The Future of Work – Learning from Sport

Part I. How to Be a GOAT* While Working Remote

#PositiveImpact

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*GOAT is an acronym which stands for Greatest Of All Time.
To me, football is so much about mental toughness, it’s digging deep, it’s doing whatever you need to do to help a team win and that comes in a lot of shapes and forms.

— Tom Brady

The best investment you can make, is an investment in yourself... The more you learn, the more you’ll earn.

— Warren Buffet
Summary

− The Covid-19 pandemic has reshuffled the cards and launched telework into the spotlight. Globally, 39% people were working from home in 2020.
− But the ability to work from home is not equal, and sometimes considered as a ‘sign of privilege’. Those with a bachelor’s degree or higher have the greatest ability to work remotely (67.5 percent), whereas only 10.7 percent of those with less than a high-school diploma can work from home.
− Work from home has brought new freedoms, saved some extra cash by cutting out commutes, with the added bonus of reducing some carbon emissions. The reduction in air pollution in China during the outbreak of the pandemic in February 2020 saved an estimated 77,000 lives.
− However, concerns surrounding mental health, the hurting of inner-city businesses, new graduates unable to connect with their peers and even vulnerability to cyber-attacks has led to questions about whether our honeymoon with work from home is drawing to a close.
− Despite this, flexible work is going to remain with us to some extent, as only one in seven UK workers want to return to five days of commuting.

Learning from sport

− We can draw lessons from the greatest of all time (GOAT) like Tom Brady and Roger Federer as well as sports teams like the French handball team led by Claude Onesta to create better functioning teams for this new mixed medium workplace.
− Looking at some of the most successful sports teams, we find that transparency is key to the well-functioning of teams and companies, particularly when working remotely, by building trust between managers and their employees. Such transparency can be achieved by using metrics to measure performance such as through Workplace Analytics.
− In the workplace, it is often the case that team effort supersedes individual performance. The performance of the French football team in the Euro2020 demonstrated that success is often achieved through team cohesion rather than just collecting the best players.

What we predict

#1 Offices will refill way faster than you think.
#2 Freelancing is the new remote working.
#3 We can only see the tip of the outsourcing iceberg.
#4 Inequalities will continue to drop.... between countries.
Introduction

Who would have guessed that Tom Brady would lead a team to Superbowl glory at the age of 43? Who would have thought that Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi would still compete for the Ballon d’Or award at the ages of 36 and 34, respectively? And who would have guessed that Federer, Nadal, and Djokovic would continue to dominate tennis well into their thirties, despite a generation of new players?

There are close parallels between great athletes like these and professional success. We have a lot to learn from remarkable women and men who achieve great heights in sports—especially as we move toward a post-pandemic work-from-home future.

Our work has been shaken by the Covid-19 pandemic. Almost everyone is trying to guess what the new normal will look like and where we will be working in the future. A major dilemma for post-pandemic employers is how to manage teams working remotely. On the one hand, managers and supervisors want to ensure that remote workers are doing their jobs—that they are in fact working. But in most work-from-home arrangements, managers can’t see what employees are doing or how much time they are actually working. Thus, a central question is related to trust.

We also need to understand how work-from-home arrangements might impact employees. How will home office jobs affect the mental health and relationships of workers? Will online work erode the bonds between coworkers? Will they be able to experience teamwork or feel connected to their companies’ missions?

Perhaps we can learn from top athletes as we think about these questions. Workers, like athletes, could be evaluated by their performance, not only by how much time they spend at the computer. And they might learn a lot about maintaining good mental health from athletes, who endure high levels of pressure and stress.

In other words, we might be ready for a new way of thinking about work and labour relations. If so, then business could become a lot more like professional sports.

As we address the future of work, it is helpful to consider how the work-from-home trend started and what impact it is having today during the Covid-19 pandemic.
1. Working from home: Is the honeymoon over?

1.1 Covid-19 has offered the largest ever laboratory for a new remote work model

The concept of telework has existed since the 1970s, but in a more limited scope than today. Telework and telecommuting were born in tandem with the emergence of new technologies and when the 1973 OPEC oil embargo increased fuel costs for traditional commuters. The sunset of the manufacturing industry, the declining cost of information and communication technology (ICT), and the rise of information jobs in developed economies all combined to make it more possible to test home-based methods of work.

Between 2000 and 2010, the number of individuals working from home at least once a week increased by 35 percent. But telework really took off after the global financial crisis in 2008. That trend was institutionalised in the US under the 2010 Telework Enhancement Act, which made telecommuting more secure for federal government employees. The law also required policies for eligible employees to work remotely. Following the implementation of this act, telework participation by all federal employees increased from 14 percent to 22 percent.

Then, in 2020, the pandemic propelled telework into the mainstream. Worldwide, 39 percent of workers in 2020 did their jobs remotely from home, up from 24 percent prior to the pandemic. In the US, 42 percent of the labour force worked from home full time in 2020. For federal employees, 59 percent worked from home every day in 2020.

Some economists have considered work from home as a “sign of privilege.” They point out that only knowledge workers with computer-based jobs can work remotely. The evidence affirms this view, at least to some extent. The highest 10 percent of wage earners have the greatest access to telework. In 2018, 25 percent of workers in this group had access to telework. Educational attainment also impacts the likelihood of being able to work from home. Those with a bachelor’s degree or higher have the greatest ability to work remotely (67.5 percent), whereas only 10.7 percent of those with less than a high-school diploma can work from home. This telework ability inequality is also seen at a country-level. Countries with higher GDP per capita tend to have a greater number of employees more able to work online (Figure 1).

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1. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines telework as the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) including smartphones, tablets, laptops or desktop computers for work that is performed outside the employer’s premises.
There are also differences between industries. The potential for remote work is highest for those who do not participate in physical or manual work, or those who do not require specialized equipment such as X-ray machines to be able to work. As a result, people who work in management, business, and financial occupations have the greatest ability to telework (86.6 percent) compared to service occupations (7.9 percent). These industries also tend to have the largest concentrations of employees in the top quintiles (Figure 2). A divide can also be found between urban and rural areas. In the densest metropolitan areas, approximately 50 percent of workers are able to telework, compared to 31.8 percent in nonmetropolitan areas.

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**Figure 1: The richer are more mobile: in advanced economies, remote work is easier.**

Telework ability index by GDP per capita (PPP)

Sources: Deutsche Bank; PIAAC survey; Dingel and Neiman (2020); and IMF calculations. Note: Tele-workability index ranges from 0 (no task can be performed remotely) to 1 (all tasks can be performed remotely). Data represent country-level national averages of tele-workability index.

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1.2 Work from home has reduced costs, saved time, and cut emissions

As work-from-home arrangements became more common, politicians and journalists emphasised that workers would feel more freedom. Certainly some people feel that way. Individual flexibility has been a great win for some remote workers. Worldwide, one-third of workers surveyed stated that they would quit their jobs if their bosses required them to return to the office full time. Those who favour flexible work schedules want to work from home on average 2.5 days per week. Only one UK worker in seven wants to return to five days a week of commuting.

By eliminating the need to commute into the office, the shift to online work has led to significant cost savings. Prior to the pandemic, UK workers spent on average twenty-nine minutes per day commuting and £5.50 per day on travel and parking costs. If the average UK worker continued with a flexible working arrangement and worked two days a week from home, the cost savings may be up to 6 percent of earnings.

This benefit also extends to the environment. Work from home reduces the number of commutes and therefore relieves road congestion and reduces carbon emissions. China particularly benefitted from this shift, with CO2 emissions dropping by 25 percent in February 2020. According to some estimates, the reduction in air pollution saved approximately 77,000 lives.

Upward pressure on rent in major cities has also eased off with the increase in vacancies both in residential and commercial property. In London, office vacancies are almost double their pre-pandemic level, seeing three quarters of medium-sized firms cutting back on office space, and even renting out spare offices. Office construction in the country has also fallen from 4.32 million square feet to 3.61 million square feet.


10 People in China, Belgium and France are least keen, favouring just 1.9 days a week from home while people in India are the most enthusiastic, wanting 3.4 day.


to a year ago. In New York City, fifteen thousand rentals sat empty in September 2020, the most vacancies in recorded history. The change in demand saw rents plummet in the city, to just below their 2015 level, although they are beginning to tick up again fairly rapidly (Figure 3). The biggest fall was concentrated in Manhattan. In the buyers market, in Midtown East, property sellers often accepted (on average) 14 percent less than the asking price in the first quarter of 2021. In Manhattan, 97 percent of the condos sold at or below the asking price.

Figure 3: New York rents (index Jan 2015 = 100)

1.3 … but the opinion is slowly starting to reverse

Despite the benefits cited above, evidence is emerging to show concerning side effects. Mental health is one critical concern related to the new work from home model. In the US, two-fifths of those surveyed said their mental health had declined since the outbreak of the pandemic last March. Similarly, the percentage of people with low levels of mental health has doubled since the pandemic began. Newly remote workers, who are among those worst affected, are 30 percent more likely to report declining mental health than those still employed in non-remote settings. Only a third of all workers were offered mental health support from their employers.

Other key concerns include the lack of social interaction, reduced work-life balance, and increased distractions. Isolation has especially appeared as a major downside to working from home, with nearly two-thirds of individuals saying they felt more isolated from their colleagues. The results were split down gender lines, with women (58 percent) being more likely to feel isolated than men (39 percent). Women were also more likely to develop musculoskeletal problems (44 percent) compared to men (29 percent) due to inadequate seating. Emotional burnout related to work is also a concern, with 38 percent of US workers finding themselves exhausted after a full week of virtual meetings, and 30 percent feeling stressed.

For new graduates who entered the labour market in 2020 and 2021, online work has caused new problems such as stifled networking, professional invisibility, and weaker development of soft skills related to communication and teamwork. Generation Z employees were three times more likely to have sought help for mental health concerns than older employees.  

For downtown businesses that rely on commuting office workers—such as lunch restaurants, retail shops, and hospitality firms—the Covid-19 pandemic has presented a significant risk to their survival. As more workers set up home offices, their consumption spending shifts to the suburbs. Paris has seen its economic activity decrease by 37 percent since mid-March compared to a 34 percent decrease at the national level. For the eleven UK core cities, it was estimated that total losses related to reduced spending in urban centres had already amounted to £1.6 billion by May 2020. Public transport systems have also taken a hit, with Transport for London recording a revenue decline of 90 percent following lockdown measures.

Other major concerns now include an increased vulnerability to cyberattacks. As work shifts to online platforms, cyber criminals increasingly profit off the fear surrounding the coronavirus and the weaker security of those working from home. Last year, there was a double-digit surge in cyberattacks, such as ransomware, threats to the Internet of Things (IoT), new malware, and crypto-jacking. Ransomware threats saw a significant spike, increasing 62 percent globally and 158 percent in the US. In addition, IoT malware detections were 66 percent higher as a result of new attacks on home networks and remote workers. Phishing scams were likely to impact 47 percent of individuals who work from home. The average cost of a data breach while working from home can reach up to US $137,000.

As business leaders consider all of these factors, we continue to see them taking diverse directions and grappling with uncertainty. On the one hand, a third of US chief operating officers have plans to reduce office space over the next few years as lease contracts reach their end dates. However, tech giant Amazon has recently signed new leases for office space amounting to 900,000 square feet across six cities. The reason for this decision is a lack of spontaneity in their virtual team working arrangements.

The next section presents an analysis of professional sports designed to help us navigate these challenging issues for workers and employers. As we look at professional athletes and teams, we can learn from their successes and pitfalls in order to identify how workers can thrive in these difficult times.

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**Key learnings:**

- The ability to telework is not equal across income groups, industries and countries, with knowledge workers being the most able to work remotely.

- The shift to work-from-home has led to greater flexibility, extra savings by cutting out the commute, falling CO2 emissions and falling rents in major cities.

- Despite our initial honeymoon, people are starting to realise that the freedom of work-from-home does have some downsides: dilution of company culture, coordination issues, and even the mental wellbeing of some workers.

- Overall, there is a trade off that comes with remote work, and may benefit some but not all employees.

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2. What sports can teach us: From Moneyball to the NBA

2.1 What it takes to be a high-performing employee: learning from the GOATs

Sustained passion and motivation, great discipline, eagerness to learn and grow. These factors all play a role in the success of great athletes.

We have a lot to learn from the greatest of all time (GOAT) athletes. Looking at the incredible careers of these athletes, especially those with spectacular longevity, we find a superb work ethic. They are willing to constantly apply themselves. They inspire others and impact their teammates. How could Tampa Bay have turned into Superbowl champions if it had not been for Tom Brady? How could Real Madrid stay at the top if it had not been for Cristiano Ronaldo?

Some of the world's best athletes have bizarre pregame rituals to help secure their wins. Roger Federer always eats pasta before a match, and Serena Williams laces her shoes the exact same way. Right before the match starts, Rafael Nadal will place his hair behind his ear, pull his nose, and adjust his shorts. Williams will bounce her ball five times. In team sports, GOATs like Tom Brady have expanded their pregame rituals to the rest of the team. Right before a mid-afternoon match, Brady will hold throwing sessions for receivers, forcing them to locate the ball in direct sunlight in preparation for changes in lighting conditions during the game.

These small routines help athletes gain composure before their games. They help players eliminate unproductive thoughts, which leads to increased focus.

Obviously, these athletes have incredible ability, but their performances are inextricably connected to their resilient mental strength. It used to be thought that elite athletic performance was dependent on a circular wheel of concerns, of which mental skills were one spoke. Over time, it became clear that all elements of elite performance were dependent on robust mental skills, so much so that it became the centre of the wheel. This helps to explain why some players can consistently maintain a high-level of performance, and it also helps us understand why superstar gymnast Simone Biles needed to withdraw from some events during the Olympic Games.

If mental stamina is the centre of performance for athletes, the same is certainly true for workers in today’s economy. So shouldn’t workers—especially those who work remotely—have access to good mental coaching?

Mental coaching has been found to benefit every area of an athlete’s performance. This includes pregame anxiety, injury recovery, and getting the most out of practices. In 2018, twenty-seven out of thirty Major League Baseball (MLB) teams employed mental skills coaches. These coaches recommend strategies such as creating short-term goals and positive self-talk to help improve performance. Additionally, the mental coaches help athletes to address emotions off the pitch so that they stay composed if play becomes stressful. One technique is to help them visualise a successful end result, which prepares an athlete’s body to perform under pressure.

Traditional coaching in sports has proven to be about far more than managing practices and games. Instead, coaches fill a variety of roles, such as mentor and role model. Whilst improving individual aptitude is important, coaches lift the team as a whole. They are the vehicle through which a jumble of individuals with varying skills is transformed into a cohesive unit.

Behavioural predictability is also important. To develop behavioural predictability, coaches and players need to act in a consistent manner in order to build relational trust. Without trust, players might not feel comfortable about approaching the coach for help, and the coach might not feel comfortable about handing responsibility to players.
The corporate world has much to learn from these dynamics in professional sports. A few leading companies have already spotted this. In 2001, Google’s future CEO John Schmidt recruited Bill Campbell, a former coach of college-level American football, to act as a mentor. Campbell contributed his wisdom from his sports career. He advised Google’s leaders to create a two-way relationship, offering harsh but constructive, one-on-one feedback, and requiring managers to be honest, humble, and willing to learn.

Similarly, the consulting firm - McKinsey, prioritizes training and coaching as a core component of the company. This helps the firm to maintain a high level of performance across the organisation. Consultants benefit from coaching and feedback on every project, approximately every three months. Offsite trainings typically occur every six months that include external coaching, conferences, role modelling, peer games, and education. The whole purpose is to foster a sense of belonging and the consistent high-level performance of their consultants.

### Key learnings:

- What is harder than climbing to the top? Staying there, because it requires constant personal investment to maintain motivation and high-level performance.
- Mental training, work ethic, and good habits explain strong performance over the long term. These factors are central to highly successful teams and environments.
- The most successful companies invest significant amounts of time and money in recruitment, training, and coaching to sustain their ranks.
- All of the above is typically done through personal relationships. Employees mimic the daily habits of successful peers, and they participate in intense offsite training to boost motivation and mental wellbeing.

#### 2.2 US sports: the team is the best of the sum of the part

American team sports (e.g., basketball, baseball, football) have a commonality: Each player has a very precise role on the team and their performance is constantly measured. Statisticians track every detail of their play, including interceptions, yards gained, strikes and balls, run batted in (RBI), shooting accuracy, tackles, etc. Each position has its own set of key performance indicators (KPIs).

The National Basketball Association (NBA) has experienced a statistical revolution that has forever altered game play. The league has installed player-tracking systems in all twenty-nine arenas. Using a technology known as Second Spectrum, the NBA utilises machine learning to collect data on speed and distances, possession, passing, defensive impact, and rebounding. Particularly important is the new ability to measure and analyse defence players, which have historically been neglected in favour of offensive players. This new system has allowed for a more holistic representation of team play, bringing new attention to the role of defence in the game.

In football, GPS systems have been used to track movements on the pitch, as well as data about physical performance, such as heart rate, running speed, and the body’s work rate. This technology helps to monitor the physical condition of each player on the team. It also helps to identify factors such as the most frequent spaces covered in defence and how well the space on the pitch was utilized. Football clubs that use this technology include Chelsea FC, Liverpool FC, Bayern Munich FC, AC, and Inter Milan.

For the Olympic Games, these technologies now help to improve both individual and team performance. Precise motion tracers are now used in sports that require athletic precision, such as diving and synchronised swimming. For synchronised swimming, these wearables drastically improve team synergy.

In boxing, a new wearable called Hykso fits inside a boxing glove and tracks punch speed and accuracy. The Kenyan women’s volleyball team uses GPS devices like those used by football teams to track players’ strength, heart rate, and other vitals. They also provide information about positioning on the court. Intel’s 3D digital twin technology creates a virtual replica of stadiums to help athletes to familiarise themselves with arenas and mentally prepare for performances in those locations. These new technological

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31 This baseball term means credits a batter for making a play that allows a run to be scored.
developments are part of a new wave in sports, optimising both individual and team performance in the race to win.

Analysing data is increasingly a key to success. This factor was demonstrated in the film Moneyball, which is based on the 2003 nonfiction book by Michael Lewis. This book and film depict a case study of the trade-off between a team’s budget and its achieved performance. Working under a limited budget, the Oakland Athletics general manager Billy Beane hired a statistician to identify undervalued players that were being neglected in the way the team traditionally measured players’ success. In the book’s own words, it was through using metrics more granular than simple batting averages that helped Beane realise that “if you’ve got a dozen pitchers, you need to speak twelve languages”. This sentiment of valuing a player’s unique contribution and skillset is what eventually helped Beane build a team that routinely beat rivals who had outspent them many times over.

Off the pitch and in the workplace, there are similar technologies to help improve the performance of sports teams and business teams. Common technologies can assess numerous aspects of business operations, such as call centre performance, customer relations management (CRM), food delivery times, etc. However, companies have only marginally implemented these technologies. Very few employers are tracking the performance of employees as rigorously as sports teams track athletes. One exception is within the sales sector, as sales jobs are typically more easy to measure. Contrary to common beliefs, or paranoia about too much transparency, most employees have positive attitudes about job assessments, in part because it prevents their high-level work from being overlooked. As their contributions to companies become more visible, the employees typically land higher paying jobs.

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<th>Key learnings:</th>
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<tr>
<td>– Sports have made leaps forward in the recent decades by using technology to better track and improve the performance of athletes, whereas companies are lagging in the adoption of performance measurement technologies.</td>
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<td>– Individuals and teams that focus on analysing and optimizing performance tend to outperform their peers. Or they do more with less, as depicted in Moneyball.</td>
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<td>– Contrary to popular opinion, a lack of transparency in companies creates internal politics and feelings of unfairness, discrimination, and job burnout.</td>
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<td>– As more people work remotely, this lack of transparency, combined with the lack of social interaction at work, feeds paranoia and significantly impairs trust between managers and employees.</td>
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2.3 What happens when team effort supersedes individual performance?

Sometimes a team is not as good as the sum of its parts. For example, consider PSG and Manchester City, which have gathered the best players and coaches but so far have not won their fair share of championships.

In contrast, a look at French football reveals what happens when team effort supersedes the stardom of individual players. In 1994, Manager Aime Jacquet gave a young Bordeaux midfielder, Zinedine Zidane, a chance to play. Zidane was wise enough to realise that the best way to use his talent was to support the team.

Jacquet also removed senior players from the team, such as David Ginola and Jean-Pierre Papin, in order to create a more integrated team, despite fears among French fans that the team would be defeated by rivals.\(^{32}\)

What made the 1998 French World Cup team so successful was Jacquet’s focus on building off-pitch relationships between players and staff. He organised a gathering in December 1997 in Tignes. The

connections formed at the alpine resort help to build trust between the players and between the players and the team’s management. Jacquet also shielded the players from the critical press that followed after changes to the team. That decision preserved the morale that helped carry the team to victory.

A similar framework was adopted in 2012 by Didier Deschamps. He mended the French team, which had been fragmented since the scandalous expulsion of Nicolas Anelka in 2010. In preparation for 2018, managers selected a team that was thought to be harmonious rather than just selecting the twenty-three best players out there. No player was more important than the other. As player Benjamin Mendy explained, “We have good players on our team, but that is not all. We are a true family.” Some players did not make it on to the pitch (e.g., Adil Ramy), but they participated in the team spirit and bonding. Deschamps, who built his career as being a backbone for his teams rather than a star player, instilled the same mentality among his players. The team was not spectacular, but extremely hard working and resilient. Everyone was willing to sacrifice for the team.

France’s performance in the Euro Cup in 2021 showcased a different story. On paper, the team was even better than in 2018. However, the team struggled to integrate its players. The relationship between Karim Benzema and Kylian Mbappé floundered on the pitch as both strikers occupied similar areas on the left flank during play, confusing their positions. The manager also selected Clement Lenglet to replace an injured teammate, despite Lenglet having not played during the group stage previously or in France’s two pretournament friendlies. Off the pitch, tensions also broke down between players’ families, with arguments erupting between the Rabiot and Pogba families, and the Rabiot and Mbappe families over a lack of effective teamwork on the field. Finally, as players grew in confidence with their newfound stardom after winning the World Cup (Mbappé is a particular example), their egos increased and their willingness to make sacrifices for the team decreased. Poorer team cohesion, both on and off the pitch, and greater egos compromised French success in 2021.

Bookmakers thought teams with star players, such as France, Portugal, and Belgium, would win. However, Denmark, a team of relatively unknown players, made it to the semi-finals. The final victory came to a team without any real star: Italy. We might say that Italy repeated the story of France’s 1998 World Cup team, which had a coherent, cohesive, hard working group of players.

Another case study of success is the French handball team, coached by Claude Onesta between 2001 and 2016. Under him, the team were European champions in 2006, Olympic champions in 2008, World champions in 2009, European champions in 2010, and World champions again in 2011. The team then won a third European championship in 2014 before winning the World Cup again in 2015! The French handball team was led by Onesta to 9 finals, 8 of which it won, and it was the first nation to have all three international titles at the same time. This is probably the most dominant team in sports history over a prolonged period of ten years.
What we can learn, individually and collectively, from Claude Onesta?

I was lucky enough to attend a coaching session by Claude Onesta. I was deeply impressed by his philosophy and how sports coaching can translate into business leadership.

About individual performance, Onesta stated: “An exceptional individual does not do exceptional things but is capable of excellent responses in reduced space (time, quicker). He has a perfect control/mastery of the high-level ability to perform perfect gestures and in a shorter time. The real genius can accelerate and decelerate and change rhythms as many times and as often as needed. [He] controls performance, controls his time . . . [He] continues to advance, [but knows that] better is not necessarily faster. He does less . . . to do better.”

This is in line with the analysis of GOATs in American football. It shows how small habits, mental preparation, and control of performance can lead to long-term success.

About collective (team) performance, Onesta stated: “Since our early ages, we are raised in a competitive environment (grading, ranking) and at work (bonus, salaries). Most businesses have good players, but they lack a collective team spirit. The first workers will keep competing and the middle workers will use their energy to sneak and not get caught. There are three categories of people: the sharks (leaders) and . . . the pilot fish (followers). [These two sets] tend to group together . . . Then comes the dolphins (entertainers) who do not belong to a group and have great relationships with everyone. They tend to bond the team together . . . It is very important to have them within the team.”

This reflects what occurred with the French team in 2018 and players like Adil Ramy, who brought a cheerful atmosphere to the team. In contrast, new team members, egos, and the Covid-19 bubble seemed to break France’s 2021 cohesion.

On governance, Onesta said: “Some are wearing masks . . . [They] hide away with a minimum level of daily ambitions. So we need to rethink how to motivate people at work. It is interesting to see sports players who want to win, while workers lack motivation. People, at least at the beginning, all have the ambition to succeed. How is it that this ambition does not exist a few years later? In the beginning, most people think that working for the common good will result in losing. But the opposite is true: Others can nourish, transform, and develop the project. Exchanges and critical feedback are necessary for most people and the result is a positive project evolution. . . . This is not the project of the boss or a single person. This is a team project. Everything should be put in like a sought-after performance for a higher level of success, a higher level of recognition. People should be team members not by kindness or generosity, but for personal interest because the outcome is better.”

Onesta’s statements resonated with our previous analysis about governance and the issue of poor transparency and weak motivation, which feed team politics and inefficiencies.

While talking to Claude Onesta, he stressed the importance of trust, mutual respect, accountability, “coproduction.” He said we can obtain high-level results at the global level, especially in a team with very talented players, including rich athletes with strong egos.

“The problem,” he said, “is that the business model, on the contrary, works more on mistrust in an often-hostile environment. So we appoint a manager for two to three years, no more, for fear that he will create too many habits, too many imbalances . . . So many things in business are seen as inconveniences.”
Key learnings:

- Sports have made major advances in recent decades through the use of technology that better tracks and improves performance. In contrast, companies are lagging in the adoption of performance measurement technologies.

- Individuals and teams who focus on analysing and optimizing performance tend to outperform their peers (or they do more with less like Moneyball).

- In contrast, lack of transparency in companies creates internal politics, feeling of unfairness and discrimination and job dissatisfaction.

- At a time of remote working this lack of transparency, combined with the lack of social interaction, is a feeder of paranoia and significant impairment of trust between managers and employees.

Conclusion: What do sports tell us about the future of work?

Human memories are short. It is easy to draw conclusions based on what we experience today and then miss the big picture.

One of the most striking long-term trends in our societies and economies in recent decades is urbanization. The rise of big cities has created thriving environments for social interactions and centres of economic excellence. Large populations bring market potential for local businesses, thereby creating a competitive talent pool for companies. The combination of the two creates a virtuous cycle for individuals who benefit from exciting environments and important career opportunities.

The Covid-19 pandemic measures have reshuffled the cards and have temporarily disrupted that long-term trend. The changes that have happened in the last eighteen months will either be a catalyst for trends that were already present before the pandemic, or we will see pre-pandemic trends revert in the opposite direction.

Here are our four predictions for the future of work:

#1 Offices will refill way faster than you think. We are already seeing in London a significant increase in traffic and people back in the office. Banks and corporates are calling workers to come back to the office. People are even returning to voluntary cooperative workspaces, such as WeWork. In August 2021, the use of transit in London is near 40% greater than the level recorded by Apple Mobility in mid-January 2020. In New York, this return has been slower following the spread of the Delta variant, although it is still 10% above mid-January 2020 levels. Steepening rent increases in New York City from mid-2021 also point to this return to the city.
However, it is also likely that some companies will begin to include the option of working from home to attract future employees in a similar way to high wages and benefits packages.

Figure 4: Apple mobility index (Jan 13th 2020 =100)

#2 Freelancing is the new remote working. According to our dbDIG proprietary survey, once the Coronavirus is no longer deemed a threat, people expect to continue working from home 2-3 days per week. These are long-term trends of freelancing. Working on freelancing platforms like Upwork or Deliveroo will continue to accelerate. Some employees may not want to be back in the office, and they might want to work differently. A freelancing agreement offers flexibility for the employee and predictability for employers who may need to resolve the coordination and performance issues that arose during the lockdowns.

Figure 5: Share prices of Upwork and Fiverr have surged during the Covid-19

#3 We can only see the tip of the outsourcing iceberg. Call centres were one of the first outsourced sectors, but the trend is accelerating to several support functions, such as IT, accounting, HR, data inputs and a lot of clerical jobs. With Covid-19, some managers have realized that their functions could be performed remotely. Because that change has gone well, we believe there will be a long-term trend of companies progressively outsourcing functions so that they can focus on the core business.
#4 Inequalities will continue to drop.... between countries. The reduction of income inequality between countries has been a massive trend since 1980. Platforms like Upwork allow clients to purchase a service performed from anywhere in the world. The premium of paying someone based in the US vs. lower-cost countries to perform a similar service cannot be infinite. This will ultimately provide opportunities for increased income for white collar workers in emerging markets and put pressure on the same revenues in developed markets, while continuing to narrow the spectacular income gap built during the first Industrial Revolution. Some countries have started welcoming remote workers with designed visa programs.

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