

Digital Transformation – The Human Experience

5 key insights to help you think differently

May 2022

The pandemic has been a catalyst for a step-change in the speed and depth of the digital transformation of organizations. Having responded to the business continuity demands of remote and hybrid working for employees, this flexibility has now become the new norm. However, this new paradigm presents significant new challenges to traditional models of leadership and the role of management. The pandemic has also exposed the complexity and fragility of our global economic system creating much greater uncertainty and volatility across many business activities.

Add to this:

- New Environmental, Social and Governance (**ESG**) regulations in the EU [1] and the UK [2]
- **‘Digital native’** millennials and Gen Z now account for the majority of employees [3]
- The **‘great resignation’** of older workers, often the bedrock of stability and know-how for organizations, are leaving as never before. [4]
- **Burnout** - **44%** of employees in the US say they are more burned out on the job today compared to a year ago. [5] The blurring of work home boundaries disproportionately impacts women. [6]
- **Overqualified** employee rates are increasing – One in three of all UK graduates are overqualified for their roles.[7]
- **The future of work** - By 2025, the time spent on current tasks at work by humans and machines will be equal. Most of the jobs in the future probably don’t exist today. The top employee skills are expected to include critical thinking, analysis and problem-solving, and skills in self-management such as active learning, resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility [8]

It has all the ingredients for a perfect storm.

“Culture eats strategy for breakfast”, a quote attributed to Peter Drucker, highlights the importance of company culture and human factors in determining success regardless of how effective a strategy might be.

Being a digital organization means not only having digital products, services, and customer interactions but also powering core operations with technology. Becoming one, therefore, requires a mega change in the activities employees perform, their

mindsets, as well as in their behaviors, and the ways they interact with others inside and outside the organization. It's not a digital transformation without a corresponding human transformation to a new sustainable digital culture. So, it's not surprising that some commentators are calling this a watershed moment for company culture.

As specialists in digital culture, we know how to work with leaders and managers to create sustainable human/technology relationships and change, based on science. This article shares five of our key insights founded on the latest research.

1. Digital culture matters

Digital transformation changes and breaks down existing employee connections and networks. Hybrid and remote working changes the nature of these relationships still further and for new and younger employees, it also creates a networking vacuum where it's much harder to establish connections and networks, an essential ingredient to an employee's sense of belonging and wellbeing. [9]

In our article ['Why a healthy digital culture matters'](#), we explain how, not purposefully investing in an organization's digital culture, exposes employees to unnecessary risks of increased stress, alienation, and even burnout. [10] Capturing the human experience of digital transformation is not only essential but doable. However, if you don't, digital culture will be established by default.



Organizational culture comprises the values and characteristic set of behaviors that define how things get done. A healthy one provides the guidelines, the tacit code of conduct, that steer employees to act appropriately and make choices that advance the

organization's goals and strategy. However, as with any culture, organizations can also suffer cultural blindness where they are unable to see or understand how particular matters might be viewed or see alternatives and other perspectives. Similarly, there are risks associated with 'groupthink', where a consensus between those in leadership and management develops, in which the desire for harmony or conformity results in irrational or dysfunctional decision-making outcomes. [11]

The need for organizational culture to evolve into a digital culture is because there is a shift from *'what to do'* to *'how to do it'*. In a large sense, the world has reached a plateau in terms of new inventions. In its place, we are faced with unbounded innovation and relentless iteration, two core tenets of the Digital Age [12]. The agenda here is to improve on existing models, processes, structures, and systems. This clearly needs a new, flexible, and growth mindset. [13]

Digital culture means many things to many people, however, in most instances, it eventually boils down to how people interact with technology and each other.

We see three important reasons for instilling or updating your digital culture during any digital transformation program:

1. The success of your digital strategy ultimately depends on human factors. [14] Digital technology is designed to operate in controlled and constrained environments. Employees are essential to interface and adapt to the technology within its limitations, to problem solve and get the best results from your digital investment.
2. Many organizations lose prime candidates despite them having the capabilities the organization seeks because either there is a perceived or real mismatch in the values of the candidate and the organization. [15]
3. Highly experienced and talented people leave the organization because either they are seen as no longer having the correct cultural fit or they no longer feel that they fit in. [16]

Some questions to reflect upon:

1. What are the crucial elements of a strong digital culture in your organization?
2. What does your digital culture strategy look like?
3. What mindset are you seeking from employees and how are you developing it?
4. How comfortable are your leaders and managers in challenging decisions?
5. What measures do you have in place to avoid cultural bias and "groupthink"?

2. Upskill your leaders and managers

Upskilling is a longer-term investment in augmenting the knowledge, skills, and competencies that help employees advance their careers. "Reskilling" and "upskilling"

are often used interchangeably, but they're separate concepts. Reskilling is about employees learning new specific skills.

As the current events of the past couple of years have accelerated how and where work gets done, employee reskilling became a short-term survival strategy to fuel or sustain company growth. Organizations found that investing in skills learning, enabled both performance and reliability of their employees.

Yet, organizations looking to retain their employees amid the “Great Resignation”, (24 million US employees left their jobs between May and September of 2021) [17], need to move beyond this short-term approach. When employees are offered and encouraged to take advantage of upskilling opportunities for their personal or professional growth, improve people metrics, such as employee engagement, retention, and ESG, also go up. [18]



Some questions to reflect upon:

1. What is the strategy that your organization has to upskill?
2. What are some of the key jobs that you need to upskill to be prepared for 2025?
3. What are the key areas of upskilling which could make the biggest impact?
4. What are the biggest risks if we do not upskill?

2.1 Incorporate Team Coaching as part of your culture

We often remind our clients that you cannot blame a people manager for being the sole cause for employees leaving the organization. Yet it is a fundamental reason to stay, improve, grow, and retain employees when their people manager is someone who has and acts with a coaching mindset. If you ask employees what it is that they need in an upskilling process, 75% of the time they will prefer a coach over any other skillset, why? Because a coach is someone who will not judge you, who is an ally who engages in a

thought-provoking and creative process that inspires the employee to maximize personal and professional potential. It is designed to facilitate the creation/development of personal, professional, or business goals and to develop and carry out a strategy/plan for achieving those goals.

Some questions to reflect upon:

1. What are the characteristics, mindset, and skill set that a manager coach should have?
2. What would be required for 'can any manager or leader be a coach?' And why?
3. What might happen if you don't change and adapt the mindset of managers?

2.2. Empower your employees to own their career development

One of the smartest and most strategic things a company can do is bring onboard employees who do not fit just one job or role, but instead find people who can shift when the business shifts. These employees often know how they wish to grow within the company, they just need the tools and encouragement to get there.

The biggest obstacles organizations are currently facing around talent mobility, succession, career pathing, or development, are not related to tools or technology; they are rather tied to the corporate culture. What this translates into is that if we don't have the right cultural frameworks and behaviors to support and build the optimal talent environment, we are not able to let people take on new roles, based on perceived risk. The implications, people believe that it is easier to leave the company than continue to move and grow internally, especially if it involves a major career change. [19]

The pandemic is not just a health crisis but also an economic transformation. New roles, changed skill requirements, massive imbalances of skills gaps and surpluses, and the need to redeploy people rapidly all figured into making talent mobility, succession planning, and internal growth, the key to pandemic success from a talent perspective, spotlighting these fields into the forefront of many organization's priorities. But even once the pandemic is behind us, we'll need to focus on them, in order not only to succeed but also to survive.

Some questions to reflect upon:

1. How do we create the conditions for people to be willing to give their best?
2. What is your approach to talent mobility? What's your goal for talent mobility?
3. What's your talent philosophy? How do you measure its success?
4. How does the end-to-end employee experience work?
5. How do you support employees with learning, feedback, and development?
6. Do you provide support for offboarding as well as onboarding to a new position?

2.3. Create and share a Blueprint

Every healthy individual, regardless of age or background, can learn and improve their skills, and they are doing it all the time without even realizing it. The neuroplasticity of the human brain ensures that it can adapt neural pathways throughout life in response

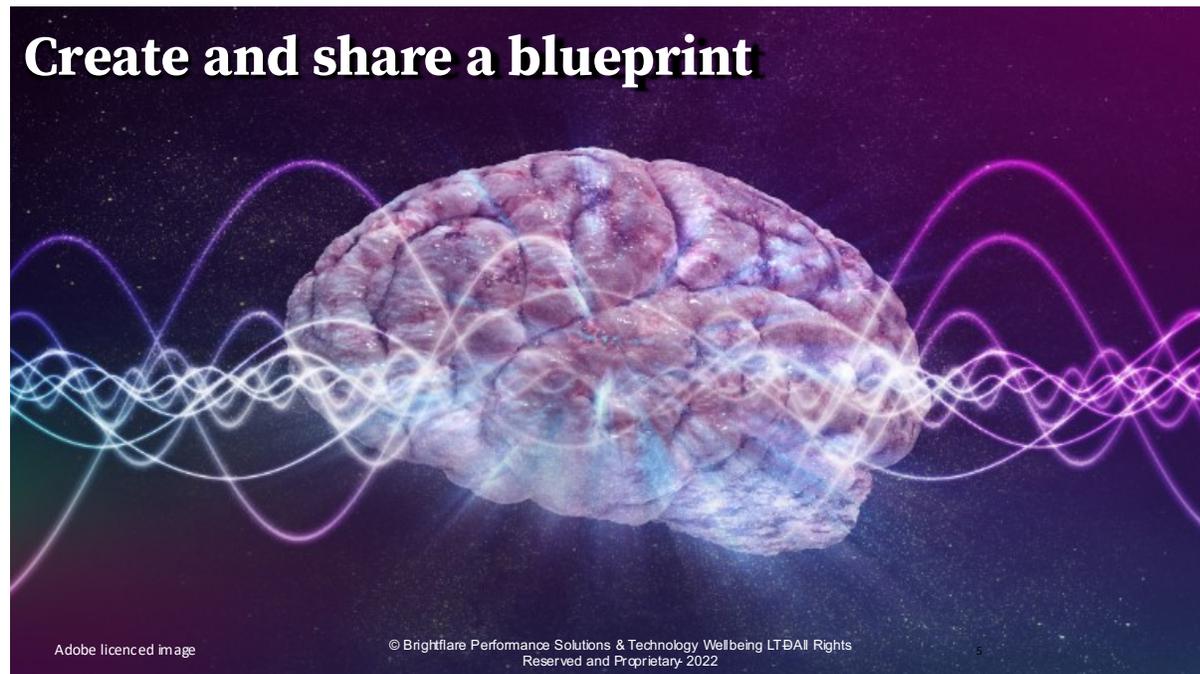
to experiences. [20] It is only a question of organizations creating the right environment and employees adopting a growth mindset. [13]

By offering upskilling opportunities for leaders and managers, organizations can develop a stronger and clearer path to growth and the transparency of the processes involved. An important aspect of any upskilling program is to identify clear paths and milestones for performance measurement. This methodology gives employees insight into the process while also enabling them to play a role in advancing their progress.

Lastly, keep in mind that leadership is as old as human civilization. As people began forming groups, leaders emerged to establish order, provide direction, and help groups meet goals (with survival as a top priority). Leadership today requires leaders to navigate significant organizational and social realities that probably exceed any challenges early business leaders could have imagined.

There's an increased demand for empathetic leadership styles that understand people perform best when all their needs and concerns are taken care of. Managers are increasingly asked to consider work-life balance, family and other commitments, and the fears or concerns of their people. Indeed, research has shown that managerial support is critical in supporting people as they deal with stress and health issues. [3]

It's impossible to predict the future and so there will be days when managers don't know what hit them. But we do know that managers of the future will need to be flexible and be able to rapidly adapt and learn in response to new situations.



Some questions to reflect upon:

1. What are you doing to upskill your leaders', managers', and employee skillsets?
2. What will be the short/long term business impact if you don't do this?
3. What could be the benefits of a coaching mindset for your organization?

3. Creating a sense of belonging

A sense of belonging and being accepted within a group is a basic human psychological need. It provides a sense of safety and can be a great motivator. Feeling that you belong is also important in seeing value in life as well as enhancing your resilience. But 40% of US employees say that they feel isolated at work, and this leads to lower levels of commitment and engagement. [21]

Conversely, organizations with high employee perception of belonging benefited from a 56% increase in job performance, a 50% drop in turnover risk, and a 75% reduction in sick days, [21]. It's not surprising that 79 percent of organizations say fostering a sense of belonging in the workforce is important or very important for their success over the next 12 to 18 months, [22]

Just imagine the impact on a top US football team where 40% of the players don't feel part of the side!

An organization's culture will also have a strong bearing on employees' sense of belonging as well as their mental and physical health. Burnout, which is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress, [23] is often triggered by one or more of the following: [9]

1. Workload
2. Perceived lack of control
3. Lack of reward or recognition
4. Poor relationships
5. Lack of fairness
6. Values mismatch

A number of these triggers relate to an employee's sense of belonging.

Creating a sense of belonging at work is the outcome of three mutually reinforcing attributes: [21]

1. Employees should feel **comfortable** at work – An inclusive culture where employees feel respected and treated fairly.
2. They should feel **connected** to the people they work with, the teams they are part of, and the organization's purpose, values, and goals. Importantly employees want to feel that the organizations they work for are aligned with their personal values.
3. They should feel that they **contribute** to meaningful work outcomes— understanding how their unique strengths and efforts matter and are helping their teams and organizations achieve their goals.

The important thing to appreciate is that one size may not fit all employees, therefore some flexibility in the organization's strategy to foster a greater sense of belonging is required.

Some questions to reflect upon:

1. How does your organization foster a sense of belonging with employees?
2. How is the voice of the employee heard within your organization?
3. What measures are in place to ensure that each employee is respected and treated and rewarded fairly?

4. Sustainability transformation

The United Nations have said that climate change is the defining crisis of our time, [23] and time is running out. There is now a large scientific consensus that humans are the leading cause of climate change, [24] the effects of which are already impacting our world through changes in rainfall patterns, rising sea levels, and the increased risk of heatwaves, and floods, droughts, and fires. [25] The United Nations has also marked 2030 as a target for achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and Business has a critical role to play in achieving these goals, [26] and SDGs are a key part of the conversation on Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG).[27]

Having a strong ESG strategy will positively impact an organization's brand, customers, and ability to attract and retain talent. In a UK survey of office workers: [29]

- 76% of millennials say that environmental ethics are a huge concern to them.
- 83% said their company is not doing enough.
- 80% said their company's environmental values are either not aligned or only partially aligned with their own.
- 65% said that they were more likely to work for a company with strong environmental policies.

It positively impacts an organization's brand and its customers. In another survey of consumers [29]

- Nearly 80% of respondents indicate sustainability is important for them.
- 57% of consumers are willing to change their shopping habits to reduce environmental impact.

It positively impacts an organization's attractiveness to investors.

- New Environmental, Social and Governance (**ESG**) regulations in the EU [1] and the UK [2]
- Strong ESG programs are also motivating investors who see such practices as indicative of sustainable growth and part of a modern approach to risk management.

- Getting your ESG right leads to higher value creation including cost reductions, (Energy and Water), and improved Investment & Asset Optimization. [30]

The global technology companies are some of the biggest investors in renewable energy, with many now reporting or having plans to be **Carbon Neutral** and **Carbon Free**. [31] However, on 20th September 2021 tech workers from twelve global technology giants joined the global climate strike highlighting tech's role in climate change.

Key to an organization's sustainability credentials is the move from a linear business model of 'take, make, waste' to a circular and sustainable one that responds to carbon emissions, global waste, and pollution at every stage.[28] It presents an opportunity to rethink the business, remove complexity and fragility, build more resilience and unlock the creative potential of the business.

Some questions to reflect upon:

1. How is your organization aligning its sustainability values with that of future & current employees, customers, and investors?
2. How credible is your sustainability strategy and what is the risk of being seen as 'Green washing'?
3. To what extent is your organization able to move to the circular sustainability model?
4. What significant hidden risks have you uncovered by moving towards a more sustainable business model?

5. Why diversity matters

Put simply, the goal of any organization should be to create a level playing field for all employees to maximize productivity, potential, creativity, and shareholder value.

With 658% more S&P Global 500 Companies mentioning Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in earnings calls since 2018, this issue is already a priority. [3] However, US companies spend an estimated \$8 billion a year on DEI initiatives with little to show for it. [32]

People must feel that they belong and that they are treated fairly to produce their best and most productive work. But if you feel:

- Your ideas aren't valued when you contribute them.
- You have to work harder than other colleagues to receive the same recognition.
- Others are seen as having potential, but every time you have to prove your ability.
- You aren't given the same access to opportunities.

Then it's no surprise that many employees feel their organizations are not a good cultural fit for them. And this feeling may apply to many more employees than you think?

For example, a DEI initiative that does not address the impact of social class, will not be as effective as one that does. Not only will it be less effective in helping women and people of color, but it will also alienate first-generation white male professionals from blue-collar backgrounds. [32]

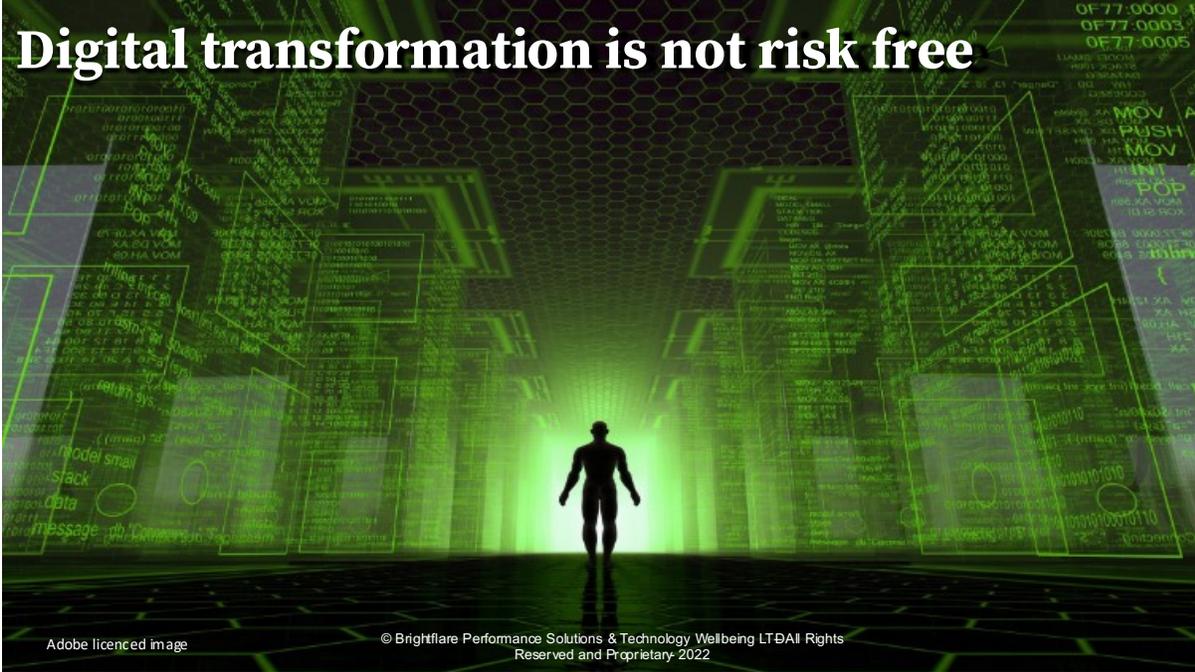


Similarly, an analysis of the top 1000 US companies by revenue by Korn Ferry found that the average age of a CEO was 59. [12] Many world leaders are also at the experienced end of the scale with Joe Biden 79, Xi Jinping 68, Olaf Scholz 63, and Boris Johnson 57. But older employees are often unconsciously stereotyped as having the lower ability, being less motivated and productive, harder to train, and less flexible. Unconscious or unintended stereotyping influences the outcomes of hiring, performance appraisals, and other business systems which are not strictly evidence-based. Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems designed to assist in recruitment have also proved difficult to implement due to the deep historic DEI biases in the data training sets. [33]

5.1. Digital transformation is not risk-free

Today Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not intelligent! It has no awareness of the limitations or constraints of the data, statistical processes or programming it uses, or the full meaning of any of the answers it gives. This requires human intelligence. Organizations are legally responsible for their actions, whether these are performed by employees, automated processes, or machines. If data with embedded historical cultural biases associated with gender, race, disability, or class has been used to train your AI recruitment assistant or any of your HR or customer AI-assisted software, then

guess what, it will most likely perpetuate and amplify these biases and potentially expose the organization to risk, and those individuals impacted, to discrimination. AI creates unique governance challenges and risks, particularly as its statistical models evolve and adapt over time.



5.2. Is diversity the key to creativity and problem-solving?

Everything that we think and do, has the potential to limit what we think and do next. Our past informs both the present and our expectations of the future, and most of the time we won't even realize it's happening, [34]. Teams with a high degree of similarity in backgrounds, experiences, and culture, might not generate as much creative friction as those teams with people of widely different perspectives who feel empowered to explore 'out of the box solutions. [35] Surrounding ourselves with people who are different from us, creates a larger pool of experiences to draw on for creativity and problem-solving.

5.3. Why we should think differently about DE&I

What we find surprising is that the status quo of organizations and boards with poor diversity still appears to be seen as 'the norm', and the relatively slow progress in DEI initiatives appears to support this. [32]

But the current situation is just the product of historic-cultural biases!

So rather than the onus being placed on those trying to justify the value of company diversity and diverse boards, surely it's only a matter of time before those companies that are moving too slowly are asked to prove why poor diversity produces better results for their business, customers, and investors.

Some questions to reflect upon:

1. How does your organization celebrate the contributions made by the diversity of your employees and ensure it is a good cultural fit with them?
2. How does your organization's approach to flexible working enhance the work experience and talent retention of employees?
3. What measures are in place to objectively test the fairness of your digital culture and processes concerning different groups of employees?
4. How does your organization reduce the risks of 'groupthink' and cultural bias?

6. Summary

In this article, we set out the importance of the human experience in digital transformations during what has been described as a perfect storm of change in the global economy. We shared five of our key insights, based on the latest research, which explored digital culture, upskilling leaders and managers, a sense of belonging, sustainability, and diversity.

We think that if organizations are to meet the challenges of the fourth industrial age, in a global economy that is becoming ever more complex and volatile, then the ability to exploit human capital will be a key differentiator in the success and resilience of any organization.

We firmly believe that thinking flexibly and differently at all levels in the organization is achievable by the adoption of a growth mindset culture at an organizational, management, and employee level, and embracing team coaching as an essential skill for managers of human capital.

We can assist you in creating a healthy, sustainable, and inclusive digital culture and help your leadership and management teams enjoy thinking differently and more creatively in meeting the challenges ahead. We take a coaching approach to get the best out of your high-caliber leaders and managers.

We will co-create the right formulation for your organization, and meet you where your organization is, depending on your level of readiness. Don't run unnecessary risks, by ignoring this imminent situation and its consequences to your culture.

Contact us!

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Ana Smith is a global executive coach and consultant noted for her passion for what she does and for her energetic and interactive style. **She is the CLO of Brightflare Performance Solutions.** Throughout her career, she has been extremely curious about the impact and relationship between humans and technology.



She's been part of executive teams in organizations such as Microsoft, General Electric, Hewlett Packard and American Express, with deep expertise in helping organizations with digital transformations and major organizational changes, helping teams and individuals elevate their performance and productivity, whilst optimizing their wellbeing.

Ana wants to serve people and organizations as a well-being coach by encouraging innovation and forward-thinking to inspire leaders, managers, and employees to be at their best and are energized to make the necessary behavioral changes, finding fulfillment and personal meaning.

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He is fascinated by the collision between technology and psychology and understanding how this relationship is changing our world, our health, and the way that we think, feel, and behave.

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