



## Inside IBM'S

# COVID-19 RESPONSE

CIO **FLETCHER PREVIN** and his team “compressed 10 years of strategy into 10 weeks of execution,” reports **PHILIP DELVES BROUGHTON**.

ILLUSTRATION: NIGEL BUCHANAN

**A**S IBM'S CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER, FLETCHER PREVIN leads a global team of over 12,000. Their mission is to prioritize user experience and provide secure, global IT for around 350,000 IBM employees. Together they manage IBM's network infrastructure, cybersecurity, over 500 data centers, 480,000 laptops, 220,000 mobile devices and an annual budget of \$2.7 billion. They are responsible for the IT across IBM's business units, from outsourcing to quantum computing, as well as in every aspect of IBM's operations, from supply chain to marketing, making IBM's IT department one of the biggest tech operations outside the US federal government.

Fletcher joined IBM in 2006 and has held several key roles in sales and technology. His experience spans reinventing desktop computing environments (Windows, Mac, Linux), industry-leading solutions for sellers and mobility programs, transforming IT infrastructure, delivering productivity tools and agile transformation. Prior to joining IBM, he managed the Enterprise Systems Group at Walmart.com. Fletcher is a graduate of Connecticut College with a degree in Political Science.

### How did the crisis unfold for you?

IBM is in the business of running mission critical workloads, so we regularly simulate and model things like geopolitical instability, earthquakes and fires. This was a new model for us: What if the whole planet has a problem at the same time?

Sometimes it pays to be paranoid. Early January, watching what was happening in Wuhan, we thought we needed to be prepared to have the capability for everyone to work remotely. There is a lead time to ordering and installing the hardware and capacity for remote access, and they were already becoming difficult to get in various parts of the world.

This crisis has highlighted how delicate the worldwide supply chain is. This just-in-time supply chain model, where you're not keeping big inventories of things, means things can get disrupted in a relatively short amount of time.

We started to see lead times for manufacturing tick up. Laptops going to 8-10 weeks, routers, firewalls, network equipment became supply constrained. And just as we were having challenges in sourcing equipment, so were a lot of our clients.

In early March, we realized this wasn't a contingency plan anymore. The genie was out of the bottle. We had to pressure test the IT to make sure everyone could do their jobs remotely. That meant ensuring the systems were running and people could connect to them, but also that they knew how to work this way. The finance department, for example, had never closed a quarter working remotely. So we had days where we had particular divisions try working from home to make sure everything worked.

IBM mandated work from home in the US on March 20 and in India on March 24.

### And then?

Phase one was just about the technology—quickly meeting the need. How do we get all the capacity up and running from a technical perspective so everyone can work from home?

Just in the last five years, we've been able to assume that everyone has a laptop, a camera and high-speed internet at home. We've wrapped collaboration and productivity tools around these capabilities. It wasn't long ago that we'd just talk on the phone. That's a much “less than” experience. Videoconferencing has been very important for working from home.

I always advise CIOs to implement tools that embrace modern ways of work and are agile. Do the tools make it easy to have a meeting? Share files? File an expense report? Onboard an employee? That goes for all technologies that enable remote work.

Phase two was the cybersecurity concern. Cyber is an enduring challenge and a moving goalpost. Now you've extended the attack surface of your enterprise to everybody's homes.

You've got people's children using smartphones and laptops, using social media, streaming media. Having a different cyber strategy became very important for us so we could have visibility into what's going on in our enterprise, extending out into the remote endpoints in people's homes. Specific technical things became important to us, like securing those endpoints.

You read about a lot of environments where they sent people home and their VPN was then overwhelmed by people watching streaming media and movies. That's an artifact of having a VPN strategy which requires you to haul all the traffic back in to inspect it. We put in place split-tunnel VPN, which meant we could see what we needed to.

Phase three was culture. There's a big difference between working from home and being under house arrest in a pandemic. Over time, how do we maintain the health and well-being of our workers and a high-performance culture?

We're benefiting in the short term from the fact that most people know each other already and have some foundational relationship, having been together in person. It's like your relatives: You don't stop being close to your parents or grandparents just because you no longer live together.

But as new people come into the organization, you have this concept of deposits and withdrawals on the relationship bank at work. Work calls are the withdrawals. Deposits come in the form of going to lunch together, talking to somebody, inquiring about what's going on in their personal life. Those things are more difficult but not impossible to recreate in a virtual work environment. They require deliberate effort. If your only interactions are work calls, it doesn't leave a lot of room for making friends.

In the office, we would have gone to dinner together. So, now we send food to people's homes and have dinner together through videoconferencing. I sent a home office enablement kit to my team—a nameplate, a coffee mug, a stress ball—saying, hey, we're probably going to be in this condition for longer than any of us would have anticipated, so here's a little something to make your home office more office-like. Little gestures of kindness go a long way in times like this.

**You've said that in terms of technology many people these days experience the "Jetsons" at home and "Flintstones" at work. What did you mean?**

New people coming into work have a very different set of expectations from people 10, five or even three years ago. When I first started working, I accepted that things are more complicated in a

big enterprise. That's the nature of the beast. New people come to work thinking "the technology should be better than in my personal life." And often it isn't.

So when did it become OK to live like the Jetsons at home and like the Flintstones at work? If you have this kind of disparity in the experience, the short answer is, it's not OK and people will make decisions about where they want to work based on that difference.

Today's best user experience is tomorrow's minimum expectation. IT departments have to focus on that experience. Can you onboard new hires and off-board those departing without coming into the office? Can you provision people with tools to do their jobs seamlessly? Quality of life issues sound pedestrian, but the state of IT is a daily reflection of what the company thinks about its people. The culture of a place is a function of how your work gets done and your culture is the only unique thing you have.

**What has been the most significant change for your team?**

From an IT perspective, this has compressed 10 years of strategy into 10 weeks of execution.

Before the pandemic, IT departments were broadly all on the same journey. They wanted the benefits of the cloud, and to embrace software as a delivery model that gives them scale and security. They wanted to get out of legacy data center operations. They needed to provide their employees with collaboration tools to allow them to be productive from anywhere, and to have a cyber strategy that permits that kind of flexibility while still being secure.

In a large enterprise, everything is a scale problem. You're dealing sometimes in highly regulated spaces, with different sets of privacy concerns around the globe, different data residency obligations that have to be met. People are working through these challenges on various timelines.

Many people thought they had more time to get there. Suddenly, this all became critical—a classic case of trying to change the tires on the car while it's going 60 miles an hour. IBM's decision to consolidate IT into a single shared service was a force multiplier in being able to effect change at scale. We were empowered to make decisions.

Before COVID-19, only 25 percent of IBM's 350,000 plus people were not in a traditional office. Our strategy had been to bring people back into the office. So this was a very rapid change in a matter of weeks to get to 98 percent of people working remotely.

As it pertains to cyber, you've got three broad areas: technology, policy and education. The technology is pretty straightforward. Here are the capabilities. Here are the solutions. The education is pretty straightforward. We'll be transparent about what we will and won't do and under what circumstances.

It tends to be the policy that causes the most churn in an enterprise: Who's entitled to what, what will we pay for, what will we not pay for, what do we want to permit from a policy perspective? When you're under duress, it motivates you to find answers to these questions and compress your existing plans.

**Any pleasant surprises?**

We were working 24/7 for weeks, a lot of long nights. But the end result was the business didn't experience any disruption. That has been a nice surprise.

We survey our people to ask them how they feel about working remotely. How supported have you felt through this process? How is your mental well-being? How stressed do you feel? Are you proud to be working here?

Overwhelmingly, the answers have been positive. Ninety-six percent feel this has been well handled. They were able to continue doing their jobs without disruption. They have the hardware and software and IT support they need.

While we're seeing a little bit of an elevated stress level, this stems from general concerns about the health and well-being of people's families and the news.

We also look closely at metrics around productivity, emails being sent, meetings being had, sales cadence activity, number of software releases, Slack activity—which shows that, if anything, people are more productive working remotely. They don't have the commute time. They are having up to two hours more per day of meetings.

**What did you not anticipate?**

It's proven to be a more complex problem to solve than we realized going into it in March. Now the question is what do things look like coming out of it? How do we emerge on a stronger footing?

There is so much complexity around safely returning people to an office, especially in a metropolitan area like NYC. There are concerns around mass transit, then you need to have temperature screening, PPE distribution, doors need to be propped open. The flow of people needs to go in one direction so they aren't crisscrossing when they go to get a drink.

To whom does it fall when someone is not being compliant with the guidelines? Is it a human resources issues, a facilities issues, the person's manager's issue? Those are the sort of scenarios we haven't really had to pressure test, and now we're going to have to.

**Will we ever go back to the office?**

Our talent strategy isn't changing, our jobs aren't changing, but the role of the office is changing. We don't know exactly how, but we're making some assumptions like we'll need less real estate because some amount of remote work will persist.

For a lot of people the office will no longer be a place you go every single day to do your job. People will occasionally gather for some purpose. That means fewer, smaller, remote satellite offices, replaced by flexible hubs that can be easily reconfigured.

We are learning what types of roles are enhanced or diminished by working remotely. After the pandemic ends, we will have a better understanding of which jobs benefit from being in the office and which jobs work better remotely.

If you or I were going to the office to sit six feet apart and shout through masks, that's probably best done on Webex. But there are other jobs that really do have to be done in an office, whether that's manufacturing, supply chain management or in our case scientists doing semiconductor design, who require specialized lab equipment.

You have a sort of budget of risk. With more people being brought back into the office, there's an increased risk footprint, and you want to save that risk for things where there's a huge benefit to being physically in one place.

**How do you stay sane?**

I shortened all my 30-minute or one-hour meetings to 20 or 50 minutes. And turned all my one-on-ones into virtual walking meetings. I get on the treadmill and tell the other person if you want to go out and take a walk and not be on video, let's do that.

Every week, we have a virtual happy hour where we can talk as friends. Originally it was at 5:00pm on Friday. But we found it's not great for people to roll right from a work meeting to happy hour. They are still in work mode. So now we have a buffer of at least an hour between the end of work and the start of happy hour.

**What advice do you have for CEOs about remote work?**

First, start to position it as work from anywhere, not work from home. It gives you a lot more latitude to avoid a class system where some people have to come back into the office and others don't. You want a progressive work environment where people can get their jobs done from anywhere, whether that's at a client site, or from home or on the road.

Second, actively measure the health and well-being of your workforce through direct and indirect measures. Survey them, but also look at the productivity markers to know when things start to deteriorate and where you need to put energy.

Third, put a new social contract in place. People who used to work remotely sometimes felt marginalized compared to people in the office. This has been a great equalizer. You no longer have two meetings going on, where people in a conference room are laughing and whispering while people calling in from outside can't see what's happening.

People don't have to explain any more why they're not wearing a jacket or tie, why there's a dog in the background, or a baby crying. If the situation at home means that you can't be on video, that's OK. These are things that just happen in life.

Now everyone's home has been turned into an office, the new social contract accepts that all of this is OK. It is more accommodating of people's lives. ♦

**PHILIP DELVES BROUGHTON** is a writer and a Senior Consultant at Brunswick, based in New York. He was previously a Senior Advisor to the Executive Chairman of Banco Santander. His books, including *Ahead of the Curve*, have appeared on *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* bestseller lists.

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