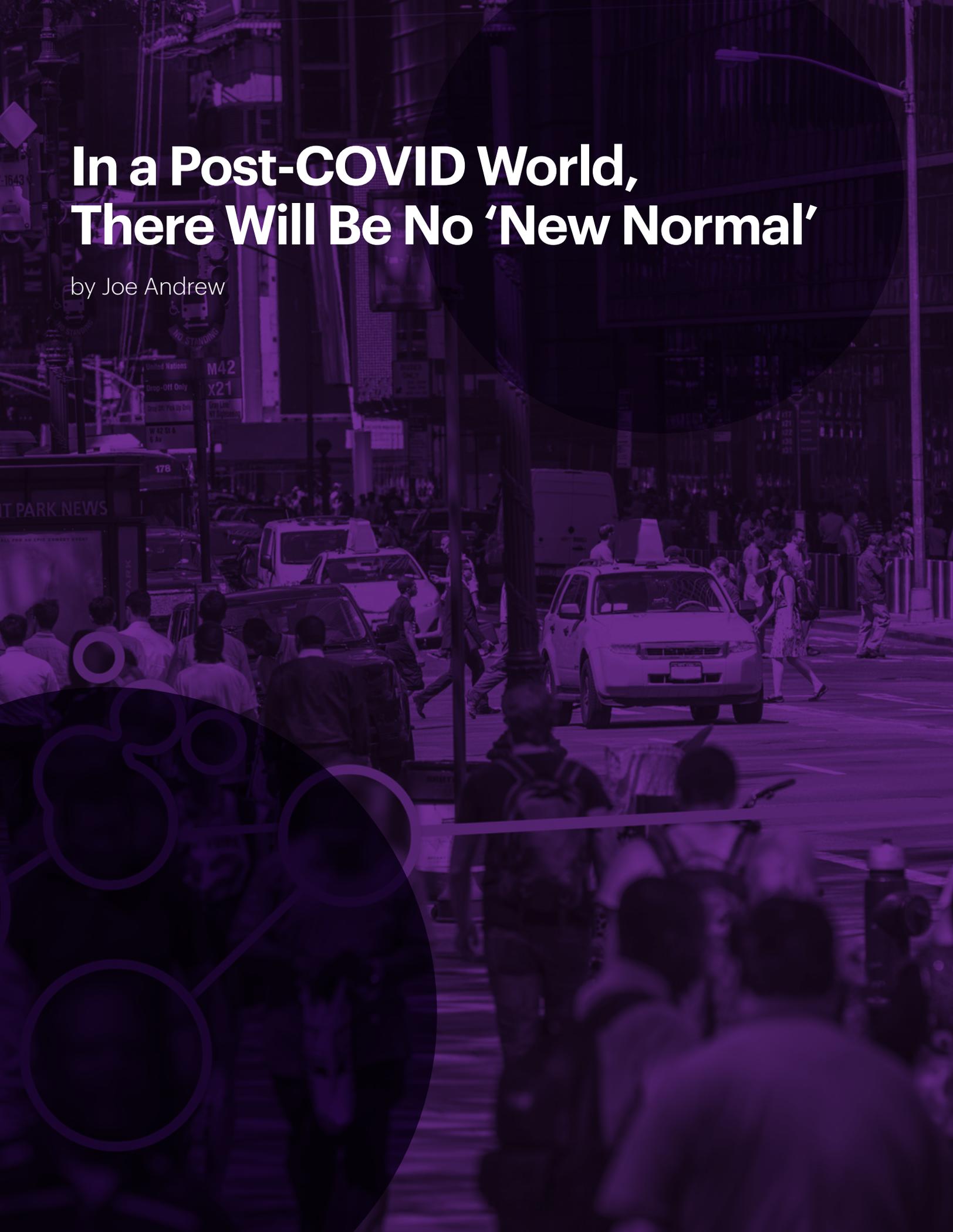


In a Post-COVID World, There Will Be No 'New Normal'

by Joe Andrew



Traditionalists want to get the world back to normal. Modernists want to get the world to the new normal. What they are both missing is that there won't be a normal — the old one or the new one — for a long time, if ever.

Normal connotes a steady state. Conforming to a standard; usual, typical, or expected. Our perception of normality is about expectations — we expect most things to have some semblance of how they are today when we wake up tomorrow. There is change — as Heraclitus said, “No person ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and they are not the same person,” but we live beside the river of most change, not in it. We expect there to be some constant in our day-to-day lives. But what if the only constant after the crisis is change?

If there is one thing that experts have noted, it is that the crisis we are at the beginning of will accelerate trends that were already happening. What this crisis will change the most are those things that were already changing.

That may mean that things like digitization, globalization and its reaction, nationalism, will all happen faster than they were moving before the crisis. The collective reaction to institutionalized racism, the withdrawal

from world leadership of the United States, terrorism and the increase of human migration caused by all of these challenges will move faster and faster. There is no sense of returning to anything, let alone getting to a steady state. We cannot expect that all things around us will be typical or expected if they are changing faster than we can adapt to them.

But more important than any substantive trend is this process point: acceleration is accelerating itself.



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Astro Teller, the much admired “Captain of the Moonshots” at Alphabet’s X, and his much maligned explanation to Thomas Friedman about the challenge of human adaptability to accelerating change, is more demonstrably true today than it was before we had ever heard of COVID-19. Teller and Friedman posited that with the advent of the easy to use smart phone and the underlying democratization of ideas that came from it and wide use of the internet, that change in most areas dramatically began to accelerate around 2008. Teller and Friedman’s observations were maligned by reductionists who always want every theory to be substantive, while they were making a process point.

Our very ability to adapt to all the change happening around us was the key trend of our time. If the crisis created by COVID-19 is accelerating trends, then it is clearly accelerating the trend of increased change.

The age of cellular service coincided with the beginning of what Klaus Schwab, the founder of the World Economic Forum, calls a Fourth Industrial Revolution that has brought the mechanical, biological, and digital sciences together and where the speed of current breakthroughs has no historical precedent. Changes in medicine, physics and technology are evolving at an exponential rather than linear pace. You can make fun of these concepts, but that laughter is hiding the anxiety that we are feeling as we experience the quickening pace of change all around us in the real world, not just the artificial snow of Davos, and we — as individuals and societies — are struggling to react. And that was before the current global crisis.

Those who are in the business of predicting what will happen next, from Teller to Friedman to Schwab, were often too conservative about the rate of change before the current crisis. As change accelerates, we are learning something about the world that lies in wait for us. We are learning that there will not be a next new normal, but rather a new dynamic.

That is why “new dynamic” is probably a better term for our future than “new normal.” Rather than a steady state, we are likely going to face constant, accelerating change. Our biggest challenge will be to adapt to this dynamic and find ways to live in the moving river, not beside it, as it overflows its banks and swamps our expectations of what is normal.

While we never know what will happen next, we now know that the challenge of our times is how we adapt to what happens next. We will be surprised, maybe even shocked. The business studies about change management will have to be reimagined to focus not on organizations changing themselves, but how change effects organizations. Brain science, motivational psychology, and behavioral economics will need to focus more on how people adapt to change.

We may try to live beside the whitewaters of change, but we are more likely to succeed if we learn to swim, surf, or sail in this new dynamic.



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