

# Bloomberg Businessweek

## When Life Returns to Normal, Not All Tech Companies Will Thrive

Months of remote work have shown the limits of some platforms.

By  
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The past year has been grim, solitary, and deeply traumatic. For the tech industry it's been all those things, [plus hugely lucrative](#). Silicon Valley has long specialized in technologies that compete with face-to-face social interaction, and this year the competition disappeared. “The pandemic has allowed us to test hypotheses that we were considering but have never dared testing fully,” says Diego Comin, a professor of economics at Dartmouth University who studies technology adoption. “Remote learning, massive virtual conferencing, leisure that has a large digital component. Because we don’t have any other alternative now, we had to try them with a positive attitude.” The companies behind those technologies—[Zoom](#), Slack, DoorDash, Netflix, and Amazon, to name a few—have seen business go nuts amid a broader economic meltdown. But at some point, maybe even this year, things will start going back to normal. What happens then is an enormous unknown for the industry. Which

of these new tools will keep their value when human contact is no longer freighted with contagion and death? Here are a few hypotheses.

Transaction tools: Asked which pandemic-friendly technologies will prove particularly sticky, Patrick Walravens, a technology analyst at JMP Securities, mentions [DocuSign](#), the leading software company for signing electronic contracts. Then he tells a story about picking up his Jeep from the repair shop: “So you get there, and they’re all wearing masks, and there’s great signage, and they cover your car seats with plastic wrap and disinfect your car.” But just as he’s almost out the door, Walravens is handed a pen and told to sign a piece of paper. “There’s so many places where we’re still touching grubby pens and pads and contracts,” he says, with evident disgust.

A DocuSign contract merely memorializes the results of a conversation; Zoom has the much harder task of carrying the conversation itself

The rapid growth of DocuSign suggests that the coronavirus is finally undermining the wet ink signature—even Walravens’s mechanic is purportedly looking into it. But digital contracts aren’t just more sanitary than paper ones; they’re also easier to customize and transmit and store and find. Those things will continue to be true long after Covid-19.

Walravens contrasts that with videoconferencing and business communication platforms such as [Zoom](#) or Slack. We’ve learned that we can do much more on those platforms than we previously thought, but months of purely remote work have also revealed their limits: In an office, someone who doesn’t know how to do something can simply stand up, go over to a more experienced colleague, and ask them to come over and see what they’re doing wrong. It’s hard to replicate that via videoconference. [Zoom was a fast-growing platform](#) even before the pandemic, but as social distancing eases, it could lose many of its newer and less natural users, such as schools and

smaller businesses without far-flung offices. To Walravens, the relevant distinction is between transaction and dialogue. A DocuSign contract merely memorializes the results of a conversation; Zoom has the much harder task of carrying the conversation itself.

Network effects: Figma is a cloud-based design tool that replaces the balky process of sending PDFs back and forth or saving and resaving files on a shared drive. Instead, it allows everyone involved to work together in real time via a web browser on a single shared digital canvas. “The nature of multiple people working on it has made the workflow process actually better,” says Mike Volpi, a partner at Index Ventures, one of Figma’s investors.



Volpi

Photographer: Christopher Goodney/Bloomberg

To Volpi, the tool isn’t just a better way to do remote design work, it’s a better way to do design work, period. And in theory, the more people who use such tools, the more powerful they become. “There are some of these services that took advantage of the advent of Covid to kick off their own virality, no pun intended,” Volpi says. “And those will likely be less tempered by Covid being gone.”

A food delivery service such as [DoorDash](#), on the other hand, has less of this dynamic. Having more restaurants to choose from makes it more appealing to more customers, and vice versa, but at the end of the day each customer is acting alone. “It’s not like because my neighbor’s using it, I’m more likely to use it,” Volpi says.



A bike delivery person with a DoorDash bag in San Francisco.

Photographer: David Paul Morris/Bloomberg

Work, not play: There's another explanation that might affect the relative post-pandemic fates of workplace collaboration tools and food delivery apps. Comin, the economist, argues that the lessons we've learned about the power of technology differ starkly depending on whether we're talking about work or play. Before Covid there was already a significant demand for more flexible work arrangements. There wasn't, however, a lot of clamoring for Zoom happy hours or concerts that you could attend only through a laptop.

People have spent their leisure time doing those things because they had no choice. "We have experienced, overall, a decline in the quality of leisure," says Comin. He says he's been reduced to streaming movies set in faraway places to sate his wanderlust—for a taste of Bangkok, he recently sat through *The Hangover Part II*. He plans to remedy that as soon as humanly possible. "If I could travel for vacation, I would do it now, like I wouldn't even take a jacket," he says. "I would go straight to the airport."