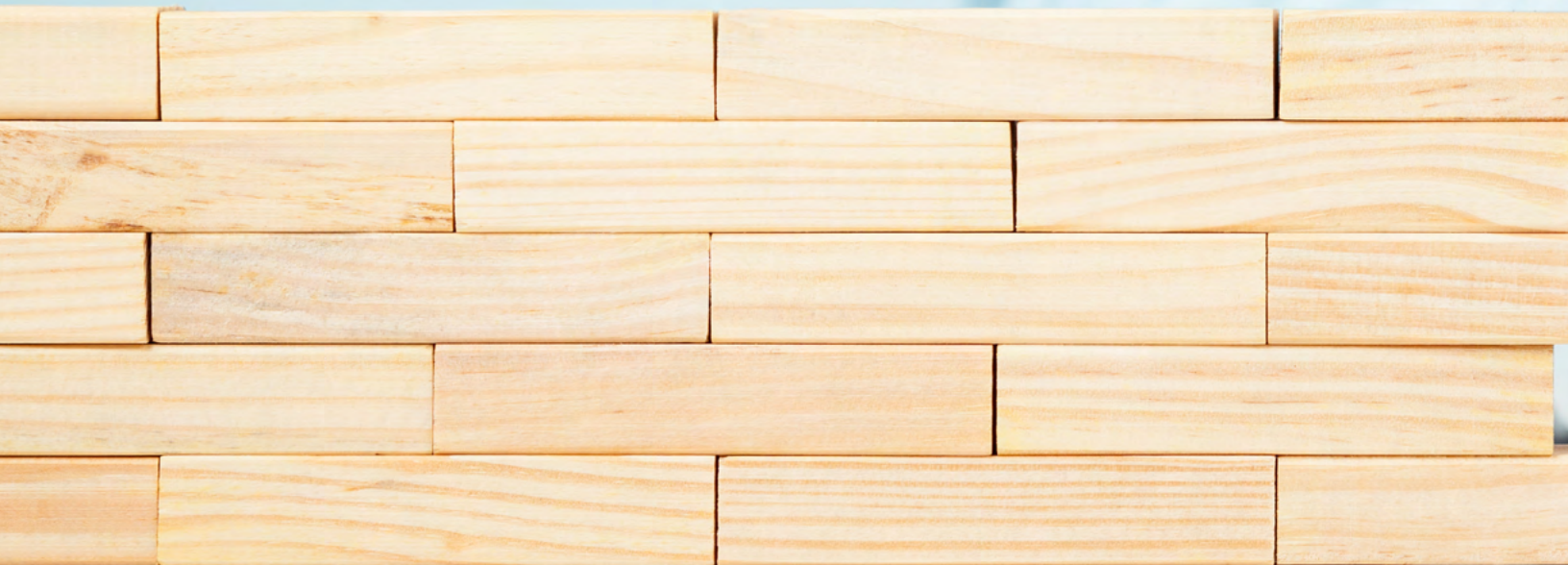




REFLECTION AND RECALIBRATION

Work in the time of COVID:

learning from
today to prepare
for tomorrow







With the virus projected to linger in some incarnation for years to come, the reality is we may never be able to recoup pre-COVID 'normalcy'. These will be our future's formative years.

A year and a half ago, few could have foreseen that a localised outbreak of an unknown virus in one corner of the world would snowball into a raging global pandemic within weeks. Today, the deadly SARS-CoV-2 virus continues to travel, infect and kill, ravaging lives and livelihoods in equal measure. It has already crippled economic sectors and forced radical changes to the way we work, study, conduct business and interact socially. With the virus projected to linger in some incarnation for years to come, the reality is we may never be able to recoup pre-COVID 'normalcy'. These will be our future's formative years.

Faced with that prospect, companies have had to think hard about growth and survival strategies. Extrapolating from what we see today, NGC has

asked: what will the future look like for our business and employees? How can we prepare for whatever 'normal' materialises when the dust settles?

THE FUTURE OF WORK

The role of technology

Across the world, COVID-19 has accelerated the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and there is no turning back. Technologies and digital applications that enabled businesses to keep operations going during the pandemic will move from being innovative stopgaps to baseline resources. This means that companies still behind the curve in terms of digitisation risk becoming uncompetitive or even obsolete if they do not adapt. It also means that the bar of excellence now sits



higher, and companies wanting to distinguish themselves must do more.

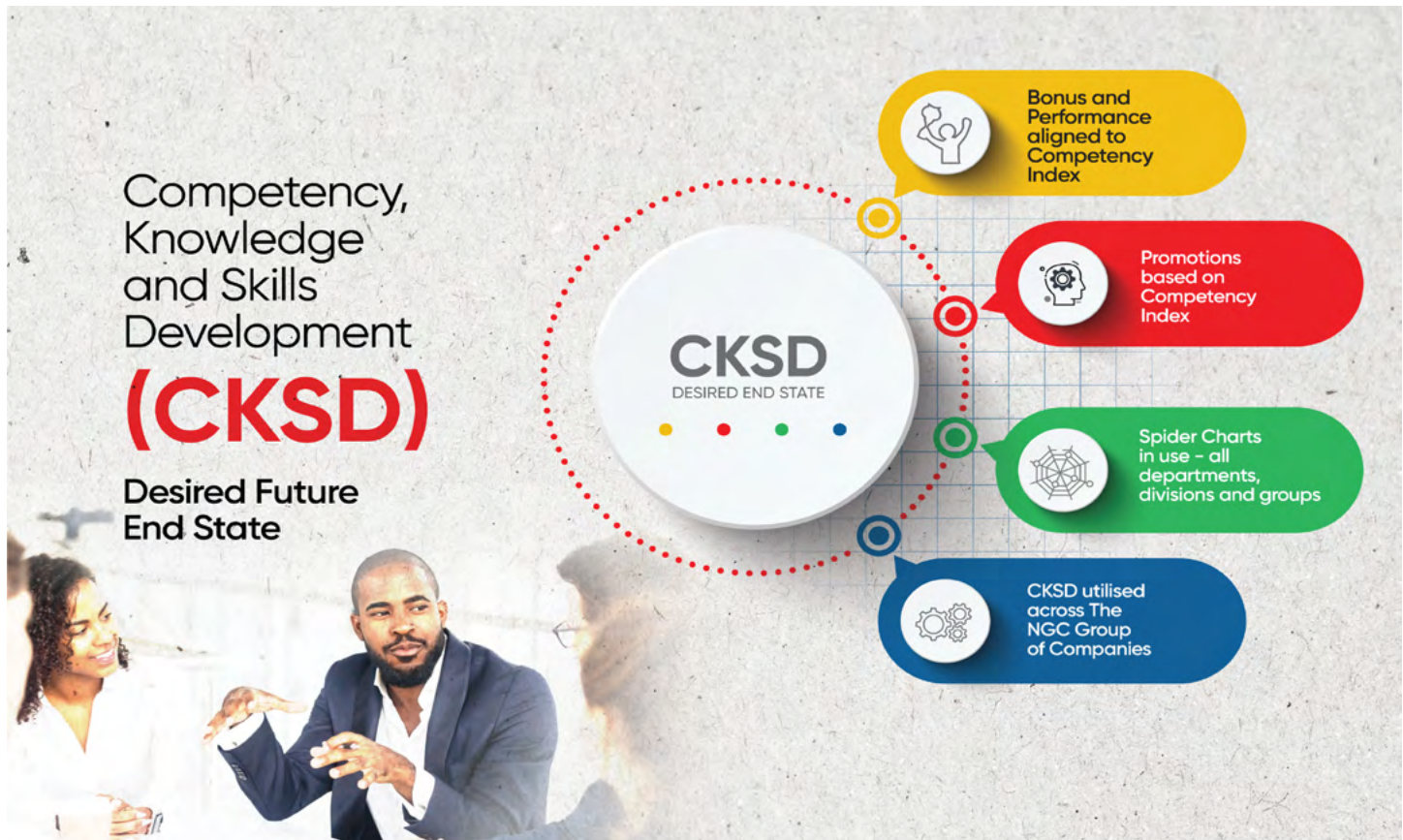
Before the onset of COVID-19, NGC and its subsidiaries formalised a comprehensive Technology Strategy, which maps technology milestones for the organisation to achieve on its way to becoming a global energy brand. Some of those milestones — such as the introduction of drones and extended reality technology — had already been crossed prior to 2020. Deployment of other tools was accelerated during the pandemic, including smart forms and data dashboards, digital project and portfolio management, and platforms for electronic invoicing and tendering.

However, while the Company was able to leverage technology to navigate change over the past year, the rapidity of that change was alarming. It highlighted the need to expedite rollout of other key items on the technology roadmap — ‘nice-to-haves’ in today’s industry — which could become vital to survival tomorrow. For example, another paradigm-shifting event could necessitate use of the industrial Internet of Things, robotics, 3D printing of parts and spares, cryptocurrency or even artificial intelligence applications to maintain competitiveness. Anticipatory investment can provide a buffer against such disruption.

NGC and its subsidiaries are accordingly cementing technology as a cornerstone of growth strategy. This not only means procuring the hardware and software tools to digitise functions, data and workflows, but investing in the training of employees to leverage those tools for maximum benefit and productivity. Organisational culture is also being adjusted to encourage their use, especially where technologies disrupt ‘comfortable’ tools and systems of work.

Evolving risk landscape

At the same time, the level of integration with technology should not be so high that a technology-based crisis event compromises essential services or assets (physical or digital).



NGC'S CKSD INITIATIVE IS PLAYING AN INTEGRAL ROLE IN THE COMPANY'S HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

According to the World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Risks Report 2021, technology-related risk is forecast to become a critical threat to the world within the next five (5) years.¹

This is where scenario modelling and business continuity planning become especially important. As the world moves forward from COVID-19, new risks can emerge that could destabilise business sectors and even society — for example, a major cybersecurity incident or crippling telecommunications failure. It is critical that companies study the risk landscape and implement the necessary barriers to protect against possible and probable threats.

NGC and its member companies have an active Business Continuity

¹ <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-risks-report-2021>

Planning (BCP) team that continues to meet weekly to assess and address risks and imminent threats. This team has been instrumental in manoeuvring the business through the pandemic and its work will remain critical to future-proofing the organisation.

Human resource development

One of the risks that companies will have to confront is the obsolescence of skillsets within the workforce, particularly as more functions are digitised. Adapting to change during the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed functions in all businesses that could soon become obsolete or redundant, because companies realised they can survive without them.

Investment in upskilling and retooling employees will therefore be imperative. Deloitte reports that the half-life of a learned business

competency has fallen below five (5) years,² meaning constant training will be necessary for employees to stay relevant in the evolving, increasingly automated workplace. The responsibility for continuous learning and professional development could also fall to employees themselves, as they face competition from young entrants into the workforce who are increasingly equipped with fresh and in-demand skills.

NGC is in the midst of a Competency, Knowledge and Skills Development (CKSD) exercise to map the skill profile of the organisation, to identify gaps that need to be filled. The exercise is seeking to determine where employees are falling short of skill

² <https://www2.deloitte.com/za/en/pages/human-capital/topics/future-of-work.html>

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demands, where there are hidden competencies that can be leveraged, and where new hires are needed. Upon completion, the CKSD exercise will inform a comprehensive training and recruitment strategy to assist in building a workforce that is equipped to operate in the 'new normal'.

Hybrid workplace

During the pandemic, telecommuting became normalised as companies across the world moved 'non-essential' staff into work-from-home (WFH) arrangements. The WFH scenario proved effective for many employees, but others found the experience difficult due to lack of resources or domestic matters competing for their attention.

In terms of future workforce distribution, questions around the merits of teleworking will need to be answered on an individual company basis. NGC and its subsidiaries are in the process of determining what the future of work will look like for the organisation, particularly as it relates to the location of workers, based on the pandemic experience and forecasts about what lies ahead. A survey has been issued to staff to get feedback on workplace preferences — whether people prefer working from home, the office, or a hybrid of both. This survey is expected to inform strategic planning going forward.

That said, it cannot be denied that remote working over the past year, and the migration of services across industries to digital platforms, has had a positive environmental impact.

As industrial production stalled, and demand for transportation fuel fell, the world witnessed the largest-ever decline in energy-related emissions since World War II — some 5.8% in 2020, according to the IEA.³ Impressive though this



REMOTE WORK ARRANGEMENTS PROVED SUCCESSFUL FOR MANY COMPANIES DURING THE PANDEMIC AND COULD BECOME NORMALISED IN THE FUTURE

is, the WEF posited that the 9% decline witnessed in the first *half* of 2020, during the initial phase of the pandemic, is the level that must be sustained over the next decade to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees.⁴ In this context, the future of work should not be decided on the sole basis of what is best for an organisation, but what might be necessary for the planet. NGC and its subsidiaries are leading green agenda conversations and projects, so the environmental implications of telework will be an important factor in discussions around future workforce distribution.

Safety first

Should telework become the norm, what of health and safety? HSSE protocols were integral to operating successfully during the pandemic. Even with the support of technology, work could not be delivered without people, and good health is imperative for optimal performance and productivity.

As the WFH arrangement continues for most NGC and subsidiary staff, ensuring employees have access to

ergonomic workspaces is a top priority. Homebound staff members have access to funding to purchase ergonomic office furniture, and all employees are required to routinely complete ergonomic inspections and checklists while working from home.

The dimension of mental health is also standing out on the risk radar. Anecdotal evidence across industries and countries paints a picture of an increasingly burnt out and stressed workforce, working longer hours for the same pay. Fatigue and stress can lead to errors — from minor blunders of little consequence to poor decisions with major impact — not to mention the toll they take on physical wellbeing. Going forward, HSSE will need to bring mental health to the front burner.

NGC has several channels in place to reach out to staff. The Company regularly provides business updates through employee forums and weekly newsletters, hosts 'knowledge cafes' and virtual celebrations, and gives opportunities for virtual social interaction through contests and wellness activities.

³ <https://www.iea.org/articles/global-energy-review-co2-emissions-in-2020>

⁴ <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-risks-report-2021>



REFLECTION AND RECALIBRATION

NGC has also organised several virtual information sessions with medical professionals specifically centred on health, including COVID-19 and vaccination awareness presentations.

For staff in need of more emotional support, the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) offers access to counselling services with Families In Action.

Areas of challenge

The future of work in many areas has a clear trajectory, based on successful adaptations made during the pandemic. However, there are areas that were not as successful in transitioning.

For example, NGC had several open engineering and construction projects in 2020. Restrictions on movement and commercial activities during phases of the national lockdown led to work suspension or delays on many projects. Resource mobilisation to restart work after some restrictions were eased cost additional time and money.

In addition, supply chain disruptions both locally and abroad meant raw materials and other inputs into projects became scarce or more expensive. In Trinidad and Tobago for example, when cement production was temporarily halted in May 2021, retailers began charging double the standard price for dwindling supplies of stockpiled cement.⁵ Burdened logistics services and Customs clearance bottlenecks have compounded delays in those projects relying on imported materials and inputs.

On top of these issues, force majeure contract clauses built to exempt parties from penalties due to extraordinary circumstances could in the long run increase overall project costs for the Company.

⁵ <https://newsday.co.tt/2021/05/19/trade-minister-to-investigate-rush-for-cement-price-gouging/>



MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES ARE RISING ON THE RISK RADAR AND REQUIRE HSSE ATTENTION

There are several takeaways from the experience that will need to inform project planning going forward, particularly as it relates to procurement of inputs, contingencies, and contract formulation. The deeper integration of technology into project planning and execution phases can also help buffer against disruption.

Project construction was not the only area to experience setbacks. NGC's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) portfolio comprises many initiatives whose effectiveness relies on a degree of face-to-face interaction, or which cannot be properly executed under lockdown conditions.

Some, like the NGC Bocas Lit Fest, were able to pivot to virtual platforms. Others, such as training activities for Police Youth Club members, could not migrate as successfully, due to inconsistent participant access to the requisite devices and internet connection, as well as competing demands on their time and attention.

Programmes requiring fieldwork such as NGC Right on Track could

not be facilitated at all as currently designed.

The Company therefore took the opportunity to reconsider its CSR approach. It has been working on a new strategy to address CSR partner needs in the new environment, and treat with emerging risks that could impact youth and community development in the near future. Ensuring the long-term sustainability of supported groups - particularly in the context of disruptive social and economic change - is the ultimate goal of this new approach.

A whole new world

Despite worldwide vaccination programmes currently underway, the COVID-19 pandemic rages on. With new variants emerging, there is no telling how long the virus will remain with us. The one thing we can say with certainty is that this pandemic will be remembered in history for its disruption of major organisational and behavioural patterns of human society — how we work, how we study, how we play. Where we go from here is left to be seen, but the world we build will be unmistakably shaped by our response to the SARS-CoV-2 virus. ■