

Changing Leadership and Culture through Digital Technology at Snowpeak in Japan during the Covid-19 Global Pandemic

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Abstract

This main intent of this research is to illustrate how Snow Peak, a global outdoors retailer headquartered in Japan, utilized modern technology to revamp people operations, culture and leadership during the Covid-19 global pandemic.

It also provides insights into how traditional organizations can employ agile practices and other advanced people operations and communications initiatives to activate inclusion and provide opportunities for organizational transformation and business growth.

The researchers analyzed multiple factors of impact which influenced culture, legacy business practices, work arrangements and digital technology adoption leading to the creation of a modern business architecture and organizational resilience, with a new, inclusive and people-focused style of leadership, needed to operate business through challenging times and unforeseen circumstances.

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1. Introduction

Snow Peak is a high-end hiking and camping equipment manufacturer in Japan. It was founded in 1958 by Yukio Yamai in Sanjo City, Niigata Prefecture, Japan, as a local incubator under the name Yamai shōten (山井商店). The company started creating outdoor equipment, such as crampons and pitons, made of titanium and inox steel. In 1963, the company was trademarked while

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establishing the brand name of *Snow Peak*, in vision of Mount Tanigawa, a local destination popular with Japanese mountaineers. Fans refer to it as *SnowPi*, for short. Along with outdoor equipment, the company also commercializes under the Giga Power (ギガパワー) brand isobutane fuel.

The *Jūbako* (住箱) prefabricated portable home, designed by Snow Peak in collaboration with Kuma Kengo, won the Japan Institute of Design Promotion's Good Design Award in 2017 and contributed to strengthening the firm's reputation globally. In 2019, the Snow Peak president Tai Yamai moved to the United States, just as the global Covid-19 pandemic was about to start spreading. The rapid development of the geopolitical transformations inflicted by the pandemic indicated that urgent change was needed and the company had to be managed in a totally new manner.

On the 26th of February 2020, it was announced that Tai Yamai would assume the position of chairman with representation rights, while his eldest daughter, Risa Yamai, would become the president of the firm, in an attempt to bring new vision and leadership to the firm. On 23 July 2020, the experiential complex facility "Snow Peak LAND STATION HAKUBA" fully opened in Hakuba Village, Nagano Prefecture, as Japan was imposing various mobility restrictions throughout the country, corporations were exploring remote work options, and many employees were choosing to live and work online from outside the main urban areas of the country. *Workation* (abbreviation of "working vacation") is a term which was created at this time in Japan to refer to the arrangements that people were making to take advantage of this opportunity to work from an unconventional set up conducive to vacation, rather than the traditional brick and mortar office space. The Covid-19 pandemic brought an unexpected increase in sales for the company, as more and more people and organizations were becoming accustomed to remote work situations and *Jubako* prefabricated homes became popular.

Snow Peak marketers anticipated this upcoming trend, and they worked together with the local government and with other hospitality and housing providers (such as Japan Airlines, Mitsubishi Real Estate, Japan Railway System, etc.) to create *workation* travel packages aimed at digital nomads and any other corporate employee working under remote work and social distancing arrangements at the outbreak of the global Covid-19 pandemic. These initiatives attracted not only the attention of individual corporate employees, but also the attention of talent operators and organizational developers throughout the country, as the Covid-19 pandemic-related restrictions were rapidly becoming stricter and more complex.

While social distancing and frequent handwashing seemed to be the only effective measures for staying away from the COVID-19 infection until a vaccine was going to be produced, many organizations were rapidly realizing that social distancing was no longer just an option – it was becoming a definite obligation for everyone. Most Japanese companies had a shy 5% remote work option

implementation ratio outside of Tokyo and nearly 20% within metropolitan Tokyo before the spread in the COVID-19 in early 2020. As mass congregations were no longer permitted throughout the country, many of these companies had no choice but to implement remote working and to introduce digital collaboration platforms at a rapid pace. As a result, the lifestyle and working styles of many people in Japan would be thoroughly transformed.

In recent years, the company has further diversified its business portfolio with camping office equipment, mixed-use resort business, outdoor training, and promoting workations and it became well known in Japan and the North America for its outdoors life-style products.

2. Literature Review and Participatory Observations

2.1 Remote Work Arrangements during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Japan

During the Covid-19 global pandemic, businesses in Japan were struggling to cope with an array of remote work practices, which emerged rapidly during this period (Masuda, 2021). The need for transforming people operations and installing a modern culture of collaboration, inclusion and innovation had been imminent for decades, but it had not been urgent enough for corporates to commit serious investments in modern technology and re-vamping people operations (Damaschin et al, 2019).

Snow Peak opened an outdoor site at its global headquarters facilities on the hills of Sanjo city, providing visitors access to multiple facilities, such as outdoor hot springs, baths, camping and recreation facilities, which were used by outdoors activity lovers, family outings and digital nomads from urban areas working under remote work arrangements (Masuda, 2021).

Remote work-related problems were rapidly becoming an issue of national concern, as many Japanese homes do not have enough space to provide all family members with the comfort and privacy necessary for conducting remote work in a psychologically safe manner (Takahashi et al, 2023).

2.2 Snow Peak Business Evolution

Discontent with the climbing gear of the time, the first president Yukio Yamai (1931-1992) developed original climbing and fishing gear, leading to the expansion of the business as an outdoor leisure manufacturer and handed it over to his daughter at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic was about to bring a lot of organizational and operational changes to corporate Japan.

Product manufacturing has a long tradition in rural Japan (Imai, 2018) and Snow Peak also follows this pattern. Handing over businesses from one generation to another, while observing local rituals, is traditional for Japanese organizations

(Watahiki et al., 2024). The procedures for organizational events may be slightly different from one region to another, but they may also change in case a Buddhist altar exists within the premises of the company or not (Kosei et al., 2024). Working for a local business with strong reputation leads to enhanced employee happiness in certain companies in Japan (Kaneko et al., 2021).

Tradition plays a major role in Japanese corporate culture and re-shaping strategy and business operations in sudden manner is usually met with a good amount of organizational resistance (Profiroiu et al., 2020). Employees in Japanese organizations are highly observant of leadership directions, and they are sensitive to stimuli indicating unforeseen change and uncharted territories (Popa et al., 2020). Whenever technology is the main driver of change, the agility of the business will be tested, as people need to be re-skilled, cross-skilled and up-skilled rapidly in order to be prepared for adopting and being able to successfully utilize data and modern technology (Tajiri et al., 2020).

In view of these traditional managerial aspects, but also pressed to immediate action as the global Covid-19 pandemic was beginning to impact Japan, Snow Peak undertook a rapid shift in work practices imposed by the strict travel and congregation restrictions in Japan – remote working, cognitive technology adoption and digitalization had penetrated the organizational fabric in just a matter of months, making way for enhanced dynamism, agile practice implementation and cross-divisional collaboration.

3. Methodology

The quantitative aspect of this research emerged through a combination of 268 employee surveys, while the qualitative side of the research was composed of 8 individual interviews with Snow Peak managers and executive directors (interviews which were carried out in due cadence over a period of 5 months in 3 different regions of business operations – Niigata, Sanjo and Hakuba), and 5 focus group discussions with Snow Peak craftsmen, product designers and business planners (these focus group discussions were carried out over a period of 6 months in 2 regions of business operations – Niigata and Hakuba).

The authors of this research also utilized participatory observation as a practice of research, as they were involved in various business transformation initiatives as in-house business consultants. They worked closely with Snow Peak talent operations and organizational engineers to explore some most significant initiatives the business was undergoing as a result of the Covid-19 related restrictions and monitored major changes in user behavior (employees and customers), as well as the impact on the organization, at multiple layers, as part of an on-going business transformation engagement.

The initial assumptions were the following:

- 1) People would have more time as the result of remote working arrangements.

As a result of implementing remote work and flexible work initiatives, employees would most likely have more individual time, as commuting time was no longer required. The so-called "Loyalty Overtime" (the tendency to conduct overtime work simply because everyone else in the team was doing so) would no longer be necessary, as the employees would not be able to see whether the manager (or other team members) were still working for the day or not. Meetings would be shorter (in remote meetings with limited communication options, long-term meetings cannot be easily held and people would be tired by spending long hours in front of computer screens and mobile devices).

- 2) People would be able to focus better on work efficiency and individual tasks

When co-sharing working space, individuals are likely to speak to each other and deviate conversations from the main tasks of work and, therefore, loose focus. On the opposite, though, working in isolation under remote and flexible work arrangements, the employees would be better positioned to focus in individual tasks, optimize resources and create enhanced work efficiency.

- 3) Evaluation criteria would change from process to output.
- 4) Assessors (people managers, talent operators, third-party evaluators, etc.) would no longer evaluate the number of hours worked, but the quality of work and the business and social impact of the work completed.
- 5) Talent management would become easier as a result of highly visualized data related to output.

Work tasks would be shorter and easier to visualize, monitor and support.

- 6) Administrative work would become simpler

Printed materials, paper documents, paper files, organizational and individual seals would no longer be required. Electronic signatures would replace the traditional seal. Various applications, internal transactions and approval processes would be simplified and digitalized, with fewer steps in the process and shorter procedures. Multiple approval layers might no longer be necessary.

4. Results and Discussion

Although all the initial assumptions were verified and endorsed by the employee population interviewed, there were still some aspects which necessitated further managerial attention and interventions, as the business was getting ready for shifting operations to digital engagements and agile practices. Some of the initial managerial concerns were:

- 1) Work impact and work quality evaluations would put ambitious and hard-working employees at a disadvantage (the manager would no longer be able to observe directly how 'hard' someone had actually worked).
- 2) Difficulty of sharing physical space, atmosphere and hands-on experience (organizations cherishing in-person teamwork, high personal engagement and participation in corporate activities would lose grasp of employee

behavior, while strong corporate legacy traditions, such as "eating together from the same pot" (Katayama, 2008) would disappear, causing corporate culture to suffer) due to the adoption and heavy utilization of digital technologies.

Having the abovementioned concerns in view, the Snow Peak HR team worked across the business with multiple stakeholders and people managers to determine what else was needed to strengthen culture and enhance remote work technology adoption. They concluded that remote working arrangements were not the only business issue that the company needed to address immediately. As people were spending increasing amounts of time working from home or from alternative locations, the introduction and the immediate adoption of digital technologies which were needed for remote collaboration were rapidly becoming priorities for everyone at Snow Peak. Digital transformation initiatives had been explored and discussed in the past on numerous occasions, but the activation of these initiatives had been postponed, either due to lack of sufficient funds allocated to digitalization or simply due to their low priority on the executive agenda. Now, more than ever, transforming internal operations and moving from a heavy paper-based organization to a totally digital and bionic enterprise seemed to be the next right thing to do across the whole business.

As a first step, talent operators sat down with system engineers and other IT specialists, forming a agile squad charged with the mission of determining which videoconferencing platform would be chosen for internal virtual meetings, as coming to the office in person was no longer an option. After a long series of discussion and debates on whether Zoom or Microsoft Teams should be chosen over locally developed platforms, the squad concluded to introduce both Zoom and Teams for the beginning, although concerns had been raised by the Compliance and Legal departments regarding security issues related to utilizing non-Japanese platforms for work. Before long, Zoom emerged as the preferred platform of utilization, as it offered easy-to-use functions, such as breakout sessions and material sharing, as well as the option to record meetings and share the recordings later with team members who could not participate at a certain event.

Moving forward, multiple squads were formed, each being charged with clear missions, ranging from exploring other digital tools and platforms to be utilized for internal collaboration, learning and talent management, to researching emerging business needs and developing new products, solutions and business models to address those needs locally withing Japan and overseas.

The recently introduced technologies enabled everyone at Snow Peak to collaborate better and faster across multiple business units, to learn and to acquire new skills, competencies and certifications online and to reach out to remote teams operating overseas in order to discuss and prototype emerging business ideas and product concepts. Working across business silos and geographical restrictions had become so normal by the end of 2020, that learning English and trying to communicate with colleagues working overseas had become a favorite pastime at Snow Peak.

Thus, Snow Peak product engineers based in Japan soon realized that the Covid-19 related remote working constrictions were impacting customers in a similar manner overseas and, throughout many discussions with overseas marketing and distribution partners, consensus was reached to focus on the development of new outdoors products, which would be used not only by families during camping trips or outdoors events, but also by remote workers. The series of new products created and designed by multi-national teams working on collaborative platforms soon became popular both in Japan and overseas.

In the meantime, the talent operations squad was focused mainly on reskilling, upskilling and cross-skilling the talent population in Japan with a whole array of new digital skills and competencies. Internal training had all shifted from classroom-style, in-person training sessions, to web-based training seminars, workshops and coaching sessions. Mural emerged as a preferred platform for on-line drawing and co-creation, as multiple users could connect from diverse locations and collaborate using digital “post-it” notes or writing together on the same digital canvas. While other businesses were still struggling to adopt cognitive and biometric technology and they were experiencing Artificial Intelligence (AI) anxiety, Snow Peak talent operators were already utilizing various forms of AI and automation for managerial processes, ranging from talent acquisition to monitoring, recognizing and rewarding employees for their achievements.

One of the main reasons for this speedy integration of deep tech tools at Snow Peak was the early timing of adoption, which did not confer employees too much time to worry about the possibility of failure in adoption. Rather, Snow Peak employees had started exploring and utilizing emerging cognitive technologies on their own in daily business practices, working closely with technology vendors and developers to make the adjustments necessary for their business.

By early 2021, Snow Peak had already shifted paper-based time management and employee information updating processes to Workday. Everything that used to be done either on paper or on Excel, requiring multiple supervision and approval layers, was now done directly into an on-line system. The introduction of every new application and digital platform was accompanied by hours of on-line training. In February 2022, the Learning and Development team had tripled from the previous year, as people from all business units were rapidly cross-skilling and were adding training and coaching functions to their daily jobs. Having dual positions internally at Snow Peak was not a new practice, but it had become a highly popular one since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, as many employees were trying to acquire new skills and experience by working across departments and business functions.

The practice of having a dual career and the convenience of being able to work remotely on-line through multiple digital platforms led Snow Peak talent operators to having to make another difficult decision: should external work also be allowed and encouraged? Although the labor law in Japan does not prohibit employees to have a secondary job, many businesses have been discouraging their

employees from doing so, some even making sure that their employees do not engage in outside work and imposing restrictions regarding alternative employment.

At Snow Peak, working outside the company had not been restricted in any manner, as many employees were also helping out on their family farm work during weekends, but it had not been promoted either. The successful adoption of digital technology and the transition to agile work practices had freed up a lot of employee time and had cleared away numerous work-related inefficiencies. It had become obvious that the Snow Peak employees had not only acquired valuable digital skills during the early stages of the pandemic, but they also had the time to use them now for multiple purposes, both internally and externally. Organizational developers were arguing that working elsewhere could have multiple benefits, such as creating new connections, new business opportunities, learning other skills and having access to other types of resources. As a result, the company agreed to allow alternative employment, with certain limitations related to working for competitors or the amount of time which could be used annually working elsewhere.

In mid-2021, the Snow Peak executives gathered together to analyze the impact of remote work arrangements and the adoption of cognitive technology, based on the assumptions from the previous year.

It was observed that:

- 1) People had more time and meetings had become significantly shorter
- 2) People were able to better focus individual tasks and to invest more into developing new skills and capabilities
- 3) Evaluation criteria had changed from process to output. Assessments were no longer carried out only one way, from top to bottom, but also from bottom to top and laterally as well. Upwards feedback and peer feedback had recently been introduced as functions of the Workday platform.
- 4) Talent management had become easier and multiple applications and digital platforms were utilized to visualize, monitor and support talent management and development
- 5) Administrative work had become simpler, as most people processed were carried on digitally

The initial managerial concerns had not yet completely disappeared, though.

- 1) Upward feedback brought about an unexpected wave of managerial populism as employees were now having the option to express their feelings directly and to offer feedback to their managers too.
- 2) More and more people would choose not to turn their cameras on during meetings, even when they were actively speaking.
- 3) Engagement and firm loyalty were at an increased risk, as many people were working elsewhere during their free time and were, therefore, having multiple responsibilities.

An employee survey carried out during the summer of 2021, though, indicated that 88% of the employees surveyed were still looking forward to coming

to office, while only 21% indicated that they wanted to work in the same way and format as they had done in the past. Employees were asking for flexibility around not only where they could work (remote, office, hybrid, etc.), but also around when they could work (morning time, evening time, flex time, etc.). The traditional 9:00 to 17:00 working schedule was no longer relevant, as many people would work early morning hours to adjust to North American time differences, while others were working late in the evening, after children had already gone to bed.

Employing cognitive technology for talent operations and internal transactions, though, enabled everyone to enhance work efficiency, productivity and to make most of their working time. Robotic Process Automation (RPA) and AI assistants were introduced utilizing Microsoft Azure Open AI service, enabling employees to enhance work productivity by accelerating the completion of tasks, such as drafting emails, collecting information and crafting proposals for internal discussions and for external interactions. From this respect, employing cognitive technology seemed also to be a more viable transformation option than bringing digital talent from overseas, as Japanese immigration regulations were making international relocations practically impossible.

Working totally from home is not a viable solution for everyone either. Married couples would frequently have to be on work calls simultaneously, while children had to connect on-line for school classes too. Therefore, many employees were requesting permission to utilize corporate premises to set up their own working tents, while socially distancing themselves from others. This new practice of working from a tent seemed to be predestined for Snow Peak – one of the largest manufacturers of outdoors equipment in Japan.

5. Conclusions

Although transforming legacy business in Japan to modern operations and structures, making the move from analog to digital was initially hard to implement, as business operations were still functional, lack of digital skills and relevant talent were predominant on the market and digital transformations were not considered high priorities and business traditions and norms (such as using physical seals, stamps, paper, etc.) were well anchored in the Japanese culture. As part of the case study process, the following conclusions emerged:

1) Digital transformation initiatives were rarely well timed and orchestrated across the business. Rather, they were randomly introduced and prototyped at various parts of the organization, with gradual extensions across the business, as was deemed necessary by the broader business.

2) The lack of digital skills and digital talent locally on the market in Japan contributed to significant delays in the implementation of digital transformation initiatives. Initiatives such as hiring digital talent overseas and working with digital nomads were hard to implement due to strict immigration rules and lack of experience of working with external talent.

3) The Covid-19 pandemic was a time when digital transformation initiatives, remote work arrangements, agile practices and cognitive technology adoption happened in an accelerated manner, due to the series of social distancing requirements and the reduction of non-value-added activities, such as commuting to work, service-overtime work and engagement in unnecessary and undesired corporate activities and events.

4) Business in Japan chose to utilize the time and money saved by commute reductions and facility utilization to invest in reskilling, up-skilling and cross-skilling their talent pools with a series of emergent digital skills, to adopt modern collaborative and agile work practices and to invest heavily in cognitive technologies. The adoption of these practices and technologies was conducted randomly, with wide disparities from one region to another, from one industry to another (IT firms being faster than anyone else at adopting these changes), from one company to another, from one team to another and from one individual to another. Individuals and teams with a higher sense of emergency, stronger intellectual curiosity and higher inclination to learning and to adopting a growth mindset were faster and more successful in learning and applying new skills and technologies in their daily work.

5) The adoption of digital structures, agile work practices and cognitive technologies in corporate Japan led to enhanced cross-unit, cross-company and cross-industrial collaborations, timely operations, stronger employee engagement and accelerated innovation, in terms of products, services and business models.

The individual interviews have, thus, illustrated, that cognitive technology adoption in Japan was conducted in an orchestrated manner, based on need and business requirements, and strongly accelerated during the Covid-19 global pandemic, when businesses had to make space for digital collaboration and provide employees the opportunity to work and create value in virtual spaces and remote locations. This remote collaboration situation led to another imminent business requirement: reskilling, upskilling and cross-skilling employees with a set of emerging digital skills and collaborative mindsets and work attitudes.

Legacy employees who had been hired either by technology skills or humanities aptitudes had to be immediately cross-skilled to cope with emerging business needs and new, digital requirements, of the modern, on-line working arrangements. Employees with engineering backgrounds had to rapidly adopt and utilize Emotional Intelligence aptitudes and behaviors, while humanities skilled employees had to learn how to utilize digital and cognitive technology and how to collaborate with colleagues and business partners across the value chain in completely virtual spaces.

Traditional Human Resources operations which, according to business customs and cultural traditions used to be carried with utmost care and attention to detail in-person, had now to be carried on-line, with just as much attention to detail and emerging business customs relevant to new and, to many, intriguing rites of passage – digital formalities: emails had to be written in a certain manner, according to emerging digital curtesy, specific to the Japanese business

environment, while virtual Zoom meetings had to be carried out in a culturally intelligent manner as well. One interesting aspect to observe here is that rapid digitalization and virtual communication did not wipe out cultural sensitivities, and the traditional preference for detail observation and individual respect. The human was constantly at the center (user centricity) of every single digital transformation in Japan and the user experience (UX) was at the core of talent operations and marketing initiatives, in terms of emerging Employee Experience and Customer Experience initiatives.

The talent operators at Snow Peak observed multiple positive behavioral transformations related to digital technology utilization within their employee population. Most notably, 8 of the managers interviewed indicated observations on less commuting time, proactive and timely collaboration across business units, shorter and more effective meetings (up to maximum 30 minutes; previously, meetings could last for hours), no need to participate in optional corporate events, such as drinking parties, bonding events and corporate outings, an increased desire to learn and acquire new skills and capabilities on-line, enhanced employment engagement and a strong desire to revise and update the legacy Employee Value Proposition (EVP).

On the downside, though, digital fatigue and remote-work related family issues were among the primary concerns. Work-family conflict would also be the main reason of stress for working mothers nationally in Japan. At Snow Peak, though, 68% of the employee population were working mothers in 2023, and 83% of the population interviewed indicated that they could manage both work engagements and family commitments.

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