



How to
UnLearn

by Playing the Game

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Unlearning and Failing Fast to Survive and Thrive!

This short eBook highlights 6 game changing challenges that will shape you and your organisation, as we shift through the gears, post Covid-19 lockdown

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1. The New Realities

Well before Covid-19 emerged, CEB/Gartner, a global research and advisory company, commented that more than 8 out of 10 employees are matrixed, working in multiple teams, within different functions and with people from around the globe. So not only does this shift us to a matrix work environment (often referred to as a dotted line reporting relationship), cause new skills to be needed by employees, it also causes leaders to engage and look at career progression differently. In our work across the globe, we observe more and more organisations moving to this matrixed approach. Project teams and work teams, depend on working across functions and regions, to best serve clients and each other. If anything, this trend has only been exacerbated by the global pandemic. With the acceleration of working from home, people no longer sit with the people they work with anymore. So, leaders and managers are more critically important than ever before to the success of this new world of work and the shift in ways of working and how they engage their colleagues to succeed in the new order.

None of us ever want our colleagues to say:

“There are competing priorities and at times it feels like I am pulled in so many directions, I don’t know where to start-what really takes priority? One manager tells me one thing and the other something else”

“It would be nice to be appreciated for all the hard work I do. I never feel that my contribution to the business is recognised as I have a number of managers and dotted lines?”

2. New Ways of Working:

According to YouGov in March 2020, 54% of Britons are now working remotely, many for the first time. While lockdown was temporary, the increase in homeworking of 27% over the last decade, reveals we were already experiencing the new normal. This increases the need for teams to communicate effectively remotely, but also collaborate well.

Remote working is really not a problem is it? According to recent studies by leading academics from around the world, remote working during lockdown has boosted productivity by 13%. The problem/challenge is described well by Professor Lynda Grattan of London Business School, when she says, “the inequality that becomes visible with remote work, its hard to be productive when you’re in less than ideal living conditions, like a cramped flat”.

So, while there is no quick fix here, perhaps this throws the spotlight on developing more imaginative ways of engaging our talent as we navigate the new world of work. Add to this, the effects of physically seeing colleagues. As Lynda points out, its an important consideration, because if large scale remote working becomes the reality, it may be a very long time before you ever see your colleagues again. You may well be on end to end video conference calls for the foreseeable. Let’s face it, serendipity is important, bumping into people in the corridor, as Lynda Grattan points out, quite often the ways we make decisions in organisations aren’t in meetings, they are made in the corridors?

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Others have also commented in a similar vein. Take Eddie Obeng, founder of Pentacle, a virtual business school. He's concerned about feelings of isolation and loneliness in the workplace, in the absence of important physical personal interactions. This is also reinforced by a friend who runs a US based consulting company, staffed entirely by remote workers. She says that isolation was the biggest source of staff turnover during her first year. She tries to organise annual in person meetings to compensate for this loss of in person interaction that could potentially weaken morale or slow productivity. Covid-19 and socially distanced working has made this even more challenging, even more so if we are confronted by a second wave of the virus which the Economist suggests is highly probable. According to this article, we're not in phase 2 of the pandemic, as we are still firmly in the grip of phase 1.

According to Obeng, the gains we could achieve from widespread working from home are impotent and the pro's certainly outweigh the cons. He goes on to say, "in the long run, I think it's huge. Imagine: we go to something like 20% of our days are spent working from home. That's 20% less commuting. That's also the ability to live further out of our city centres, to re organise our lives and have some quiet tranquility, so yes, I think it's an enormous benefit, he says, if we get it right"! But how do we get it right?

3. The workforce reality of the Pandemic:

Video Calls have been a lifeline during covid-19, as we all embraced digital in an attempt to stay connected. During lockdown most of us have had no physical contact with our employees and colleagues. The emotional stress and strain has been immense with each of us facing our own dilemmas. But is Video chat harder? What's different compared to face to face communication? Is there a way to make it more engaging?

At home we have been asked to share our varied occupational obligations, in competing physical space, with parenting and home schooling of all ages. All without privacy, and heavy reliance on digital and mobile technologies, when many were experiencing wide fluctuations in internet service levels, while being asked to participate in endless virtual meetings with multiple distractions and very little technical support.

In a recent article by Gianpiero Petriglieri, associate professor at Insead and Marissa Shuffler an Associate professor at Clemson University, being on a video call requires more focus than a face to face chat. Video chats mean we need to work harder to process non verbal cues, like facial expressions, tone/ pitch and body language. Paying more attention to these, consumes a lot of energy. "Our minds are together when our bodies, feel we're not. That dissonance which causes people to have conflicting feelings is exhausting. You cannot relax into the conversation naturally. To compound the situation, it has been reported that **delays in phone or conferencing systems of 1.2 seconds made people perceive the responder as less friendly or focussed.**

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Silence is another challenge. According to Petriglieri, “silence creates a natural rhythm in a real life conversation. However, when it happens in a video call, you become anxious about the technology.

According to Shuffler, if we are physically on camera, we are very aware of being watched. “When you’re on a video conference, you know everyone is looking at you, you are on stage, so there comes the social pressure and feeling like you have to perform. Being performative is nerve -wracking and more stressful” It’s also very hard for people not to look at their own face, if they can see it on the screen, or not to be conscious of how they behave in front of the camera.

Factoring in, Employees returning from Furlough, we can begin to see how the loosening of lockdown will impact?

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So if Video chats come with extra stressors, our; Zoom, MS Teams and Google Hangout, surely fatigue can't be attributed solely to that? Our current circumstances, whether lockdown, quarantine, working from home or even returning to a socially distanced regime, are also feeding in. According to Petrigileri, the fact that we feel forced into these calls may be a contributory factor. "The video call is our reminder of the people we have lost temporarily. It is the distress that every time you see someone online, such as your colleagues, that reminds you, we should really be in the workplace together" he says, "What I'm finding is we're all exhausted; it doesn't matter whether they are introverts or extroverts. We are experiencing the same disruption of the familiar context during the pandemic"

Then, there's the fact that certain aspects of our lives that used to be separate- work, friends, family, are all now happening in the same space.

This recipe of ingredients leads us to the self-complexity theory which illustrates that individuals have multiple aspects, context dependent social roles, relationships, activities and goals and how we find that variety healthy. When these aspects are reduced, we become more vulnerable to negative feelings!

So, what is the answer to video conference fatigue?

4. Read the Writing on the Wall:

A recent report estimated that 1/3rd of the UK population who had never used online shopping did so for the first time during lockdown. This has fundamentally changed consumer behaviour, putting into question the resilience of existing business models and practices, including the need to travel to work or around the world for meetings. This has challenged underlying business processes and decision making. In effect organisations have delayed and devolved authority levels, stripped out functional silos and built collaborative virtual for a and team based chat groups.

Remote working from home, is now the norm for over half the population in many countries around the globe. For some, this is long overdue while for others, the juggling has created stress and anxiety. Of all of the surveys we have studied during lockdown, there is a consistent trend of 5 topics; Communication challenges, social isolation from colleagues, workplace/space distractions and a lack of IT, equipment/support.

Over 9million UK employees were furloughed, since lockdown began. Recently the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that 600,000 employees in the UK have now lost their jobs and some have even reported that up to 40% of this furloughed will be made redundant. To exacerbate this situation, since lockdown, unemployment has risen to over 1.3 million, with major firms like British Airways, Virgin, HSBC, Jaguar Land Rover and British Aerospace announcing redundancies.

Conserving cash, is the strategy for our times, with many firms already implementing deep cost cutting, reducing spend on discretionary items. Many have halted hiring and frozen or reduced pay and incentives. All of these moves, along with job insecurity has led to significant anxiety and a vulnerable workforce.

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Even although our ability to adapt is clear, what is equally clear, is that there is no going back to pre Covid-19 operations. Organisations must embrace the need for agility more than ever before, where the future of work, will be people centred and organisations will need to be flexible, fluid and dynamic. We believe, this is where Digital Gamification, will become the emerging model to help organisations survive and thrive by "unlearning"

Ultimately this will reveal how to create nimble cross functional teams, working on projects with short rather than long implementation. Teams will be networked like never before, led by new emerging talent, not supervised by time served supervisors and senior managers and leaders. Organisation hierarchies are already flattening to reflect this new order. Accountability and Responsibility will be devolved like never before, where authority is moved to information rather than information to authority, where reporting will be in real time with insights focused on future trends. What do we need to "unlearn" for these new ways to emerge?

Many of us have struggled with our Technology Quotient, as we grapple with with a wide mix of technology. Think about it for a second... we learned to use Zoom, MS Teams, Google Hangouts and slack amongst others virtually overnight. We have all had to change and find new ways. What did you have to "Unlearn" in order to improve your quotient?

As we see it, these changes will only continue to gather pace, with a new breed of Apps, like SupplyChain digital, dashboards and digital productivity tools becoming the most effective way to unlearn fast.

Historically, business strategies were typically set out in 1-3-5 year timeframes... these are now emerging post lockdown as 6-18 month horizons.

As organisations consider their succession plans, we discover strong demand from Generation Y and Z for greater flexibility in working patterns. New evidence, post lockdown, suggest that 61% of those who work from home, were not only more focused on productive work but they actually put in additional hours or formal time outside normal working hours to accommodate management requests. How do we maintain and leverage this trend by accelerating the speed at which we "unlearn"?



5. Unlearn and Fail Fast to change entrenched views about work

In an article I read during Lockdown, I was reminded of our increasing need for instant self gratification. Think back to how you learned at School or University. Almost all the work we did at school was aimed at getting a good grade on the subjects you studied. What follows is your strategy and experienced student will confirm that a relevant strategy will be to "hack the test" by focusing solely on lecture notes and text on the recommended reading list. This approach appears to work therefore can we also assume that anyone who wants to progress will play this game? At elite Universities, the same strategies are deployed, as after all, everyone want to get a great degree.... Right?

This propensity to I want it and I want it now, is now apparent in large swathes of Society, where “hacking the test” seems to provide a shortcut.

I read another article during Lockdown about an American Engineer/Science commentator who accepted a challenge to ride a backward bike. [The YouTube clip](#) is hilarious and makes a very interesting point about unlearning and how as a concept it's very different to forgetting!



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oI2aMKwXXnE>

The task seemed simple enough....ride a backwards bike. The bike had two wheels and two pedals. It looked just like a normal bike. Its one difference lay in the handlebars. On a backward bike, turning the handlebars to the left caused the front wheel to turn to the right and vice versa!!

The unfortunate American rider said, he jumped on the bike eager to demonstrate how quickly he could conquer this. It turned out to be a bigger challenge than he first thought. Trying as hard as he could, he could not propel himself more than a few feet before falling off. Even though he understood what was going on, his old ingrained knowledge took over the moment he tried to cycle forward.

This experiment highlights an interesting phenomenon, we often overlook.... Existing knowledge is sticky. The ideas and skills we already possess have inertia and displacing them with alternatives is often easier said than done!

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This psychology wouldn't matter if the world and our experience of it were stable, but as we know, only too well, neither are. As our contexts change and we progress through life, our optimal response changes too.

Change requires new skills and knowledge but human psychology glues us to the old. For those who don't adapt the future is?

Pre and post the Pandemic the world is full of incentives to learn with many pointing out that learning is a competitive differentiator. The challenge is not learning per-se, as people are a good at this as the pandemic has revealed. We acquire new knowledge and skills readily always searching for the next big thing. The challenge is working out what to do with knowledge once it's in our heads?

Edwin Land, co-founder of Polaroid put it this way, "Its not that we need new ideas but we need to stop having old ideas"

This process of supressing old ideas and replacing them with new alternatives, is called "Unlearning", which is very different from forgetting. The American riding the backward bike for instance didn't what to forget how to ride a regular bike. That skill was still valuable, whenever he wanted to ride a normal bike. What he wanted to do was unlearn his old skill so he could conquer the challenge of mastering his backward bike!

Unlearning is on the surface an un attractive proposition. To do it, you must admit you were wrong or held false information and begin looking for what is right or truthful. That shift from conscious secure competency to vulnerable conscious incompetency is unpleasant. However just as the act is itself unpalatable, its pay-off is the opposite..

The answer is to find a new model. In the case of the American cyclist, his revised model was simple. His legs still pedalled and his weight still shifted, as he turned round corners. In his new model, his arms pushed the bikes handlebars in the opposite direction to normal.

Finally, to unlearn, we must ingrain our new mental habits through practice. Has there ever been a more appropriate time for micro learning through gamification to unlearn fast to survive and thrive in this new normal?



6. Leaders have nowhere to hide in this time of crisis

In our recent article titled: “Leaders have nowhere to hide in this time of crisis” the challenge is clear. From the perspective of leadership in work organisations, Covid-19 presents massive challenges. Firstly, we are seeing a dramatic change in working practices due to remote working, virtual engagement/communication processes and an absence of the usual social experiences and structure which the work environment normally provides. Add to that the impact on many employees due to issues resulting from domestic tensions that will have arisen over the last few weeks, and indeed, that may well persist. This will, of course, have a dramatic impact on many of the things we take for granted in the usual working environment and the impact not only on motivation and performance but also the overall well-being of employees.

Secondly, we will be witnessing a huge impact on the economic viability of many organisations with the inevitable job losses and redundancies which will occur and in this situation, employees will need support and help in order to get their lives back on track. Also, there will be huge pressure for many companies to find new ways of making their business models work from both an economic and social perspective and clearly the need for new ideas and innovations from employees will be vital.

Thirdly, against a background for the need to change and offer something different, employees will be experiencing a dramatic reduction in their clarity and confidence about the future and uncertainties which lie ahead. Indeed, at a time when employees will need to be at the top of their game, we will see a significant threat to their motivation and sense of well-being.

In this context, the quality of leadership in organisations becomes vital, but in our experience, in terms of what we might describe as 'normal times', the quality of most leadership we see is mediocre at the best of times. Often, the prevailing style of leadership tends to be coercive or 'my way or the highway'. On other occasions we see leaders failing to really address issues, be open with staff and provide clarity and direction, they can often be more motivated to be popular and not really address the difficult issues. On other occasions we see leaders failing to provide any direction or input at all together with a complete lack of engagement with their staff.

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In 'normal times', you could probably get away with this, particularly when most other organisations are pretty much the same. However, in the Covid-19 context, there really is no place to hide and those organisations that can provide effective and successful leadership input will be the ones that will survive and prosper.

We have seen great leadership in our work and what characterises that above all, is the ability of leaders to know themselves together with knowing their employees. These successful leaders are effective in delivering the behaviour that is required by the situation and so they are able to manage both their strengths and their weaknesses in a way which lands effectively when they engage with their employees. Successful leadership, in a nutshell, is the ability to simultaneously deliver behaviour which provides direction and focus for employees together with a capacity to show an interest and a commitment which makes employees feel engaged, involved, and motivated.

Effective leadership which provides direction for employees together with helping them feel engaged creates an environment or climate in the organisation which is motivational for the employee and helps provide clarity of direction and a real sense of involvement. Indeed, we see the impact of that leadership truly driving both the motivation and performance of employees together with their well-being, in fact, we have observed that the quality of the relationship that employees have with the leader not only drives performance and well-being in a general sense but also can have a massive impact on both physical and mental health itself – leadership matters. In a Covid-19 context, aside from promoting greater well-being for employees, this will also provide the right type of environment in which those employees will have a chance of contributing at the top of their game.

Attributions

- Courtesy of Nielsen
- The Reason Zoom Calls drain your energy- BBC Worklife
- Fast Forward to the New World of Work, talentspringboard.com
- David Vallance 01 July 2020
- Derek Peacock & Dr Steve Glowinkowski - The Scotsman 19 June 2020

Play the Game of Unlearning at Work.

The Challenge of our times:

To find out how to "unlearn and fail fast, so we can survive, then thrive while improving our technology quotient, we need a route map. A Business Process Mirror...An opportunity to model the future world swiftly, cheaply and creatively, equipping organisations and teams to bridge the gaps between innovative ideas and innovative behaviour (Michael Schrage "Serious Play")

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"Truly, the best interactive and relevant experience, I have had during lockdown"

"Ingenious"

"Great to participate in a truly interactive session"

"I would never have believed so much learning would emerge form digital gaming in such a short time"