

# Surviving as a virtual SME in the time of Covid-19

 By [Gavin Weale](#)

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When the lockdown was announced by the government, it should have been easier for us than most small businesses to shift to operating virtually. The clue is in the name: Digify Africa.



Gavin Weale, founder of Digify Africa

The business specialises in helping young people learn the demand-driven digital skills of the future. But even for a company that lives and breathes digital every day, this crisis has thrown up new challenges.

Weale shares ten things Digify Africa has done or learned that have helped them manage their way through as a small business.

## **Making sure the team is set up right**

Turning virtual was seamless for some in our company who were already working from home once or twice a week. But not everyone found it so easy. Some had no home internet and even joining a meeting was a challenge.

It was important to recognise this and make a serious effort to make sure everyone was connected. We sent money for those who needed it to get new SIMcards or routers and made sure everyone felt comfortable flagging if their set up was not working well so we could help them sort it out, with the assistance of our IT guy.

Workers need the right tools to do their jobs well and expecting someone to function effectively with slow or unreliable internet is like asking a builder to fix your fence with a broken hammer. It'll slow them and your business down, so investing a little in getting everyone optimally set up seems like a worthwhile investment.

## **Most of the tools you probably need are available for free**

The whole world seems to have discovered Zoom during the pandemic, albeit the backlash, but other platforms are available. Google Hangouts, Microsoft teams, Skype and BlueJeans also work well.

For all our internal meetings we use Hangouts (free and linked to our Google Suite account which we use for work - which we also use for all our calendars and documents on the cloud).

During lockdown, we encouraged everyone to sign up to an app called Houseparty and we put a standing daily invite in to everyone's work calendars at 3pm in case they need to let off steam (and play games).

There's Trello for project management tasks. Slack for internal communications. WeTransfer for sending big files. Miro is a free virtual whiteboard. Klipfolio lets you build shared dashboards for tracking performance.

If you have a specific need, try Googling it and the likelihood is that some kind of application exists. Many are free up to a point for small teams, and we find most very easy to use.

## **Cyberthreats are real**

Moving to a virtual set-up requires an understanding of the risks. We thought we had this one sorted, until we got hacked via Zoom (in the middle of a webinar we were running, where hackers took over the session and played a porn video to the participants).

Much has been written in the press about Zoom having security issues. Make sure you understand how to use the security features in all of this and all your other applications.

Use Two-Step verifications on your critical accounts like email. Brief your staff on using better passwords (please not the name of their child and birthdate). And develop a company policy on cybersecurity with an action plan ready in case you get hacked, so that everyone will know what to do and you can minimize disruption.

As your IT support to help you with this if you don't know where to start.

## **Transparency and honesty count**

One thing we have learned the hard way through various crises in our business was the importance of transparency, and this applies especially during this crisis. It's all the more important as your teams will be assuming the worst - that their livelihoods in danger - and in some cases they may be right. The worst thing to do is to stick your head in the sand and

make optimistic promises based on hope and assumption.

We found that telling our team the truth of our situation and what we were thinking and planning was the most reassuring approach. Give them a sense of the financial position of the company. They will respect you for it and if you have a decent team culture it may even help them rally round you. Give them clarity even if you can not give them certainty.

None of this is easy but hiding the truth and dodging difficult conversations can make people more worried and anxious, and can even turn into resentment towards the leadership of the company.

## **Think of your customers and community**

Much has been written recently about how being a 'helper' to others in a time of crisis can help you build up your own resilience to survive and thrive. It's easier said than done if you can't see a way to pay salaries at the end of the month, but if you can step back and take the perspective of your customers or community you may find ways that you can become a helper too.

There has been a wave of organisations making their product or service free or more easily available during the lockdown. In our case, we have offered a series of webinars for SMEs who want to ramp up their online presence and audience. Doing something that is genuinely useful and helpful gives you and your team the sense you are contributing towards the collective effort to survive and thrive, but may also stand the business in good stead for future opportunities and allow people to sample what you do in new ways.

## **Take care of your people**

Our first value at Digify Africa is People First: that the people in our business and those we serve should always be the number one priority and guide our decision making. This has influenced our response.

In the first few days of the lockdown, I realised a few things: that working a full day was literally impossible for those looking after children; that working from home requires a different kind of structure to your day; and that we would not be able to carry on doing everything we had before. Many of us were feeling guilty at not being able to put in the hours we normally would. So we told everyone that we were not expecting them to work more than 6 hours a day, or to stick to a normal 9-5 day.

We encouraged everyone to take the time they needed to make sure they and their families were well looked after and offered an additional 5 days of annual leave to be taken during the lockdown to give people some space to breathe.

To offset the loss of productivity, our COO rapidly put together a document of key priorities for the company, leaving out some non-essential work we may have otherwise had on our lists. Accepting that overall the business would not be able to operate at its full capacity in the current circumstances was critical in all of this.

## **Think of the possible upsides**

In every crisis there comes opportunity. If we can survive, some of the measures we are being forced to adapt as businesses in the time of coronavirus may end up helping us reduce costs, be more efficient and collectively perhaps even operate in a more socially and environmentally responsible way.

For example, we have been questioning some of our infrastructure costs - do we really need so much office space and all the costs that come with it? And if we can perfect how to deliver online training effectively, this could increase our ability to scale the impact of what we do by multiple factors by allowing us to reach more people.

It's been useful to challenge our own perceptions of what the fundamentals of an operating model need to be. Once the lockdown is over, will you really need to fly to Cape Town for that meeting?

## Know that going 100% virtual is not the ideal

We have moved to being a virtual company out of necessity, but when this crisis is over - even though it could save us a fair amount of money on overheads - we will still need face to face interaction.

In our sector, as excited as we are about the possibilities of online learning, the reality is that it still has severe limitations on the African continent. It won't reach many of those who need the opportunities due to a lack of connectivity.

## Try and have some fun

It's a stressful time for everyone and maintaining a positive attitude might be a bit challenging. One of the ways we try to keep our spirits high is by creating time for the team to connect virtually outside of the work environment.

The Houseparty App is a great way to bring the team together for lighthearted banter or a game or two. Our Whatsapp has also taken a life of its own, we now not only use it to share important work-related information but everything else too, from the latest news updates to playlists and hilarious memes.

## It's okay to not be okay

Mental health of even the most stoical of people can be tested. Luckily there are now a number of affordable mental health service providers who have gone virtual making mental health care much more accessible during the Lockdown period. We signed up with [icas.co.za](https://www.icas.co.za) or a package of support for our teams at a very affordable cost, where people can access free crisis counselling and other advisory support.

But outside of that, taking an understanding, human-centred approach, that acknowledges that family and security need to come first, may help reduce your teams' anxiety levels.

## ABOUT GAVIN WEALE

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