Conquering Digital Overload

Leadership strategies that build engaging work cultures

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Engaging Work Cultures

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In memory of Richard Smith, whose untimely death during the writing of this book was a great loss to the FutureWork Forum

Preface

It was the American actor W.C. Fields who allegedly coined the phrase, 'never work with children or animals', something that has remained a sobering, all too often, truism to this day. And, of course, it depends on your gullibility, or let's just say the attraction of the new fad of *fake news*, as whether or not you believed whether he actually said that (he was rumoured, like the film-maker Sam Goldwyn, to employ an army of gag writers).

Whatever the truth, there is another truism we may want to take on board, depending on how logical, gripping, educational, entertaining or informative that you find the next hundred or so pages, that you should never, ever agree to co-write anything. I've been a solo writer for my whole life (authored 50+ books, thousands of articles studies and research papers, without resorting to a co-writer). So why, at an age when my 70th birthday beckons, should I break the rule that has kept me gainfully employed since I first wrote for my local newspaper at the tender age of 16?

To compound the felony, if you look at the cover, you'll see we have erred thrice, and opted for not one but three co-authors.

Worse still take a look at the contents pages at the front, and you'll see we have included others, Belgians, Dutch, Finns, Germans, Swiss, even the odd Brit feeling the breeze of Brexit on their creative, furrowed brows, aided by the Americans still woozy from Trump's Tweets adding to the digital din.

Yes, we have committed the ultimate publishing sin and produced a book that involves the many. All our efforts in pursuit of that elusive phrase. The all too difficult to define—the 'Digital Age'.

Like all good ideas, it started with a meeting of the FutureWork Forum. A group of 30 or so professionals who come together several times each year to discuss the emerging issues of the world of work and the workplace and how we as individuals or organizations fit into it. For the past 20 or so years, we've produced some good studies, hosted a score of conferences and offered our opinions to corporations, international organizations and governments.

This time we went a stage further and opted to 'do' a book—pooling the collective wisdom of the FutureWork Forum partners (the title we have grandly bestowed upon ourselves). At first, it was a bit of fun. It was our Austrian/American partner, Peter Vogel, whose work and worries about the increasing digital pressure in our organizations first came to our attention. From that early start, the enthusiasm of our publisher, Stephen Partridge, drove us forward and we soon had our ringmaster in place. Peter Thomson became the de facto whip-cracker-in-chief, chivvying us ever onward, cheered from the sidelines by everyone who added to the mix. Michael Devlin, Peter Thomson and I had a mad 2-day editorial scramble in Brussels to pull together strands from the Partners. This was followed by another meeting in London where we were joined by Richard Savage, Michael Staunton and Andrew Chadwick. Richard and Michael have followed up energetically to put the final manuscript to bed.

And the result? Should we have done it? Well it's not perfect, but it does achieve one great thing. It shows what a lot of trouble we are in. This Digital Age ain't that fun to be in. Yes, we would have liked to solve the problem of digital overload (provide the silver bullet), but we missed by a mile.

However, we are very proud of one thing. We took on a task that seemed crazy and we made it. We haven't found all the answers, but we have stated the case, we know where the booby traps in your business are, even if we can't seize the smoking gun. There is so much value in this book, but it needs to be read with your eyes open (and preferably your phone and email switched off). If you read it, it will reward you with an insight into the huge challenges facing the workplace and the world of work today. Read properly, it should point you to some answers. More importantly, it should act as a guide as to what to do next.

What it has proved beyond all doubt is that the power of collaboration is alive and well and the power of our FutureWork Forum colleagues' collective thoughts and actions has prevailed. And there wasn't an animal or a child in sight, either!!

I'd like to thank for their huge enthusiasm, Peter Vogel, Göran Hultin, Richard Savage, Michael Staunton, Alain Haut, Ben Emmens, Cliff Dennett Jim Ware, Susan Stucky, Matthiass Mölleney, Sunnie Groeneveld, Andrew Chadwick, Larissa Hämisegger, Michael Devlin and Peter Thomson.

I hope it makes you think, makes you act and helps you free yourself of the bits, bytes and chains from the digital slavery we have brought upon ourselves.

Thanks again to Peter Thomson and Richard Savage, two great editors, with a true sense of style.

Lymington, Hampshire   Mike Johnson
October 2017

Acknowledgements

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Editors and Contributors

About the Editors

Peter Thomson is an expert on the future of work and co-author of the best-selling book 'Future Work'. He is a director of Wisework Ltd and advises senior managers on adapting organization cultures to new ways of working. After a career in HR in the IT sector, he set up the Future Work Forum at Henley Business School and ran it for 16 years. He is a regular speaker at conferences on topics relating to the future of work and leadership. He is now a Director of FutureWork Forum Ltd and is responsible for the operations of this international association of consultants.

Mike Johnson is chairman and founder of the FutureWork Forum. He is a leading commentator, consultant and writer on the Future of Work, Talent Management, Corporate Communications and How to Work as an Independent. He is the author of 12 books on business and management issues and a regular presenter on conferences around the globe. He has written several series of world-of-work studies for both The Economist and the Financial Times, as well as over 100 global and Europe-wide studies for international corporations and institutions. He has developed a long-standing reputation as a researcher and reporter on a wide range of organizational issues.

J. Michael Devlin is a science and policy communication professional. For the past 15 years, he has led and managed teams for international research centres and consortia in the areas of agriculture, health research systems, forestry, environmental management and rural development. He is a co-founder of Sci4D—The Science for Development Platform—a new service that makes public research and programme results more accessible to decision-makers and investors, and offers synthesis and capacity building services. This initiative aims to make all 'public goods' research available in a standard format—to open this hidden knowledge to the world.

Contributors

Andrew Chadwick is a London-based architect and a global pioneer of the use of CAD in architecture. He invented the Organizational SpaceTime Modelling technique for the establishment and manipulation of space requirements. He applied his SpaceTime approach to a pilot scheme for the then Andersen Consulting in London, arguably the world's first working virtual office. As a result, he moved Accenture into the most prestigious building on the Champs Elysees in Paris creating the first truly working non-territorial office in the world. Latterly, he designed a 1000-person office in India without aircon using passive design principles. He believes the combination of SpaceTime and Passive Design is the way forward for our world's built environment.

Cliff Dennett is Head of Business Development for Innovation Birmingham, the UK's largest campus dedicated to digital entrepreneurs and SMEs. He therefore spends his time mentoring many digital start-up and growth business leadership teams. He specializes in building new revenue streams 'from the ground up'. Previously, as founding CEO of start-up, Soshi Games, Cliff spent over 5 years building a digital music-games business, raising £1.4 m investment and completing deals with some of the biggest rock bands on the planet. He has extensive experience in corporates and SMEs, having worked in sales, strategy and operations for companies including Orange, Hewlett Packard and AT&T. Cliff has spoken around the world on innovation and entrepreneurship.

Ben Emmens is a senior consultant with more than 15 years international experience in leadership, management and consulting. He has particular expertise in Human Resources Management and Organization Development in the non-profit sector where he has consulted, taught and written on organizational strategy, governance, leadership development, capacity assessment and development and a wide range of people management issues. He has worked in more than 40 countries around the world, for well-known non-profits such as UNICEF, Save the Children, Oxfam, Action Aid, the Scouts and the International Rescue Committee. His book 'Conscious Collaboration' was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2016.

Sunnie Groeneveld is a Managing Partner of Inspire 925, a consulting firm that helps companies increase employee engagement, collaboration and innovation through digital solutions. She also co-founded Lunch-Lottery.com and has been selected by the leading Swiss business newspaper Handelszeitung for their 'Top 50 Who is Who in Digital Switzerland'. She wrote the book 'Inspired at Work' in 2014 and is a regular contributor to HR Today and The Huffington Post. She holds an Economics degree from Yale University and is a member of the European Digital Leaders Network established by the World Economic Forum.

Larissa Hämisegger followed her business studies with work as an organizational developer in different start-ups and small businesses, developing the business, the organizational culture and the employer brand by working on strategy, processes and people development. She then founded UNUMONDO, a language coaching and integration service, where internationals learn the local language applied in real life with a local instead of in the classroom with books. She is fluent in five languages herself and understands a couple more. Larissa is also a yoga and meditation instructor and introduces such practices into workspaces as she sees great importance in bridging personal wellbeing, mindfulness and business.

Alain Haut enjoyed a 35-year corporate career in a global role with leading multinational companies (in automotive, high technology and

life sciences) mainly in International Human Resources Management. In 2008, Alain established O plc, a management consulting company specializing in the fields of Performance, Leadership (development and acquisition) and Change, as well as Human Resources matters in general (including coaching). In addition to consulting activities, Alain is a regular lecturer on Leadership, Talent Management and Human Resources at several business schools in Switzerland, France and Ukraine at Doctorate, Master and Bachelor levels. Alain is Corporate Peer Reviewer for EQUIS and EPAS business schools and programmes accreditation and corporate member of the EPAS Accreditation Board with EFMD.

Göran Hultin combines international and national experience of labour markets with private sector industry and business experience. He has more than 15 years of experience in international labour market legislation and regulation. Recently, he was Assistant Director General of the ILO and Executive Director of the Employment Sector. He now works with governments and leading organizations on policy and practice by building public private partnerships to improve labour performance and business strategy, aligning business goals with corporate values, building management—labour relations, developing training strategies to meet skill and competency needs.

Matthias Mölleney is a leadership and change management expert with more than 15 years of experience in senior executive positions. He is the founder of the HR consulting, coaching and training company peopleXpert. He also leads the Centre for Human Resources Management and Leadership at the University for Applied Sciences in Economics Zurich (HWZ) and is the President of the largest professional Human Resources Management Association in Switzerland (ZGP). In 1998, he became Executive Vice President Human Resources Management and member of the executive board at Swissair. He is a well-known speaker, lecturer and author with a great deal of practical experience in leadership and change management.

Richard Savage has held senior international HR leadership roles in Cadbury Schweppes, Quaker Oats and Nielsen, where he led major

successful change initiatives and ensured the HR function added real business value. He now consults, acts a coach and mentor across a wide range of companies, industries and individuals. He is a firm believer in engagement, inclusive talent and leadership development and of the need for a new model of leadership to meet today's societal challenges. His passion for helping individuals extends to his pro-bono support and is matched by his passion for his family and Arsenal football club.

Michael Staunton is an experienced talent/learning professional and coach focused on driving change and transformation working with individuals, teams and organizations. As an international leader, he has developed broad experience in organizational development as well as driving leadership and building effective talent management strategies and approaches. Michael has run talent and transformation programmes in telecoms, services, brewing, engineering, hi-tech and finance sectors. Michael was formerly Programme Director for Management Centre Europe based in Brussels, Global Vice President Organization and Development and Learning with Interbrew (now Anheuser Busch) in Leuven Belgium, and Head of Talent Development EMEA for State Street Bank in London. Michael was awarded a Doctorate in Business Administration through Portsmouth University in 2014.

Susan Stucky Since leaving IBM Research in 2014, Susan has been working as an advisor and consultant to institutes such as mediaX at Stanford, as part of thought leadership teams such as the Collabworks' TLT, and with established companies and Silicon Valley start-ups alike. The consulting approaches she brings are scale agnostic—they play well in large ecosystems and small start-ups. Presently, her areas of focus include the design of work marketplaces and of service systems for value co-creation. As always, this work includes collaborating with clients to design and develop new ways of working in the face of new technology, new business process or facilities.

Peter Vogel is Professor of Family Business and Entrepreneurship at IMD in Lausanne, a serial technology entrepreneur, business advisor and speaker. He's founder and chairman of the Delta Venture Partners

AG. He previously served as director of custom programmes at the Executive School of the University of St.Gallen and as chairman of the HR Matching AG. In his work with companies, he focuses on topics such as global megatrends and their impact on organizations, growth and internationalization, digital transformation, innovation management and intrapreneurship, as well as leadership and talent development. He's a frequent speaker at global conferences such as the Global Economic Symposium, TEDxLausanne or the St.Gallen Symposium, author of books and book chapters and a member of the Global Shapers Community of the World Economic Forum.

Jim Ware is a professional speaker, a workplace futurist, and a meeting design strategist. A former Harvard Business School professor, he has invested his entire career in understanding what organizations must do to thrive in a rapidly changing world—and enabling them to succeed. He is the founder and executive director of The Future of Work … unlimited, a research and advisory firm based in northern California. He has co-authored several books and research reports about the digital economy and its implications for leadership and organizational performance. His most recent book is 'Making Meetings Matter: How Smart Leaders Orchestrate Powerful Conversations in the Digital Age'.

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Introduction: Digitalization and Why Leaders Need to Take It Seriously

Peter Vogel and Göran Hultin

We are living in an era of unprecedented change and transformation. Never before have we and our cumulative knowledge evolved in such a rate as what we can observe today. Today's leaders need to proactively respond to many challenges that result from the 'new normal' we live in; that is the VUCA world—a world that is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Among various drivers of this VUCA world is digital technology. As Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum put it: 'In the new world, it is not the big fish which eats the small fish, it's the fast which which eats the slow fish'.[1] Digitalization has brought forth new players that attack the behemoths of the twentieth century, with novel business models and an agile market entry strategy. Hence, organizations

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need to be agile and respond to these disruptive forces if they want to maintain and consolidate their position in the global economy.

Digitalization presents businesses with unparalleled opportunities for value creation. New products and services can be offered and commercialized, systems and processes can be optimized, work processes can be automated and digital business models can be developed. All-in-all, one can say that those companies have have done particularly well over the past decades in adopting digital technologies in their everyday business—possibly even cannibalizing their own business in the process, with novel digitalized offerings—have not only survived this transformation, but also done disproportionately well, financially. In a recent study, MIT and CapGemini showed that the so-called digirati firms—firms that are strong in both the digital intensity and transformation intensity systematically outperform other companies in terms of revenues, profitability and market valuation.[2] In the world of work, digitalization has opened up many new avenues for organizations and their employees, such as facilitated communication and collaboration between employees around the world, improved recruiting, talent management processes and workplace flexibility that allows organizations to adjust to their employees' personal situations, as well as better performance management.

Despite all these undisputable flexible advantages of digitalization, it also brings with it a variety of problems for organizations and individuals. On an individual level, we are confronted with an information overload and constant distraction from our core activities. Indeed, what has become self-evident is that the information accessible on the internet is literally exploding. At the same time, our consumption of material on the internet is at an incredibly high level, with roughly a mind-numbing 2.5 million Google search queries, 2.8 million YouTube video views, 21 million WhatsApp messages and 700,000 Facebook logins happening every minute[3].

On an organizational level, issues such as cyber security, the cost of keeping on top of the evolution of digital technology or digital distraction and overload of employees are some of many downside effects of the digital age we now occupy. Moore's law—that the computing

power of processors doubles every 18 months—and Nielsen's law—that bandwidth doubles approximately every 21 months—clearly underscore the rate of change. This implies that novel technological solutions are available every couple of months, requiring organizations to invest great amounts of time and money to (1) stay up-to-date and (2) make sure that all their employees are sufficiently trained in using the new systems effectively and efficiently. As a byproduct of all this, employees are increasingly losing control over their own time, because digital systems such as emails, internal chatrooms, etc., are taking over their agenda in that they constantly need to react and respond to incoming information (some important, some irrelevant) instead of proactively managing their time.

The following fictitious case illustrates an exemplary day of a family in the digital era:

A 21st Century day in the lives of Johan and Jeanette:

Meet Johan, a 42-year-old Senior Manager at a large company and his 41-year-old wife Jeanette, a Marketing Manager at a communication consulting firm. Johan and Jeanette have two children, 17 and 14 years old. Johann has a 30-minute commute to work and despite having a 40-hour work week, he spends on average 50 hours at work, plus several hours from home. Jeanette works 80% on paper, but actually spends a lot more time on work-related matters than that.

Johan's day starts by waking up at 6am from his smartphone's alarm clock. The first thing Johan does after waking up is to quickly check the number of emails that came in since he last checked his mail the past evening. He'll scroll through them and delete spam and other non-relevant mails. After taking a shower and getting dressed, Johan sits at the breakfast table with his family. This is the time to check the news and what has happened in the world. While he used to read the newspaper, he now follows the news on his tablet, like most other smart mobile device owners. Jeanette needs to check the news first thing in the morning in order to stay up-to-date on her clients' latest news coverage. Their children also have their phones on the table, checking news, emails, Facebook, WhatsApp and Snapchat updates.

At 7.30am, everyone leaves the house to drive to work or go to school. A quick goodbye, of course with the mobile phone in their hands. Johann commutes to work by car, Jill takes the public transportation. During the commute, Johan thinks about his day and what he wants to get done. In

order to keep track of it, he dictates these tasks to his phone using voice control, or else he will forget about everything once arriving at work. Jeanette continues working through her mails and client-related news in order to get ready for work.

Once they have arrived at work, both immediately sit down and try to get to work with a clear task list and agenda of meetings for the day. They spend their day in front of the screen—both at their desk and in meetings when taking notes. As always, their agenda is being disrupted by incoming messages via mail, social media and other channels, eating up about half of their productive work time.

At 6 pm, they make their way home again. A quick conversation with their kids about their days, followed by dinner—again with mobile phones at the table—and some family time, before everybody retrieves to whatever they have to get done before going to bed. Kids chat with their friends in a variety of different messaging systems. Johan and Jeanette take a quick last glimpse at the email inbox and a final scroll down the Facebook and news updates, before their phones are put to flight mode and the lights are turned off. 'Good night, Johan'. 'Good night Jeanette'.

Footnote: Johan and Jeanette are just fictitious characters, but the situation described above most likely resonates—at least in part—with most of us. We feel overwhelmed, constantly stressed and upset because we never seem to get the things done we intended to.

The drivers for this digital overload are manifold, including both personal and workplace-related drivers. As illustrated above, we ourselves are largely responsible for this, simply because we haven't yet adjusted our behavior to digitalization and we are just starting to understand the entire spectrum of downside effects resulting from the 'always-connected lifestyle' most of us follow. We lack the necessary discipline to set ourselves boundaries when it comes to utilizing digital technology at home and at work. Simultaneously, we aren't sufficiently aware of the degree to which digital technology is invading our privacy.

At work, it is to some extent also a lack of discipline, but at the same time it is a consequence of an already outdated leadership style and the subsequent false management expectations they create. Setting rules of collaboration and communication in the digital context is one of many necessary steps that leaders need to take in order to avoid