

The Covid pandemic – catalyst for change



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Does the current global pandemic have the potential to be a great levelling influence across our sector and society at large?

In so much that 12 months ago, neither society, our sector nor this Institution could have imagined the arrival of a worldwide pandemic, Covid-19 might be considered a great leveller.

Even four months ago, society, our sector and this Institution had not really understood that the pandemic was destined to be much more than a tragic but temporary pause before a return to normality. Arguably, Covid-19 might have been considered a great leveller.

We are now appreciating that while the virus knows no boundaries, the trail of devastation being left behind is not manifesting itself equitably. It is not a levelling influence. Some countries have proven more resilient to the viral ravage than others. Institution members have been disproportionately impacted depending on where they live and work; the nature of the work they do; the focus and size of their employing organisation; and the whole socio-economic-cultural-community influences that as yet are only partially understood.

Grasping new opportunities

It is within this landscape that the Institution must continue to pursue elements of both disruptive and incremental change if it is to grasp the opportunity to adapt, innovate and reinvent. Tackling the concept of a 'new normal' and providing the support required by members in a post-pandemic world is not an optional exercise.

As we have witnessed a cessation of our ability to host physical meetings and training courses at both regional and HQ level, we have heralded a sharp increase in online meetings and conferences. These are drawing new audiences into Institution activity and sweeping aside many of the geographical boundaries and restraints that traditionally we impose around events.

How refreshing that at a UK Regional Group evening technical meeting hosted online by Chester and North Wales, an audience 10 times larger than usual logged in, with members from the United Arab Emirates among the 300 attendees.

How stimulating that rather than cancel our Digital Design and Computation Conference, the entire event was transferred online with a doubling in attendance, vastly increased representation from outside the UK, and subsequent feedback that the Institution had 'taken e-conferencing to a new level of sophistication'.

With increased provision in e-publications, access and demand on the Institution Library has never been higher. The decision of the Board a few years ago to invest heavily in digital transformation is leading to increased online resources accessed by members around the world.

What we are all learning and witnessing from the pandemic is that already existing plans for change are accelerating. Barriers to implementation are perhaps not quite as problematic as first envisaged and are leading to spin-off innovation.

A renewed global outlook

The Institution's international ambition to support a worldwide profession has suddenly taken a huge leap forward enabling greater integrated learning, sharing and networking. At a time when the world is questioning global interdependence, we have in front of us an open door to level up the provision of services and support of members and the profession wherever they are located.

How simple in the past week to have had substantive meetings to progress our activities both in the USA and in Southern Africa with nobody going near an airport! How straightforward to advance plans for our lead members in climate change to meet virtually with their opposite numbers in the Structural Engineering Institute in the USA. How energising in May to host an online two-day session for the Institution's Board and its constituent membership from Hong Kong, India, the Caribbean, the United Arab Emirates, France, South Africa and the UK.

Increasingly, it seems clear that society, industry and the Institution will not return to the pre-pandemic world. History consistently shows us that response to an

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emergency rarely leads to a resumption of the status quo ante. As society and industry adapt to a new normal (however that may look and however many iterations it takes to evolve), then the Institution, too, must embrace a new way of fulfilling its charitable objectives. In this we must strive to lead when appropriate and to follow when prudent. Understanding the difference will be key.

Our examinations have always been held as a beacon of the Institution as a great leveller. Whatever an individual's circumstances, so the logic went, then the competency standard was universal and in this we were inclusive. In recent years we have come to understand that this is too naive a notion. We have embraced understanding that recognition of opportunity does not operate on a level playing field, and that true representation and engagement with the Institution is compromised – usually unwittingly.

The Covid-19 pandemic is not itself the great leveller, but it continues to teach us that within our grasp – both as the Institution body corporate and as individual members – we have a wonderful opportunity to continue our transformation as a true international professional body; taking advantage of the technological advancements at its disposal and learning from wider societal challenges as to what a true level playing field really looks like.



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