

This is how we're creating the new normal right now

 By [Vaughan Patterson](#)

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Remember when we used to blow out the candles on our birthday cake, slice it up and give it to our friends? The world is undeniably changing. It is changing in ways we don't know and cannot yet imagine. But one thing is certain. We are forging a new future today in how we work at home and, in limited ways, from the office, our factories and warehouses.



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We are working in ways today that have long been possible but that we have now been pushed to explore more fully.

Virtual trade shows

In my industry, production printing, [drupa](#) is the largest show in the world held every four years. It was due to occur this year but it has been postponed to next year. What will happen is there will be a number of virtual shows, perhaps not replacing it, but certainly happening because drupa didn't run this year.

I recently attended DocuWorld, an annual show that shares ideas and insight into the latest office technology products and solutions in the field of information management. It was hosted online.

Virtual trade shows have quickly become the rage in industries and among businesses that formerly spent millions of rands

every year sending delegates, setting up stands and hosting customers from all over the world.

We're not yet using any new technologies to host or attend them. It's all the same old tech that we've had available for some time. Apps, online registrations, laptops, desktops, tablets even smartphones.

Virtual tours and demonstrations

Imagine what's going to happen when you can find virtual reality headsets in every home. That may seem a long way off today. A decent rig will set you back R28 000 at retail. But when you consider that it took just 13 years to progress from 56K dialup modems to 200Mbps broadband fibre in people's homes today then we don't really have all that long to wait.

One of my roles at Ricoh SA is business development. In the past, my employees and I would arrange customer demonstrations. It was a bread and butter part of our business. We would host customers demonstrating what our equipment could do for their businesses, printing the jobs that they routinely print. It was effective. Shown the quality, efficiency, cost and other benefits of upgrading or introducing new equipment at the right time, we built a book of many happy customers.



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But times have changed. We no longer have meetings in and around town. How are we supposed to demonstrate the capabilities of our equipment and get to know the customer's business so we can create or tailor solutions specifically for their needs?

We're doing virtual tours and demonstrations just like the virtual conferences. The customer can show us around their premises using something as simple as a smartphone and a video call. We can do the same for our equipment at our premises. The customer mails us a typical job they would run on their existing equipment and we load it and run it on ours while they watch. Then we courier the output to them and they have it the following day.

The new normal

The customers are getting a very high level of interaction because they're not limited only to our salespeople and managers who can afford to be away from the office. They can access anyone in the company, from the CEO to the field engineers, to answer whatever questions they may have. It's great for us because we can spend quality time with the customer in just a couple of hours. We can visit three or four potential customers every day this way and give each one full access to our team. That's a huge improvement for everybody.

We'll be participating in our own conference in the next few weeks where we expect to host as many as 6,000 people. It will most likely be run out of the UK but that's not a given nor is it important. We'll provide virtual tours of our facilities and our equipment, we'll invite suppliers, partners and customers onto our virtual stands, give them options to follow different tracks specific to their needs, and let them interact with whatever interests them.



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Again, they'll have access to everything they need in one space. Having registered for the online event they'll have verified their e-mail address. That detail automatically gets appended when they attend a talk, see a demo, take a brochure. We will

know what interested them and what did not. It will allow us to tailor their post-event experience a lot more, see who the real prospects are, and offer them meaningful post-event interactions. That's exceptionally powerful already and, with new and emerging technologies, these sorts of events are only going to become a lot more rewarding for everyone involved.

So, I agree. We don't know what the new normal will be yet, but I do know that we don't want the old normal back. It was broken.

ABOUT VAUGHAN PATTERSON

Vaughan Patterson is the head of Commercial and Industrial Print at Ricoh SA.

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