, and organizational resilience. Our powerful platform enables organizations to move quickly with confidence by providing real-time organizational visibility and detailed analytics to radically compress timelines and reduce risk.

Find out more about how you can deliver best-in-class operational resilience with Cutover here, or contact us to schedule a tailored demo.

References and further reading:

HSBC Navigator: Resilience: Building back better

Using your COVID-19 command center to build long-term resiliency

Cloud adoption looked healthy in 2020, but COVID-19 is driving a bigger boom

Work Orchestration & Observability Become Critical for Operational Resilience WP

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Contact us

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