

## **Book chapter: Strategic Digital Transformation, A Results-Driven Approach**

Kane, S. (2019) Understanding how others see your organisation. In: A. Fenton, G. Fletcher, M. Griffiths (Eds.), *Strategic Digital Transformation: a results-driven approach*, Business and Digital Transformation, Routledge, Oxon, pp. 86-94.

## **PART II: Digitally transforming the organisation**

### **The External Drivers for Change**

Chapter 10 Understanding how others see your organisation

#### *Preface:*

Armed with an understanding of influential external changes, knowledge of the value created by these changes and an awareness of what competitors are doing in response; the spotlight now turns internally to understanding your own organisation in the same way. This chapter emphasises the need to understand the internal challenges and legacies that currently impede an organisation's ability to rise to the challenges presented by the external drivers for change. Case studies are used to consider how the critical questioning of a current organisational situation can instigate radical change for rapid improvement.

### **Chapter 10 - Understanding how others see your organisation – the digital skills perspective.**

#### **1. From external to internal digital focus, it's all about people**

Organisations must be acutely aware of external competition in order to address competitive advantage, but also be open to the recognition of unexpected internal challenges that may emerge. Innovation (real or supposed) by external competitors is a strong driver for promoting some form of organisational change. However, reactive approaches that result in superficial change, which appear as innovation, simply wastes time and decreases commitment to substantial change for real long-term opportunities for organisations. Profound and lasting innovation in twenty-first century organisations, arises from an engaged workforce which is supported in its professional capacity as future-focused and technologically informed. 'Not doing digital' is no longer an option for organisations of any size, and 'doing digital' is dependent on human ingenuity for its technological enhancement. Hence, understanding how others see your organisation means consideration of modern-day expectations of society about technology (in organisations). The expert informants in this area might be closer than you think. Individuals are central to understanding organisational behaviour (Mullins 2007) and understanding how your present workforce view your organisation provides the inside story and illuminates areas for potential change and development.

Your competitors no longer need be high-street names with a substantial land-based footprint. Their operations, supply chains and personnel are potentially in the 'ether' or the 'cloud'! These magical metaphors conjure a friendly and simplistic view of the connectivity required to support extensive digital and human networks which in turn support demanding customer expectations. Thoughtful digital transformation in organisations is not complete without organisational behavioural change. To be successful, the chief decision makers in organisations must recognise that successful digital transformation cannot be piecemeal and

substantial support may be required in their own ranks as much as elsewhere in their organisation. Long-term championing of digital transformation in organisations is necessary to support the less enthusiastic chiefs who may be considered as 'digital immigrants' (Prensky 2001, 2009). But, those newly entering the workforce and rising through the ranks may also continue to rely on digital champions for long-term support as they may simply possess digital 'operation skills' and not necessarily the finesse of digital 'strategic skills' (Van Dijk & Van Deursen 2014). As such, the message here is that radical change for rapid improvement comes through sustained support and development of digital and technology skills, championed by key personnel at all levels of the organisation. It is the people who populate the workforce that will make your organisation digital. Organisations do not live by technology alone, for long-term sustainability and competitive advantage you require the most appropriate workforce.

However, it is not just your organisation that is looking for the best. Your competitors are also, of course, competing to engage the type of workforce that will help them to remain as strong competitors in the marketplace. Digitally transforming any organisation requires professional and highly skilled personnel to support progress. Such personnel may or may not be graduates, but it is likely that a substantial number will have a university education and may have just as many expectations of the organisation as it has of them. It is expected that employers have substantial expectations of employees, but digitally skilled graduates with an existing professional profile have high expectations of employers, too. Twenty-first century graduates want to work for companies who are '...fast growing and innovative...' (Bright Network 2016/17). They want more than just a job; digital skills are part of their everyday experience and expect it to be part of their working life. 'They bring a future forward outlook, in the form of digital skills and mindset' (Accenture 2017, p.2). Therefore, part of understanding how others view your organisation is to consider why such skilled individuals would choose to work for one organisation rather than another.

## **2. Understanding internal challenges and legacies which impact upon organisations**

An investigation of the organisational status quo is the starting point here. This must include all levels of the organisation in a non-judgemental approach because the strengths and weaknesses of an organisation can be unconsciously translated through stories about the workforce and management. These are informed by a cultural legacy of that which has been acceptable in the past. Organisational decisions and workforce plans are based on the practical (internal) knowledge of what is possible in relation to existing/known professional skills, and also management support (often a historical understanding of what the management will support). Therefore, a review of the most recent projects, questioning the strengths and weaknesses of each from an internal perspective (both management and workforce) will enable greater understanding of that which has most recently been achieved and suggest areas of missed opportunities due to a mismatch of workforce skills and customer expectations.

The Cultural Web model (Johnson and Scholes) provides guidance through useful section headings (which do not designate management and workforce reviews and therefore encourages information from all levels of the organisation). The model provides guidance via significant areas for focus, but is also flexible enough for wide engagement. No specific professional skills are necessary and commentary can be provided on all/any areas about which personnel have information. A range of elements are included in the model that promote descriptions of the many aspects of organisational culture. The central 'Paradigm' encourages commentary about the organisation, mindset and values. Other headings are: 'Control

Systems' monitoring what occurs through processes, the 'Organisational Structure' which is usually well known through line managers and work flows, 'Power Structures' which show recognition of where the real power and influence is situated, 'Symbols' from the company logo and the level of luxury in the organisation, to the dress code. 'Rituals and Routines' combine acceptable behaviour and expectations of management, 'Stories and Myths' point to the history of the organisation, including what people say inside and outside about the organisation and also, what an organisation chooses to promote as a story about themselves.

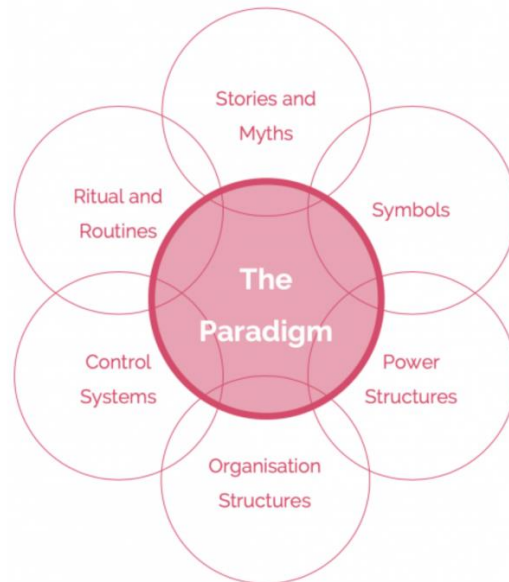


Figure 1: Cultural Web <https://www.businessballs.com/strategy-innovation/cultural-web-johnson-scholes/>

When utilising the Cultural Web in organisations, individuals are being asked to carry out a form of professional self-reflection in order to comment on their own perspectives of the organisation. Self-reflection is not a style of thinking that is entirely natural to some and may require support. Gibbs Reflective Cycle (1988) affords support for this in practice and Bassot (2016) provides a range of practical exercise and information about professional self-reflection.



Figure 2: Gibbs Reflective Cycle <https://www.toolshero.com/management/gibbs-reflective-cycle-graham-gibbs/>

Gibbs Reflective Cycle can be used to support the construction of self-reflective accounts from the workforce, based on the headings in the Cultural Web. This allows a review of organisational issues around the strengths and weaknesses of an organisation. These may help to answer a number of important internal questions, such as: what do we do well, are we engaging with digital technology, do we have the appropriate level of skills, is there enough support for our managers and workforce?

Some reporting may highlight legacies, which are ideas that have been inherited about the way the organisation has always practiced. Such stories provide a starting point for development towards planned changes within the internal environment. Legacies can impede an organisation's ability to meet new challenges and as such are important areas for investigation. For a defined emphasis on organisations, utilising headings from the cultural web provides a flexible focus that is helpful for those writing reflective statements and for the following process of analysis.

### **3. Case study – the workforce of the future, and your future workforce**

Practicing that which is described above requires practical support of the self-reflection process. This study suggests the potential for this to inform organisational practice. Digital skills as individual human capital supports organisational development, but only if you employ those that embody such skills. Understanding how your present workforce and a potential future workforce perceive your organisation provides snapshots. Will the picture of your organisation be one of ongoing development with a digitally skilled workforce that supports demanding customers, or won't those skilled professionals be interested in working for you?

#### **Methodology**

This case is based on convenience sampling (Bryman 2016). From a class of almost five hundred students in the first year of their degree course, almost half allowed access to their personal reflective statements for the purposes of research. The first level of the investigation initially focuses on fifty students. This allows a peek into perceptions about digital skills development and expectations of organisational environments. It shows the potential of using self-reflection to develop understanding of perspectives around digital skills and organisations in general. In addition to this context of convenience sampling is the use of the qualitative software package NVivo, which was employed to analyse the content of the self-reflection statements. Firstly, reading of the statements suggests potential areas of specific interest and the software provides a digital environment to store all the reflections and supports the use of named nodes as categories. As such, codes for the self-reflective statements were generated using the constant comparison technique, an approach that has been recommended for the analysis of statements (Bogdan & Bilden, 1982). Initial codes were allocated following the analysis of the comments of the first statement and the content of the second and subsequent statements were then allotted to these codes. New codes could be created for other emergent categories. NVivo software also supports coding stripes which allows the reader to highlight any part of the text and use the drag and drop technique to place any part of the statement into any selected node. Nodes can then be investigated for content, recognition of the percentage of text attributed to each node and overlapping nodes. At this point in the investigation four particular areas are notable: reflecting on reflections, understanding of organisations, expectations of skills development, and teamwork. A node was created for each of these areas.

## Interim results of the investigation

As explained in the previous sections, these interim results are based on fifty statements from a much larger cohort of a first-year university business and management module. Each of the four categories which emerged from the investigation at this stage are specified here:

### Reflecting on reflections

This case study suggests the relevance of understanding organisations through the reflections of individuals. Therefore, something of how the reflective process was viewed is relevant here. Respondents appear to be positive and suggest that reflecting on experience and practice is useful in a number of ways. Firstly, one respondent suggests: *“I am now able to review my practical experiences to enhance my learning and development”* (anonymous 1). Another respondent comments: *“...Gibbs theory is a reflective learning cycle...I would do a task, see how I was feeling whether the activity was easy or difficult, then I would evaluate the activity, try and figure out what knowledge and information was gained from the task, conclude the activity and finally would be able to use the knowledge and information gained from each activity”*. (anonymous 38)

In addition, it is noted that: *“Reflective writing enables me to identify my strengths ...[and]...weaknesses... I now understand how to improve...I struggled with Gibbs Model initially...However, I understand the importance of being able to reflect ...as it is a skill that will enable me to progress...”* (anonymous 40). Also thoughtfully noted by another respondent: *“Without reflecting and looking back ...[it is] potential lost. It’s...my feelings and opinions ...that allow new situations to be tackled effectively”*. (anonymous 45)

While it is not suggested that self-reflection is easy, it does appear to be considered worthwhile. Many rich seams of understanding come from the reflective process, which does not occur in our usual day-to-day experience and therefore, the experience is potentially lost.

### Understanding of organisations

Across all the four categories, the highest number of references, by far, were attributed to statements which related the personal understanding of organisations.

Progress of technology was aligned with both personal and work life: *“necessary skills to work digitally [are] not only essential to everyday life but also crucial for the working environment”* (anonymous 1). The specific use of digital skills was also recognised as particularly important in organisations: *“digital communications...are vital in companies, for example, emailing, video messaging...[and] what security they have to protect the company”* (anonymous 14). It was expected that organisations would utilise *“good communication to function properly”* and that they would *“take advantage of using communication devices to speed up their process”* (anonymous 16)

Understanding how organisations reach clients is also noted as *“digital communication ultimately...keeps businesses connected to current clients”* (anonymous 20) and comments of understanding the way in which present organisations are run is not just based on skills and strategies required to support profit-making businesses, also noted were *“Local councils...equipping locals with[digital] skills [to support] employment and other aspects of life”* (anonymous 23)

In addition, reliance on technology in organisations is suggested as a way in which human error can be reduced, decision-making can be supported, and distribution of information may be facilitated. Understanding of the digital world is stated as key for career progression and

presents digital skills as extremely important in professional life. In regard to specific software, Excel skills were highlighted as sought after by employers and more generally, the skills to build brand awareness via social media and also skills in online communications and collaborations. There is also an expectation of using social media apps: "... such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn etc to promote...brands and interact with customers" (anonymous 45).

It was also considered that those without digital skills would miss opportunities to "fully integrate" in social and work life. Selling practices, marketing and customer satisfaction were all aligned with the requirement for a certain level of understanding and practical knowledge of digital skills for business, as was also competitor and market analysis. Effective and efficient organisations are thought to be focused on: "...analytics, especially social media analytics and the Microsoft Excel software, which is both a necessary skill to have in the workplace as well as a powerful analytics tool" (anonymous 37).

Understanding organisations for this particular group of students is a blend of many factors, but unsurprisingly, technology is dominant in their view of how organisations will seek to be successful. At the heart of this is a workforce that has the requisite skills to support and utilise digital software and systems. Digital skills are described as "highly valued...and...vital...for future progress..." (anonymous 43). They also believe that online collaboration enhances interaction: "once we connected through social media to arrange to meet, getting to know each other, ideas tend to flow, and we become more innovative when it comes to ideas and suggestions" (anonymous 45). This acceptance of working together through technology continues: "...digital communications within a workplace such as virtual workplace... offers more flexibility and ...it offers great productivity when people can balance work and personal life easier [these are] modern ways employees communicate with each other within businesses" (anonymous 45). Social selling, social media, blogging and vlogging are all approaches that are accepted by the cohort as normal for both personal and work life usage. Another respondent adds: "[collaborating online] will allow me to work better in a team situation and I can pass on these skills to other people". (anonymous 50)

There is no accepted line to be crossed, the time of defined workplace technologies (such as a fax machine in the office) is a thing of the past. Social shaping previously dictated that certain technology belonged in the work environment rather than the home. However, development has decreased cost and size, allowing much of the required systems hardware to become small enough to be personal. As such, it is re-shaped and enters both our professional and private lives as personal technology and therefore belongs wherever the person resides.

One respondent clearly writes about the embeddedness of such technologies in all parts of their life: "In my opinion, one of the most interesting workplace technologies is the ability of using social media as a major-league beneficial factor of the business ... social media became a significant communication tool in everyone's life. [It's] replacing traditional ways such as letters, phone calls or even regular text messages with quick chats or video... on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and many more". (anonymous 48)

#### Expectations of skills development

Following from the statements that highlight the ways in which this cohort understand organisations and consider how they may fit in to such organisations in their future professional lives, it is obvious that they expect to encounter and work within digital environments. It is of no surprise that these individuals expect to increase their knowledge and practice capabilities, but along with this is likely to be an expectation that organisations will support such development long-term. One respondent states: "In terms of my future professional life, I believe digital skills are significant in helping me to achieve my goals by

*working efficiently and adapting to the growing increase of technology used in the workplace...*" (anonymous 1). Another suggests that: *"Going forward I will aim to continuously learn and build upon my skills, to become a better-skilled individual"*. (anonymous 13)

The relevance of updating particular expertise was noted as: *"...cyber security and internet safety"*. (anonymous 18) One respondent specifically noted that: *"[I have] opened my eyes to how important online safety is and ... this made me operate with much greater caution"*. (anonymous 50)

Another considers the importance of: *"...awareness of security on electronic devices and how to defend yourself from malware which may attack your ... personal information"*. (anonymous 43)

However, the importance of skills development isn't just relevant for the workplace where an individual works for an organisation. These are transferable skills and some look toward building their skills to build their own business: *"[I use] social media channels in order to view trends of my followers; preferably in terms of content and hopefully products if I ever launch a product line"*. (anonymous 23). Another respondent suggests: *"I am going to do the Master of Microsoft programme, which will enhance my communication within the workplace. To improve, I am going to vlog my life as well as blog the steps to a successful business because in the future I would like to open my own ... firm"* (anonymous 47)

It can be seen that the respondents value the development of their skills set, which will benefit organisations they may be employed by, but also for some, their own aspirations in self-employment.

#### Teamwork

Teamwork was described in a number of ways by the respondents and suggested that it could be extremely challenging. But many also noted that aspects of technology made a difficult situation much easier to manage and even enjoyable. One respondent said: *"...it was hard sharing our ideas...without any time together. However, to resolve this we created a project group chat in order to enhance our communication"*. (anonymous 11). Another stated: *"...communicating with the team through the various media technologies such as instant messaging, through WhatsApp or virtually working with each other and editing the same document in real time, through One Drive by giving the group shared access while simultaneously engaging on Skype video conferences allowed me to effectively manage my time..."* (anonymous 37)

#### 4. Conclusion

The emergent categories taken from the reflections of the respondents in this case suggest that their understanding of organisations is through the lens of omnipresent digital technology. They view digital skills as intrinsically linked with their own everyday lives and professional progress. Their expectation is of a future where they continue to increase their training and skills. At the beginning of this investigation, the cohort referred to in this case were asked in their first class about their main reason for entering a degree programme; one person cited a love of knowledge, everyone else wanted to enhance their career opportunities. However, their reflections suggest that these two imperatives combine in their view of their future wherever that may be. Their understanding of organisations is one of technology-enhanced environments that require ongoing professional development. If that is not an accurate description of your organisation, something needs to change. Even if you haven't overtly encouraged the development of digital skills in your workforce, it is likely they have invaded

your territory by default. Recognise it now, digital transformation in organisations is here to stay, it isn't a threat, it's just the new normal. Therefore, it should be asked whether established organisations are up to the challenge of providing the support which will in turn sustain technology development, because the students presented here are the workforce of the future, or put another way, your future workforce.

## References

- Accenture (2017) Gen Z rising. Retrieved from [https://www.accenture.com/t20170901T082427Z\\_w\\_us-en\\_acnmedia/PDF-50/Accenture-Strategy-Workforce-Gen-Z-Rising-POV.pdf#zoom=50](https://www.accenture.com/t20170901T082427Z_w_us-en_acnmedia/PDF-50/Accenture-Strategy-Workforce-Gen-Z-Rising-POV.pdf#zoom=50)
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social Research Methods* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press
- Bassot, B. (2016). *The Reflective Journal* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London, UK: Palgrave
- Bogdan, R., & Bilden, S. (1982). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bright Network (2016) What do graduates want. Retrieved from [https://www.brightnetwork.co.uk/sites/default/files/what\\_do\\_graduates\\_want.pdf](https://www.brightnetwork.co.uk/sites/default/files/what_do_graduates_want.pdf)
- Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by doing: a guide to teaching and learning methods*. London, UK: Further Education Unit, GB.
- Mullins, L.J. (2013). *Management and Organisational Behaviour* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). Harlow, UK: FT Publishing.
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1-6. Doi: 10.1108/10748120110424816
- Prensky, M. (2009). H. sapiens digital: From digital immigrant and digital natives to digital wisdom. *Innovate: journal of online education*, 5(3), 1.
- Van Dijk, J.A.G.M., Van Deursen, A.J.A.M. (2014). *Digital Skills – unlocking the information society*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan

## Figures

1. **Cultural Web** <https://www.businessballs.com/strategy-innovation/cultural-web-johnson-scholes/>
2. **Gibbs Reflective Cycle** <https://www.toolshero.com/management/gibbs-reflective-cycle-graham-gibbs/>