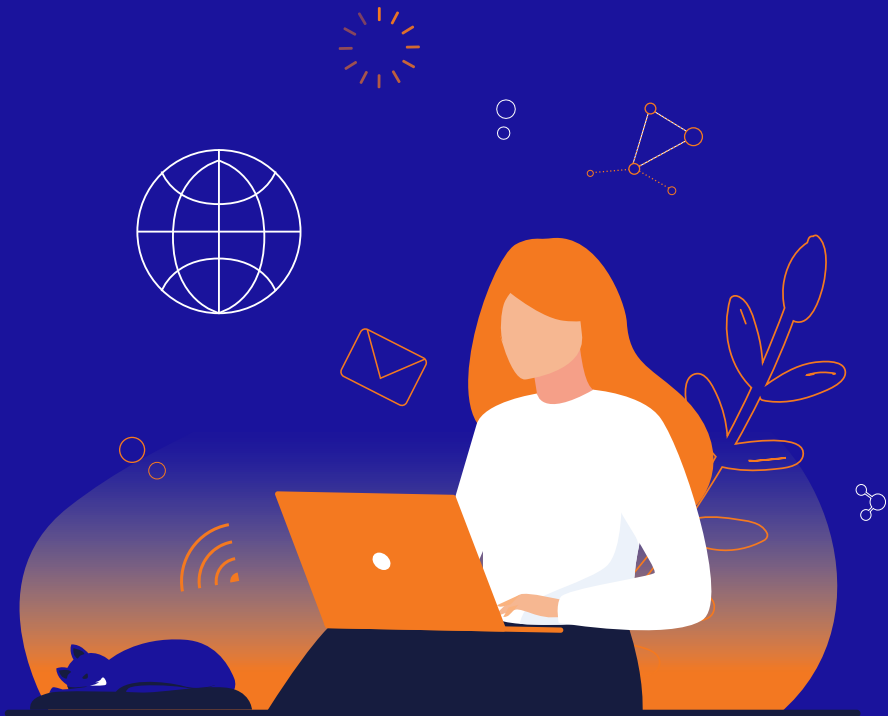# THE ANYWHERE ORGANISATION, AN 8-STEP JOURNEY TOWARDS THE FUTURE OF WORK

EDGERYDERS

INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC

Remote work is not innate. Homo Economicus relied on the centralised organisation for over a century. With the growing threats of climate change and global pandemics, the model is crumbling.

But old habits die hard. Fortunately, distributed work has many perks when done right. You only need the right mix of big ideas and small tips to get started. This is exactly what you'll find in this short manual. Read it as an adventure of which you are the hero, this is how we designed it.

Have a safe trip!

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1

IT'S A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Heroes of the past used to fly from one point to another, heroes of the future will save the world from where they are! 42% of the transport emissions are caused by business trips.

Diseases are bound to become the new partners of our daily lives. Hopefully, another path is possible : frugal, distributed, and yet enjoyable.

As always, the first step of this (static) journey is about awareness and mindset.

IT'S A WHOLE NEW WORLD

42% of the transport emissions are caused by business trips. Electric and biogas powered climate-neutral jets may be the future of aviation, but they don't exist yet (and for a long time). In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, diseases are bound to become the new partners of our daily lives. Half of humanity has been (or still is) on lockdown, and many say it could be the start of a new "trend". In short, this is not the time for trans-atlantic trips, crowded offices, or location-based collaboration.

Should we mourn the rich and unique experience of real life meetings?

Obviously not. Meeting in person will remain essential for the "political animals" that we are. Should we learn how to enjoy more distributed forms of collaborations? Absolutely. Distributed work is not enjoyable by default, and as long as it is unenjoyable and unrewarding for themselves, workers are not motivated to put in the extra effort to make it enjoyable and rewarding for their co-workers. We believe that building distributed collaboration knowledge is a necessary step towards a friction-less experience.
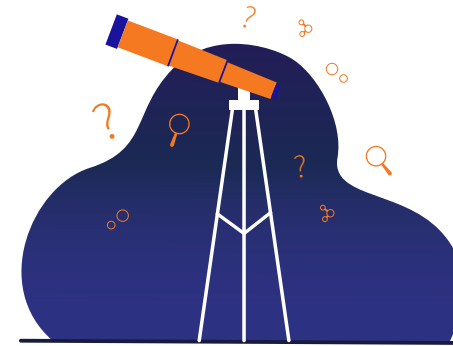
We also believe that - done well - remote work has new perks

We discovered that asynchronous communication techniques provide many enjoyable freedoms that calls and meetings can never provide: you choose time and place and pace of your work, when to have a break, and interruptions by your cat or partner won't matter at all (if you don't mind). Most of the time, it is more enjoyable than long (and often boring) business meetings.

2 BEYOND FEAR AND HABITS

Gandalf is paying you a visit? You've been bitten by a radioactive spider? Your everyday life has been shattered by the Covid-19 pandemic?

All meaningful transformations begin with a sign, a motivation to overturn the status quo. The centralised chandlerian company has been the Alpha and the Omega of economic life for over a century.

Let's face it, *"the truth is that everyone is bored, and devotes himself to cultivating habits"* , as Camus wrote it in the most relevant book of our time: *The Plague.*

BEYOND FEAR AND HABITS

Before taking the uncharted path of distributed collaboration and remote work, one must adopt the right mindset and be willing to put in the extra effort.

That extra effort refers to best practices of communication and collaboration, as described in the short (but epic) story that you are going to read. In every story, the hero needs some sort of "supernatural" aid, in order to overcome fear and give up on the comfort of everyday life. At Edgeryders, we don't have superpowers or magic formulas, but we still hope to be able to provide that little spark. And we deeply believe in the importance of values as a good starting point.

We saw that the necessary condition to move towards enjoyable, efficient distributed work is this: that some of the workers make it an unconditional priority that working with them in a distributed way is enjoyable for their co-workers. An unconditional priority is a moral or professional value. There may be good reasons to have a certain value, but these cannot include a "return on investment" for the individual practicing that value – because that would make it conditional again, unfit to break the self-stable nature of unenjoyable distributed work.

We have looked in some detail into monastic practices, as part of a communal living and social innovation space called "unMonastery" – the space was not religious, but deeply inspired by the rules and best practices of monastic communal living.

What we found was the exaltation of service to the community: this is the secret of monastic living.

Imagine two monks gardening in a Benedictine monastery, tending to pretty flowers and nutritious plants. What motivates them to do this well, year after year, without requiring instructions to do so? It's not about producing flowers and food, it is about creating the environment for their brethren's spiritual journey to be successful. The monks need healthy food and restful spaces to tend to their bodies and souls. Every time a monk takes a mouthful of food, he or she is eating the embodied service of fellow monks to them. By holding up the monastic community, and ultimately God, as the higher purpose within which personal service finds its fulfillment, the monastic community also becomes a self-stable enjoyable environment.

3 WE ARE ONLY HUMANS (AFTER ALL)

Now that you are on the path of adventure, you'll soon re-discover the power of the Golden Rule: "Treat others as you would like others to treat you".

Blinded by the mechanics of management, the corporate world too often forgets that we are only humans. (Remote) fellowship, (data) empathy and netiquette are the foundations of a successful distributed collaboration.

Your challenge is to reveal the beauty of value-driven organizations. Art, history and popular culture might be the best sources of inspiration.

WE ARE ONLY HUMANS (AFTER ALL)

Lead by example.

A core group of collaborators who embraced the Golden Rule can decide to show its benefits by example. This is much better than starting alone, as every member of that core group can already see glimpses of the enjoyable work environment whenever they are "digitally treated well" by their co-workers in distributed collaboration.

There is a beauty to it.

When was the last time you talked about beauty in your corporate environment? The appreciation of beauty is perhaps the best way how humans can understand and internalize values that pay off only in communal terms. Use art, history or popular culture reference to reveal the beauty of value-driven organizations. Once members in the organization realize that "it would make a beautiful workplace / society / country / world if everyone adhered to this value", you are already close to the goal.

A real life wizard could be useful.

A wizard is a person of calm natural authority and extensive wisdom in their area, not afraid to share that wisdom with others whether they want or do not want to hear it at the time. The wizard may take on some roles in projects of the organization, but mostly to analyze and understand the pitfalls of the current work culture. He or she would then influence tools, practices and processes to improve that, both via formal and informal (trust based) channels. It will only work when you give your wizard a lot of freedom to do their magic. At least it worked in the Lord of the Rings.

Empathy is the key.

Distance does not make empathy superfluous. New forms of compassion and concord emerge in the digital workplace. One of the most important is what we call "data retrieval empathy". It is a simple principle which makes it possible to better organize information : imagine where your collaborators would look for the piece of information you want to sort in, and then place it exactly there in the shared information repositories. For this, a good technique is to think about where you yourself would look for this piece of information, had a collaborator created it.

4 YOU DON'T KILL A DRAGON WITH A FORK

"Business as usual" is deeply related to the professional tools we use. Email dependency, synchronous communication, and brick-and-mortar offices are the blunt swords of lost battles.

Fortunately, Edgeryders and many others around the world operate 24 hours a day to forge new efficient tools.

Digital lounge spaces, parallel work streams, issue trackers and platformization of communications formulate the promise of efficient equipment. Never forget where King Arthur got his power from!

YOU DON'T KILL A DRAGON WITH A FORK

The good news is: you don't need NASA software or massive investments to reach the Zen level of a fully distributed organization.

Actually, you probably use most of the tools already. But the sword doesn't make the swordsman, and a few good rules will help you reduce the noise and the friction.

Less emails, more joy! E-mail these days is a pretty broken system. For example, there is the annoying presence of spam messages, and the risk that your own e-mail will never arrive because spam filters. Also, most people nowadays use top-posting as their standard reply style, generating a lot of ugly redundancy in e-mail messages. On top of that, e-mail software will either show messages from all threads in a single list, or show them as a hierarchically nested thread, requiring complex navigation.
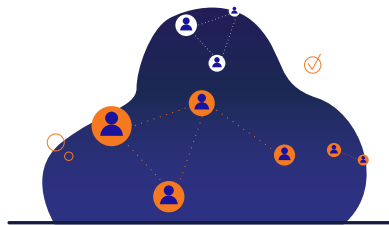
Healthy calls.

You may have experienced it during the Covid crisis : calls are a pretty important part of remote work. As such, they should be conducted with care. They naturally provide a lot of very useful tools: a mute functionality when not speaking, a text chat for richer content. On top of that you can add your own rules : finger gestures to share the floor or moderation for big groups...

And last but not least: never forget that calls are, above all, a listening exercise. Issue tracking for the win. Issue trackers have been developed for managing software development, especially related to bugs ("issues"). Software development is basically always an exercise in distributed collaboration between software users and developers. They work well for any well-defined task and to work truly globally across time zones. They facilitate the integration of people into a distributed team who come from a different culture and background. They are the sword of choice for "people who love lists" and who do not crave human interaction much.

A centralised platform. Using an online forum rather than an office building as the center / home base of a company might have been our biggest gamble as Edgeryders. By and large, it worked out.

In any case, don't forget to support Open Source software!

5 CORPORATE IS DEAD, DISTRIBUTED IS UPON US

It's the coup de grâce, the climax of your adventure. You have to be prepared, it will be a bit messy.

Who said resurrections were clean and quiet ? In The hero with a thousand faces , the book that inspired our 8 steps journey, Joseph Campbell writes: *"Perhaps some of us have to go through dark and devious ways before we can find the river of peace or the highroad to the soul's destination."*

The rise of a completely new form of organization is not a lifting, it's a rebirth.
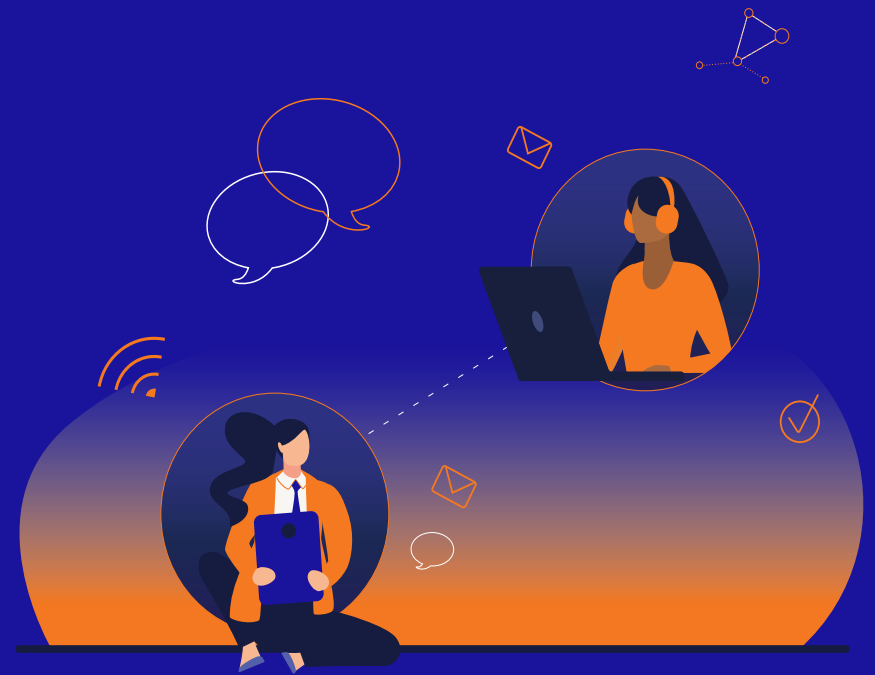
CORPORATE IS DEAD, DISTRIBUTED IS UPON US

**This means that a wide range of mechanisms that we took for granted are to be reviewed.**

The very first of them is probably synchronous communication. Remote work means delays and asynchrony. Distributed collaboration is not good at "fast" work. In this context, the best way to get things done is to parallelize multiple non-urgent work streams. This is where distributed collaboration plays its strengths: because the project context in distributed collaboration is much better documented, switching between projects is quite comfortable and fast for a collaborator, making it possible to work on more projects in parallel.

Socializing in the context of distributed collaboration is also completely disrupted, while remaining a very important part of the work life.

Unlike in the office, when working remotely there is no watercooler, coffee machine or other social hotspot for meeting your colleagues.

Fortunately, there are other solutions. Digital lounge spaces open up a space for social interaction in distributed work. All you need is to create a dedicated space for it in

the digital tools you use. Pair work allows collaborators to know each other better. Virtual room extension is well suitable to connect multiple offices of one organization or to have a large, multi-location party.
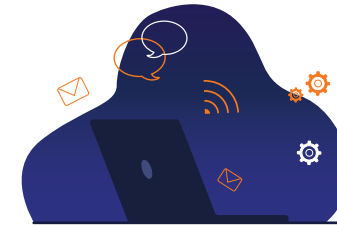
Finally, distributed collaboration completely transforms human contact.

It allows for new forms of occasional colocation while reducing business travel and commuting by 90%. By spending time together at the same place rarely but then for extended periods of time, you establish "rapport" with each other, a deeper sense of understanding, interpreting and anticipating each other's behavior and communication. Retreats, coworking, coliving or just presence time are some of the formats we tried at Edgeryders.

6 NEW WORLD, NEW RULES

"We started off trying to set up a small anarchist community, but people wouldn't obey the rules" , writes Alan Bennett in *Getting On*.

The witty quote might not be serious, but it is painfully true. As you just defeated the crumbling old order, you need to write new rules, find new systems and document them.

We are not dogmatic, and we believe in a balance between freedom and systematism. *"Lex Malla, Lex nulla"*: a few good explicit rules are better than a thousand *"don'ts"*.

NEW WORLD, NEW RULES

The first rule might be obvious but it's also fundamental.

We summarize it in three words: clear, precise, complete. People tend to apply this rule to the physical world, valuing "presentation skills" or "fluent English". They also seem to forget it instantly when it comes to instant messaging, online forums, comments on collaborative documents. Under this triptych we suggest some advice : minimize the receiver's work, anticipate and avoid back and forth, make hyperlinks beautiful, avoid middlemen wherever possible, allow for peripheral awareness, add reasonable text formatting, use systematic and beautiful filenames, etc...

Even the supporters of an anarchist self-management advocate a little hierarchy.

Maybe not between people, but between pieces of information. The human mind has some rather severe cognitive limits. For example, psychologist George A. Miller found in his highly-cited 1956 paper "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two " that 7±2 is a useful heuristic for the maximum number of list items that the human mind can remember and process simultaneously. That makes hierarchy probably the most useful data structure for comfortable and fast processing of information by the human mind. Hierarchy is also very useful to separate the urgent from the non-urgent!

Once you've found your rules and your system: write everything down.

Time spent on back-and-forth communication, and the delays introduced by it, is the biggest inefficiency in distributed collaboration. And documentation is the major way to solve it. Do not expect a collaborator to know how to do a certain thing "because she's accustomed to our organization's culture by now". Rather all your organizational knowledge must be in your manuals. If it's not there, it should be considered non-existent and your collaborators are right to say that they "don't know how to do this".

7

FINALLY
FINDING PEACE

Change is a fleeting state. As your adventure towards distributed collaboration ends, you'll find peace and tranquility. The journey is complete when you reach the "zen" level.

Interactions become frictionless, data is cleaned and without redundancies, "being distributed" is embedded into your organization's DNA and becomes truly enjoyable.

8 A NEW "NORMAL", FOR NEW LEADERS

Back from his journey, the hero always returns with a gift to the world. Your distributed organisation is now part of the avant-garde: the new wave of organizations adapted for a low-carbon future.

Back from his journey, the hero also gets new powers. Your distributed organisation harvest additional benefits like space efficiency, cost reduction and work / life integration.

EGO

ECO

A NEW "NORMAL", FOR NEW LEADERS

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerates a trend already in the making.

Before the Covid crisis, around 5.3% of EU employees worked from home (0.5% in Bulgaria, 7% in France and 14.1% in the Netherlands), compared to 4.7% in 2008. A study published by Stanford in 2017 seems to demonstrate the positive results of remote work. Out of a sample of 500 people doing the same job, 250 were invited to work from their home. The results are interesting: 13% higher productivity, $2,000 saved each year in rent, better attrition rate and better job satisfaction...

Now is the right time to impulse a deep change.

As in every major upheaval there is a "first mover advantage" to grab. Showing the way is the role of the hero. As J.R.R Tolkien puts it, "living
by faith includes the call to something greater than cowardly self-preservation."

ABOUT THE PUBLISHERS

Every hero needs a guide, and Edgeryders might be the best you can find on your adventure towards the future of work. This book is part of our mission to better equip individuals, communities and organisations to navigate situations of uncertainty and upheaval.

We initially developed this stack of tools, practices and culture for ourselves. Over time people have approached us to "build one of those for me too". Today, we are a community of 6000 individuals and organisations in 80 countries. Our methodologies and technologies have been developed through research collaborations with leading universities as well as clients in private, public and third sector organisations.

Learn more about how Edgeryders can help your organisation to adopt good practices for remote work and distributed organisations at **remote.edgeryders.eu**

Got questions, ideas or comments?

Write to nadia@edgeryders.eu
or join our community on remote.edgeryders.eu

THE
ANYWHERE
ORGANISATION

Anywhere.edgeryders.eu

WHY A BOOK ON DISTRIBUTED BUSINESS, WHY NOW?

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