

Dismantling vestiges of the industrial age: an interview with Tariq Rauf, founder of Qatalog

The world of work is changing, with a preference toward remote teams, asynchronous timetables, and diversity of work force over in person, timetabled, and supervised work. Technology has had a significant part to play in this development, but, Tariq Rauf, founder of work hub platform Qatalog, believes that what has been achieved by technological development is only a fraction of what it can actually achieve.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Originally training as an architect under Indian architect Charles Correa, Tariq's take on the tech landscape is rooted in a playful understanding of the practical differences between designing in the real world and designing in the digital or virtual world.

Having originally proposed, and then rescinded, an article outlining why the current metaverse would be awful to work in, I wanted to talk to Tariq about design concepts, the metaverse and where it is going wrong, and where *Qatalog is going right*.

What are the differences between design in the real world and design in the virtual world

In the physical world there is tactility and the laws of physics. You can't build things that don't follow the laws of physics, otherwise it will crash and burn. And so there is an interesting set of physical constraints that

you take into account when you build something in the physical world. Things like houses and office buildings are interesting because you take into account how many people will use the building and then you build for it.

There is a level of complexity that increases when you specialise. This applies to physical objects. When you want to design a scissor, it is different to designing a knife. You have to take into account the ergonomics of how humans hold things, how comfortable it is, etc. All the fun things that come with designing in the physical world don't exist in the virtual world.

In the virtual world it is about perception as opposed to tactility.

For example, with an airport building it's not just about how many people will be in it but about how many people will flow through it. I think Heathrow is a 60-80 million passenger per annum airport. That defines the width of a corridor within a terminal. How many people flow through a building is defined by the width of a corridor. The width of the corridor determines how many seats you need, how many checking counters, how many toilets, the air conditioning, etc.

So these physical constraints define the design. Not the other way around. Which is one of the reasons why terminals don't expand, instead you have Terminal 1, 2, 3, etc. Once you hit the ceiling of what that building can support you have to build the building again.

Physical design constraints come from the purpose of the thing and how many people are going to use the thing. You work back from these end requirements.

When you think about the virtual world none of these constraints exist. In the metaverse you can host a billion people because none of these physical and tactility constraints exist. And so it is all about perception and how comfortable you are with that perception.

So the architect in me is to design to a situation and to a context. These physical constraints, as useful as they are, are constraints.

Why do you want to impose constraints on the metaverse? That is where things get really interesting.

Think of digitally native solutions, which is something built for the digital world that can only exist in the digital world, Tinder is a classic example. There is no way you can physically meet 100 people in 10 minutes and there is no way you can meet 100 people within a 5 mile radius within 10 minutes. But you can, with the digitally native paradigm of swiping and digital interaction.

With Uber, it is physically impossible to hail a cab that is two and a half miles away. But you can through the Uber app. The technology is creating new business, and new rides, that would not exist without Uber.

The same is true with Airbnb. You can't have a friend in every city that you visit, but you can with Airbnb.

If you think about innovation in the digital space, it is people who are able to wield these new paradigms to bring net new to the world that did not exist before. The metaverse is a completely new paradigm. There are no surfaces or screens. There is no limitation to the sensory perception of sound, visual, immersion. It is innovation on many fronts.

But when you take that innovation and add a virtual chair, a virtual screen, and a virtual whiteboard, that is when the product innovation in the metaverse falls flat.

It is refreshing to hear somebody talk about how skeuomorphic design in the metaverse is reductive.

So there is a trade-off in coverage of sensory perception. Touch is not there, sense is not there, but it does go a level up from looking into a screen. You do get a more natural human muscular and immersive visual experience. It doesn't offer full coverage, but it does go one level higher than we currently have.

The reason I struggle to criticise it is because people are genuinely trying very hard to make this happen. There is a lot of effort being put in to rethink stuff and there are very few areas where genuine innovation is happening. And if you look at the incremental work that we have been doing over the past thirty to forty years in the world of work, people are trying to come up with something new and that is super, super hard.

I struggle with criticising it, it is more a discussion of whether we're thinking about this the right way. Is this really what all of this technology is going to enable, for us to sit in a virtual space with virtual avatars, is that the extent of what we can achieve in this new paradigm?

Because in the absence of the metaverse, a zoom call and a fake white board does the job. The same job, slightly less immersive, but still the same job. For example, we're having a metaverse conversation now. 10 to 15 years ago, we could have only done this over a coffee table. But we're doing this now with me in Sandwich and you in London. I shared a bunch of screens with you, we conversed, I can see you, I can talk to you,

you can see me. It is a trade-off, it's not the same thing, but it's 80% there.

However, I am someone who would always prefer to work in person. And an issue I have for remote working is that I feel it benefits senior management and disadvantages junior staff.

But how much of that is driven by the systems and the ways in which we work, ways which are vestiges of how we used to work before. Previously we were limited to the physical space we had access to, but now we have access to the entire organisation. The level of access, and the friction to that access, is the same across the organisation.

You can set up a Zoom call with someone three degrees removed from you, and it is the same friction as setting up a Zoom call with someone on your team. So you're trading off intensity of near-term immediate access, with increased coverage of access.

But it's not just having a conversation, it's about the value of the conversation.

But that's where the trade off comes in. You can discover, just like Tinder, 15 people in the virtual world and use that as a stepping stone to further in-person conversations. It's not quite as binary as people think.

What you're getting in the virtual world is coverage. You're not trapped in the virtual world. You can jump in and out of it more thoughtfully.

But this is also one of the reasons why Qatalog exists. If you can go into a colleagues work, go into their projects, and see what they are doing and with who, it gives you more context to have those virtual or in-person conversations with a lot more effect.

I'd agree that virtually it is easier to build professional relationships, but I think it makes it harder to build personal relationships.

100%, if you only use virtual tools. If you stick to 100% virtual, I think there is a significant cost to the personal relationships you can build. Even on this call, we didn't get the chance to walk into a place, get settled into things, get absorbed into the environment, and get comfortable with each other.

Going from call to call at high intensity has a cost to it. But just like with Tinder, you're making a trade off.

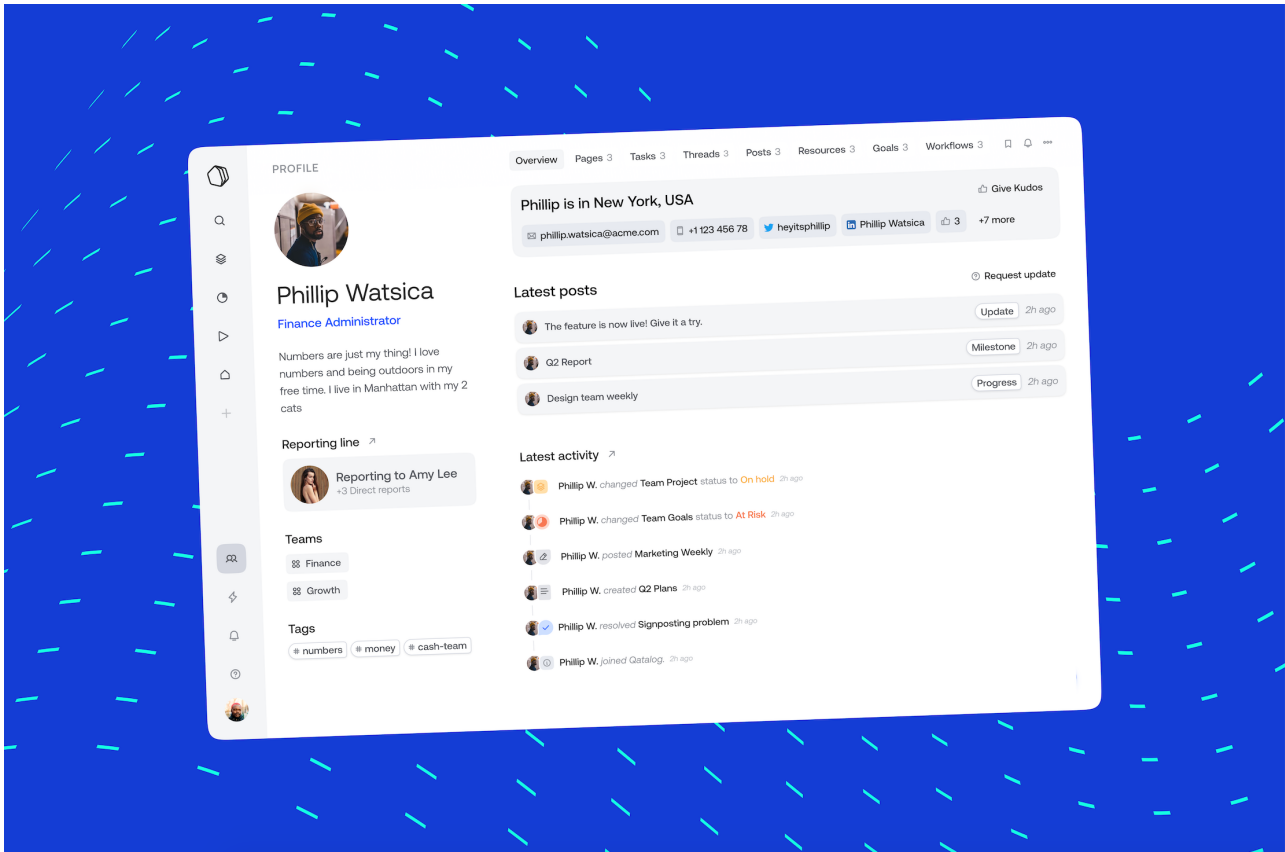
To continue the Tinder example, if people feel less fulfilled in the relationships they make through dating apps, is the trade-off worth it?

Well, we can go into the statistics of relationships and say, well, there's a 50% divorce rate in previous generations. General satisfaction in relationships as a whole is not necessarily an accurate tool.

Ultimately, as humanity expands, the way GDP grows is by increasing coverage. Increasing coverage of work, increasing coverage of industry, increasing coverage of localities you can trade with. Generally, increasing

coverage brings growth and connections. But it does have a cost. It's being conscious of that cost.

The world finds ways of making those trade-offs work. It's only when you take it as a binary thing that things get really tricky.



To move on to Qatalog: how does Qatalog simplify the modern digital working experience?

For one thing, it's built around the idea that software should be built around people and teams, not around tools. If you go to Asana, the whole tooling is built around the concept of a checklist. If you look at Notion or Google Docs, everything is built around pages. If you go to DropBox, everything is built around files. You go to Slack and everything is built

around messages.

And there is a lot of wastage around these primitives. You have to switch between all of these things to do a single thing in a single workflow.

This is a tooling first world that is built more by Western societies. We build one thing that does one thing really well, but you lose the holistic view of something.

If you look at Asian technology, it's usually quite all encompassing. WeChat does groceries, chat, finance, and more. AliBaba does a bunch of stuff. So there is a convenience and centralisation that you get by thinking about a holistic set of problems rather than just one problem.

If you look at innovation in general, you can keep making a document editor better, you can keep making a chat tool better, you can keep making a file storage mechanism better, but you start getting diminishing returns pretty quickly.

If you take away GoogleDocs, or Microsoft Word, a piece of paper and a typewriter allows you to do the same things. You can achieve everything that you just achieved with the equivalent analogue tool kit. There are conveniences that are really nice, but they're incremental over what you can achieve on a piece of paper. And that's what we've achieved with 40 years of innovation in technology. It hasn't enabled anything net new.

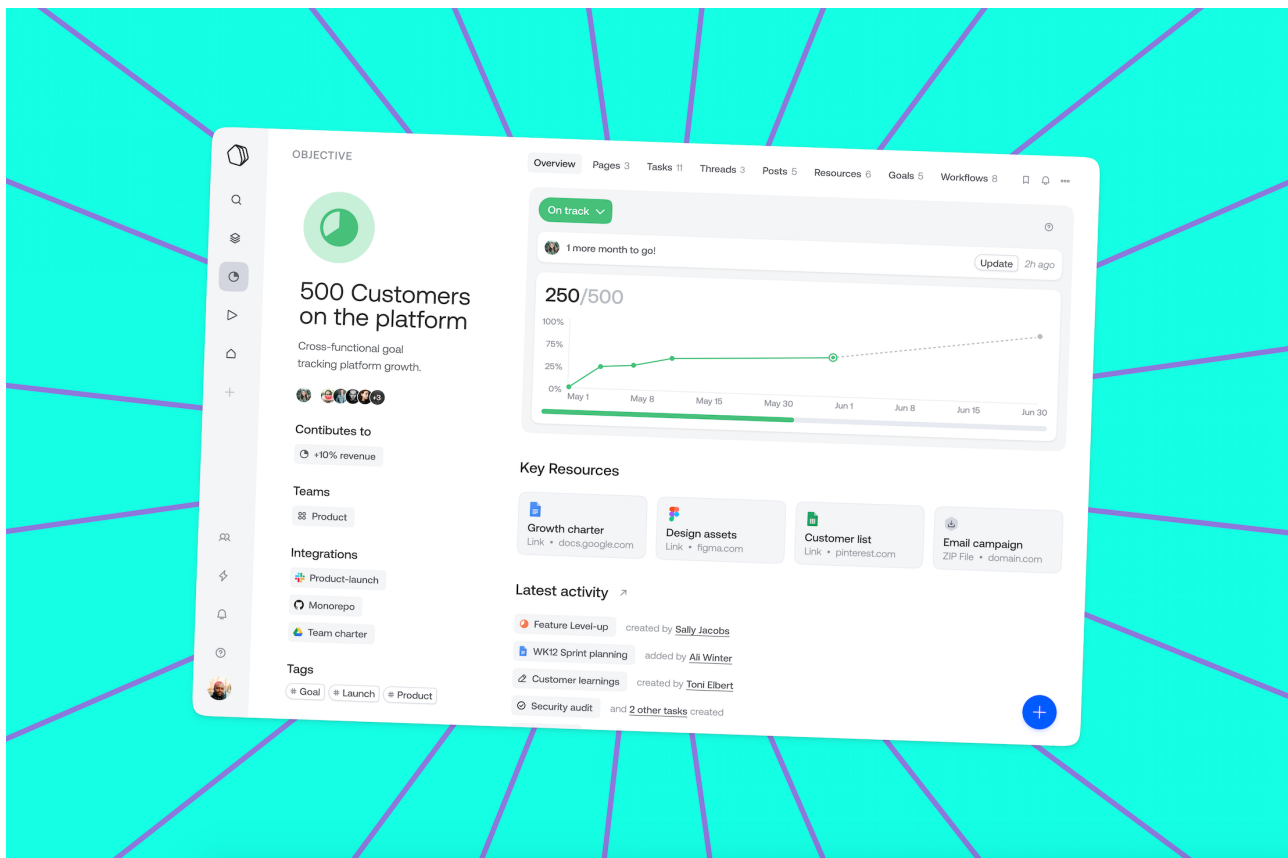
When you think of it holistically, you start to create a new paradigm. And that's why I get stuck on the skeuomorphism concept, because ultimately GoogleDocs is a skeuomorphic piece of paper. And I think we can do better than that.

How is Qatalog different from Notion?

Notion is a set of pages. You make pages, link pages to other pages, etc. It is a really good document editor. But that is only one of the things that we do. Qatalog is not built around the page paradigm, it is built around the organisation paradigm.

Who are the people in it, what are the teams in it, what are the tools in it, what are you looking to achieve? You can customise the entire organised product to fit how the organisation works.

Instead of enforcing a document model onto the organisation, we make the tool adaptable to the organisation.



How has Qatalog developed as a product over time?

We have gotten sharper. When we started we wanted to identify where the hotspots are. So we went really broad and offered as many things as we possibly could that made sense in one place, and we were able to decide which of those things were working and which were not.

We wanted to adapt our tools to our work to find a more ergonomic way of working. And that shift has happened gradually, but we have a much deeper understanding of the world of work now than we did two and a half years ago.

What has been the biggest challenge so far in Qatalog's history?

If you think about the rate of change in the world today, there are many shifts happening. How we work, organisational behaviour, expectations as to what work is. It is very difficult to navigate this world and tell the difference between structural change and transient change.

Because we built Qatalog during the pandemic, we didn't know how much of the demand we saw was real, sustainable, long term demand, and how much was transient demand.

We needed to work out what is going to be true regardless of whether people are working in the office or not. What is going to be true regardless of whether staff are in seven different time zones or not. Sticking to ground truths as to what is genuinely good for the customer, and what is genuine innovation in pushing the world of work forward, and using that as a litmus test is how we do that. But that's probably been the biggest structural challenge in building this company.



In the Qatalog Workgeist report, an emphasis is placed on the four principles of trust, flexibility, focus, and belonging. Why should these four components make up the modern work environment?

Because if you take those things away, it is a less comfortable environment. It increases stress and anxiety. Ultimately, to do good work you need to be comfortable and stress free. Because the type of work we are doing has shifted from mundane labour to creative work.

Forty or fifty years ago, the majority of the world was engaged in factory labour. Even the five day week and two day weekends are vestiges from the industrial revolution. You need five days of physical labour, two days

of rest, then five more days of physical labour.

These are vestiges from a very different world that we don't live in anymore. Because of this shift from manual labour to creative work you need flexibility, trust, belonging, and focus.

Open plan offices were built for supervision, built with adjoining desks to facilitate the easy movement of paper.

Now, we're looking to achieve deep work that requires focus. Everything we do today, knowledge work, is deep work. You're connecting dots, you're creating something new, something that a machine can't do. And that's the general trend that humanity is taking. Eventually, all manual work will be done by machines.

So what is your value? Your value comes from strategy. To do that you need quiet spaces. The work relationships need to be built on trust.

So we've got people from twenty four countries in our team of fifty. Before, it was easy to foster a sense of belonging by taking people out for drinks or lunch to generate a sense of community. But, as the diversity of the workforce increases, and the familiarity decreases, the belonging drops. If you don't feel like you belong to an organisation, your motivation to contribute to that group will decrease. So you have to actively build belonging and a sense of comfort for these people. And that's the direction of travel in the world of work.

How does an asynchronous working environment present itself in reality?

So we work back from end goals. We know what we are looking to achieve, that achievement is a goal, and that goal may have a date, and everybody self organises around that fact. There is no nine-to-five, we can't enforce that, and it isn't possible even if we tried. But we trust people to do all the things necessary to execute our plans.

People try to do as many async meetings as possible, but there is a mix of async and sync meetings in the company. Things like reviews or feedback are done as async. It's not binary, it is about finding the right balance and finding what trade offs are worthwhile.

What's in the future for Qatalog?

We're on the cusp on entirely redefining how software is built. For the last 40 years we've incrementally pushed things that are familiar to us, and made document editors better, checklists better, inch by inch, year by year. But we're at a good time, from a structural and cultural timepoint, for people to adopt new things.

There's a timing component, and we think we're at the right time to bring this to the world. And we're going to be fully changing how software for work is built.

We're building software for organisations for their use cases, as opposed to forcing tools on organisations.



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