

Adapting to challenges: A journey during the COVID-19 pandemic

The case focuses on Vertual's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The case explores the challenges faced by Vertual during the pandemic, the decisions made by the CEO, and the subsequent outcomes and lessons learned.

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How to cite: Leeves, D. & Papagiannidis, S. (2023) *Adapting to challenges: A journey during the COVID-19 pandemic*. In S. Papagiannidis (Ed), [Teaching Case Book](#). Available at <https://learning.ncl.ac.uk/> / ISBN: 978-1-7396044-1-7

Teaching Case Factsheet

Discipline: Management and business studies

Introduction

This teaching case study examines the experiences of Debra Leeves, Chief Executive of Vertual, a UK-based SME specialising in virtual reality (VR) training and education. The case focuses on Vertual's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The case explores the challenges faced by Vertual during the pandemic, the decisions made by the CEO, and the subsequent outcomes and lessons learned. It provides business students with an opportunity to analyse and discuss the resilience, adaptability, and strategic thinking required to navigate unforeseen crises while sustaining business growth.

Background

Vertual is a leading software company in the market for radiation therapy virtual reality (VR). The company is revolutionising the way radiation therapy is taught and understood in universities, as well as transforming the delivery of patient and clinical education. The company was established in Hull, UK in 2007 and since then it has grown into a global community of users, who are making a significant impact in the field of radiation therapy worldwide.

Vertual's software offerings consist of three main packages: a) VERT an interactive training solution that has received recognition for its innovation and effectiveness in teaching the theoretical concepts of radiation therapy, b) Proton, which is designed to facilitate a safer and more effective transition from Photons to Protons and (c) VERT Physics: which accurately represents real-world equipment and simulates clinical workflow. It includes modules for quality assurance (QA) and dosimetry.

The Covid Pandemic

As the CEO of a company during the Covid pandemic, Debra found herself facing unprecedented challenges and uncertainties. It demanded that she utilised every ounce of her skills, knowledge, and experience to navigate the complexities of managing and leading the company through this global crisis.

At the onset of the pandemic, its duration was unknown. The short-term plans she hastily devised as a CEO quickly transformed into medium-term requirements, and then further extended into longer-term strategies. It became a delicate balancing act to ensure the continuity of a business which operated across borders, while the world started imposing lockdowns.

Simultaneously, her focus was on the well-being of her employees, striving to maintain their calmness and safety, and offering reassurances that their jobs were secure. The media bombarded everyone with news of layoffs and redundancies, exacerbating the anxieties within the team. As the business started to face closures worldwide, Debra had to draw upon all her past experiences, using them as valuable lessons, but also recognise the need to forge new strategies and plans for the future.

The challenges

During the Covid pandemic, as a CEO, Debra faced numerous challenges and had to navigate through uncharted territory. Many people would reach out to her seeking answers and guidance, assuming that she had the solutions. However, there was no blueprint for such a crisis, and she, like everyone else, had to make decisions based on the best available information.

One of the first steps she took was to send all employees home and transition to remote work. This raised concerns among some individuals, who questioned why she did not implement social distancing measures in the office instead. She explained that the safety and well-being of staff were paramount, and remote work was the most effective way to ensure their health while maintaining productivity.

Transitioning the workforce from office-based work to remote work was a major challenge. It required careful planning to ensure that employees could continue their day-to-day activities and effectively manage their workload from home. The company had to invest in additional hardware, equipping employees with the necessary tools to set up their home offices. This included everything from desks and chairs to monitors and laptops. However, procuring the required hardware posed difficulties as the demand surged globally, leading to shortages and increased costs.

During this time, many trials were effectively conducted to find the most suitable solutions for the company's specific challenges. Even the simplest of tasks seemed to be complex. For example, since no one was in the office to handle incoming calls, the company had to restructure the phone lines and have a small team of individuals handling phone duties remotely each day. The company also had to address the issue of deliveries, as the office was no longer operational. The company had to improvise and diversified delivery methods, sending parcels and hardware directly to employees' homes. Communication played a crucial role during this period. Debra encouraged open dialogue and feedback from employees, seeking their input on what was working and what needed improvement. This led to adopting an iterative approach, trying different strategies and promptly adjusting or discarding them based on their effectiveness. As a CEO, it was essential to acknowledge that she did not have all the answers and she had to be willing to adapt and learn from the situation.

Debra also recognised the importance of maintaining communication and connection among team members, especially considering that many of the employees lived alone and needed social interaction. Additional communication channels were established to enable seamless collaboration and ensure that individuals felt connected throughout the working day. This investment in infrastructure and employee well-being added to the overall expenses incurred by the company.

Operating as an international company added another layer of complexity. Each country had different approaches and regulations in response to the pandemic. It was challenging to develop strategies that worked for the majority of the customers and adapt them to different regions with varying circumstances. For example, universities in some countries remained operational, while others closed down. This required constant evaluation and adaptation to meet the diverse needs of the customer base.

Such regional circumstances and the shift to remote working required the company also to adapt training methods, particularly when it came to engagements with universities. Previously, the company had conducted bespoke in-person software training sessions for professors, lecturers, and students. However, alternative ways to deliver the same level of training and support without physically being present in the classroom were needed. The company explored options such as web conferences and video calls, experimenting to find the most effective and engaging methods for remote training. This involved a learning curve for both the trainers and the university partners.

In addition, the pandemic disrupted various business functions, such as the traditional approach to marketing and sales. With exhibitions and trade shows cancelled, the company had to pivot and find new avenues to showcase and sell its products to potential customers who had never seen them in person. Seeking alternative communication channels meant bolstering the company's social media presence and organising virtual trade shows and webinars to reach the target audience. Consistent social media posting helped to keep the brand and products at the forefront of customers' minds. These efforts paid off, and despite the challenges, Virtual was fortunate to see profits during this period.

The outcome

It was a daunting task to motivate the team against the backdrop of a crumbling business landscape. Everyone had to adapt quickly, exploring innovative ways to keep the company afloat, pivoting the operations, and leveraging technology to facilitate remote work. Clear communication and empathy became paramount, as management created channels to address employees' concerns, provide regular updates, and foster a sense of unity and resilience.

While the journey was challenging, it also presented opportunities for growth and transformation. The company discovered new avenues for expansion and diversification, adapting their products and services to meet evolving market demands. Remote work became a permanent fixture, and Virtual invested in infrastructure and resources to ensure its efficiency and effectiveness.

Throughout this tumultuous period, everyone came to deeply appreciate the fact that effective leadership requires agility, adaptability, and an unwavering commitment to the well-being of both the business and its employees. It was not just about managing day-to-day operations, but also envisioning a future beyond the pandemic. The experience has effectively reshaped management's perspective on leadership, instilling in everyone a deeper appreciation of resilience, foresight, and the ability to thrive amidst adversity. "The lessons learned during those uncertain times continue to guide us as we forge ahead, armed with a newfound strength and determination to face whatever challenges may come our way."

Upon reflection, Debra has realised that the company managed to navigate through the challenges of the pandemic quite effectively, though some of the successes seemed to have been more serendipitous than deliberate. Nonetheless, the experience taught valuable lessons in terms of preparing for future crises. Management recognised the importance of formulating medium and long-term plans alongside short-term strategies, ensuring that contingencies were in place for swift implementation.

There were certain aspects in which the company excelled. The motivation and morale of the team remained high throughout the crisis due to their consistent efforts in communication and reassurance. Over the course of 18 months, senior management kept employees informed and engaged, creating a sense of safety and trust within the organisation. This cohesion proved invaluable as they collectively tackled the challenges on the business front.

The business successfully adapted to remote working and employees enjoy the flexibility it provides. Remote working has become increasingly popular and has proven to be effective for many roles that can be done from home. It offers benefits such as increased productivity, improved work-life balance, and reduced commuting time and costs. However, it is also important to recognise that not all roles can be performed remotely. Some jobs, particularly those involving laboratory work or hands-on tasks, require a physical presence. In such cases, it is crucial to find the right balance between remote work and in-office presence. This could involve allowing employees to work remotely for certain aspects of their role while ensuring they have access to necessary resources and support when they are in the office. Flexibility in the workplace is becoming increasingly important, especially for attracting and retaining top talent. Candidates are often looking for organisations that offer a degree of flexibility and a better work-life balance. By providing options for remote work or flexible schedules, you can make your business more competitive in the job market and attract skilled individuals. Consequently, finding the right balance between flexibility and meeting business goals is essential. While maintaining profitability and growth is important, it is also crucial to ensure that employees are satisfied, engaged, and supported. By creating a work environment that accommodates different preferences and needs, you can foster a positive and productive work culture.

One significant impact faced was the closure of universities, the company's primary customers. With students returning home, the products offered, which required in-person usage within university settings, became obsolete. However, this setback presented an opportunity for innovation. The company had already planned to introduce new products, but the pandemic accelerated the development timeline. Virtual swiftly created web-based software systems that made it possible for students from anywhere in the world to access the curriculum, continue their learning, and engage in simulation training. This shift not only catered to the evolving needs of remote education, but also opened doors for the company to enter new markets. The company realised that students now sought more flexible training packages, enabling them to learn and study from anywhere in the world. As a result, Virtual expanded its product line to cater to these emerging demands, further positioning themselves as leaders in the new economy.

Management and employees understand the need for continuous innovation, preparedness for unforeseen circumstances, and the importance of listening to customers' evolving needs. The pandemic served as a catalyst for change, pushing everyone to be more agile, resilient, and adaptable.

Conclusion

The profound changes brought about by the pandemic compelled the company to rethink its strategies and offerings. They embraced the opportunities that arose, adapting swiftly to the

evolving landscape. Reacting swiftly and seizing the moment has not only ensured the company's survival but also positioned it to thrive in the new world.

The experience of navigating through the pandemic taught those at the helm valuable lessons and highlighted the importance of preparedness for future crises. Firstly, we need to act quickly and anticipate potential challenges. While we cannot predict all the challenges that may arise, we now have a better understanding of the steps to take and the flexibility required to quickly adapt to changing circumstances. Instead of assuming that an event will be short-lived, we should prepare for the possibility of a longer duration. This includes stocking up on essential supplies that may become scarce during the crisis, as manufacturers may slow down production and shipments may be affected. CEOs should proactively identify and procure necessary resources in a timely manner.

Communication has been crucial during the pandemic, both with customers and within the organisation. Keeping customers informed about actions, support, and services has been vital in maintaining trust and ensuring needs are met. Online training, service support, and documentation have become essential tools for assisting customers remotely. Similarly, internal communication within the company has been vital to keep the team connected, informed, and supported. This includes addressing any anxieties or concerns employees may have about job security and the economic impact of the crisis.

The pandemic has also highlighted the effectiveness of remote work and the importance of flexibility. It has shown that not every employee needs to be physically present in the office every day. Embracing remote work and flexible work arrangements can offer numerous benefits, such as increased productivity, reduced costs, and improved work-life balance. CEOs and companies should consider incorporating remote work policies and infrastructure as part of their long-term plans.

Reading List

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How to cite: Leeves, D. & Papagiannidis, S. (2023) *Adapting to challenges: A journey during the COVID-19 pandemic*. In S. Papagiannidis (Ed), [Teaching Case Book](#). Available at <https://learning.ncl.ac.uk> / ISBN: 978-1-7396044-1-7

Last updated: 2023-10-09 21:26:08 - Exported: 2024-03-15 02:35:45

ISBN: 978-1-7396044-1-7

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