# Rising to the challenge

"Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe." Abraham Lincoln

When the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic first broke out, little did we imagine the scale and pace at which it would unfold: ghost towns, empty classrooms, and abandoned workplaces painted a disturbing picture of just how vulnerable our world can be. Fear took over our daily lives and 'business as usual'. An avalanche of sensational journalism and social media fueled our concerns and angst over our health and that of our loved ones.

Facing the unexpected
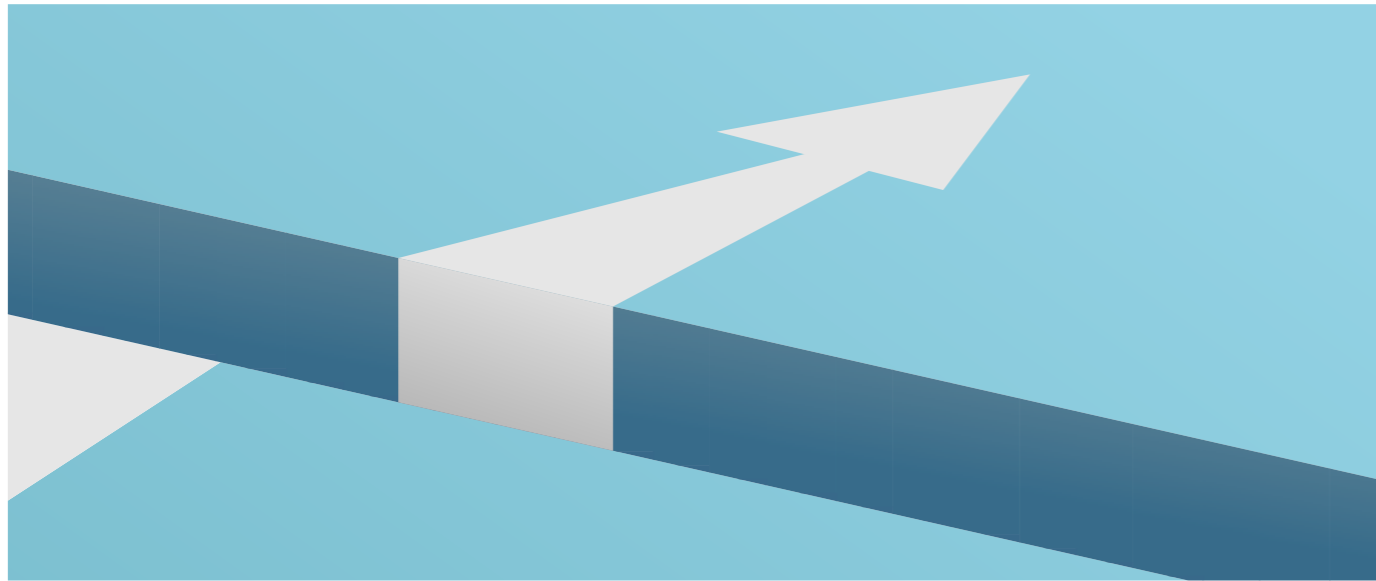
This, at a time when our Technology department at Chedid Capital was undergoing a major restructuring drive to better align itself with the company's business goals, digital strategy, and customer needs. Our focus was on implementing change management, discipline, and future-proof digital systems. In parallel, we'd placed equal weight and importance on preparing and contingency planning for emergencies and for business continuity across our territory, a volatile and uncertain MENA region. The pandemic proved to be the ultimate stress test for our readiness and resilience against the unpredictable. In this article, we highlight how Chedid Capital navigated the pandemic challenges from a technology perspective, and how Covid-19 fast-tracked tech and digital transformation, pushing us, and many companies worldwide, to adapt, innovate and differentiate.

Suddenly, things got real. 'What-if' scenarios we had been discussing and documenting in our department were unfolding at speed and at scale before our eyes. Almost overnight, our Technology team had to get acquainted, and comfortably so, at that – with the pandemic's many unknowns, adapt in real time, and carry the responsibility of work-from-home setups without compromising on our people's productivity. No customer follow-up could wait. No business opportunity could be missed. No meeting, internal or external, could be pushed or canceled. The premise was simple: no matter the obstacles, it was going to be 'business as usual' for Chedid Capital and all its subsidiaries.

One central challenge we faced was to ensure business continuity for all our entities simultaneously, and for every single employee.

This was no ordinary feat, especially within a one-week timeframe. But our team, in close collaboration with various departments, rose to the enormous challenge and showed remarkable dedication and resilience in getting things done, and getting them done on time. At the outset of the coronavirus lockdown, our procurement focused on sourcing 'work-from-home' IT – laptops and accessories – that we had to keep for emergencies; stock was very scarce due to high demand, met with limited supply on the back of East Asian computer manufacturer shutdowns, and disrupted – if not cut altogether – travel and trade routes.

Chedid Capital had been using Office 365 for some time, but Microsoft Teams was not utilized to its full potential. Our employees preferred collaborating in person or via telephone conversations. The nature of our work allowed and, often, called for it.

The pressure on the Technology team was high to make the transition to Microsoft Teams as seamless as possible. Within a few days, we had to train everyone on how to schedule, conduct, and record meetings with internal and external parties via Microsoft Teams. Suddenly, this application became the single most important tool at Chedid Capital. Between the week of March 9 and that of March 16, the usage of Microsoft Teams in our company increased by more than thirty-fold. Some of our employees, especially in trouble-laden Lebanon, secluded themselves in their hometowns in remote rural areas, where Internet connection is often slow and inconsistent – a major hurdle we had to overcome, since 100% of the work had to be virtual, and downloading large emails or joining videoconferences proved to be problematic. The team had to provide those employees with 4G broadband devices or with other tools to use their mobile devices as hotspots. Overall, these alternative solutions proved timely and effective.

Of all challenges, however, cybersecurity was by far the most significant for our group – particularly in an industry where data protection is of utmost importance. As was the case with many other companies, our Covid-19 digital transition was met with a substantial increase in email spams, phishing

attempts, and social engineering attacks. We followed the Zero Trust model, and implemented enhanced password complexity rules, a mandatory password change schedule, multi-factor authentication for all employees, and conditional access rules for systems and files, in addition to strict monitoring of risky sign-ins and email forwarding rules. Our 24/7 security information and event management (SIEM) and security operations center (SOC) provided us with insight into our security framework, allowing us to adapt and pivot our policies on the fly. In parallel, we ran frequent internal awareness campaigns on spoofing, spam, and cybersecurity to raise technical knowledge amongst our colleagues, and to allow them to rely more frequently on their judgement to identify malicious emails. The tricky part was the balancing act between our stringent security measures and employee productivity; no one likes to change passwords regularly, and no one likes to operate under that many rules and restrictions. We were able to alleviate the impact of our controls through regular communication, buy-in from top executives, and a general consensus that securing our environment was the only viable way to have everyone work from home safely.

The new normal

This pandemic has brought forth an undisputable assertion: IT infrastructure matters, and collaborative solutions we use are critical for business survival and employee productivity. As disruptive as it was, the pandemic was a catalyst for our ongoing plans to digitize and streamline our business operations. And there is no going back.

Our annual performance appraisals, historically conducted face-to-face, were automated with workflows, and operated virtually over Microsoft Teams. Quality control of cover notes and accounting closing processes of Chedid Re (our reinsurance broking arm)—a notoriously painstaking exercise—was fully digitized.

The company is also making headway into adopting digital signatures as an official way to conduct business and authenticate documents, wherever legally viable. The goal is to streamline internal processes, reduce inefficiencies, and of course, ensure a sustainable and green environment.

During the lockdown, Chedid Capital conducted its first-ever fully virtual board of directors meeting. In parallel, we ran numerous webinars and trainings every week for employees and business partners on various topics such as reinsurance fundamentals, the role of brokers in risk management, and casualty and financial lines reinsurance. By the time our employees started returning to our offices in June, we'd forgone the use of our traditional fingerprint machines to track attendance. Instead, we opted for soft punch-ins through employee mobile devices. Naturally, the response to this transition was overwhelming.

The list goes on.

In a company-wide survey conducted in April, 97% of Chedid Capital employees said that they were comfortable with the means of communication and technology provided to them while working from home. This number is a testament to the Technology team's success in ensuring a smooth and productive transition to remote working setups.
And we owed this success to our foresight, technical preparedness, contingency planning, and focused execution. Our business has never been more united and focused on what we need to do and where we need to make a difference today.

The 30,000 foot view

At a global level, Covid-19 is one of the greatest challenges the world has faced in decades. All the work that has been done-and continues to be done- at Chedid Capital is part of a macroscopic trend that centers on a simple truth:

"Technology has never been more relevant or had such a paramount role to play in every industry."

Numerous technology trends, which were already in flight during the past decade, have been fueled by the pandemic at an unprecedented rate.

- Remote working spiked during the pandemic and will continue to accelerate, with major companies worldwide shifting their paradigms to allow for flexible or even permanent work-from-home workforces. The situation has also led to massive increases in teleconferencing, online transactions, virtual events, and telemedicine, to name a few.

- Robust cybersecurity and privacy measures matter more than ever. As more companies become dependent on digital infrastructure to conduct business, the cost of system failure becomes very high, and a cyber incident or social engineering attack can be devastating. Many businesses are strengthening their security and privacy frameworks, hiring experts, and implementing security operations centers (SOC) to reduce their exposure and solidify their business continuity plans.

- Artificial intelligence, machine learning, and advanced data analytics will continue to boom post Covid-19. As interactions, communications, and transactions get performed increasingly online, datasets become more robust and allow for more intelligent data processing: detecting user patterns, predicting human behavior, recognizing images, videos, and speech, and of course, enabling intelligent chatbots, virtual assistants, and other IoT devices.

On the back of these trends, the FinTech and InsurTech industries, both of which present strong synergies with our group, are leapfrogging. In the coming years, the pace will only pick up, forcing us to adapt and innovate quicker than ever.

Imad Jabbour
Chief Technology Officer
Chedid Capital

Looking ahead

The common denominator among all these technology trends is, of course, the need for reliable connectivity and robust and secure infrastructures. Today more than ever, it is important for governments and businesses to invest in state-of-the-art technologies to support increasingly interconnected societies and smart systems. 5G, the fifth-generation wireless standard currently being deployed, promises to bring ultra-high-speed and low-latency connectivity to support a more connected world in need for mission-critical communications and vast IoT networks.

At Chedid Capital, while we uphold our continued commitment to our employees and business partners, our digital transformation, which was accelerated by the pandemic, will be our strategic arsenal to innovate, gain competitive advantage, and ultimately, survive.

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