

# Time regained

Sense-making to build antifragile  
and courageous organisations

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| bip. Group

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Foreword

Time Regained

Sense-making to build  
antifragile and courageous organisations

The last two years have tested organisations. Companies and institutions have had to face unprecedented challenges and find new solutions to problems never before encountered. Despite the difficulties, the role that organisations have played in safeguarding the economic and social system has been crucial. Entering what we may term the post-pandemic phase, this role will be even more important. It is up to organisations to help the recovery or, as it has been called, the Great Reset. They will achieve this since the arduous experiences they have undergone have made them more resilient and conscious.

The BIP Group is well aware of this, since it has always been close to organisations and has supported them in every possible way. Therein lies its true nature as a consulting business. In these times of ongoing turbulence and uncertainty, one thing has emerged with great clarity: the importance of people centricity. If organisations can overcome any crisis, it is thanks to the people of whom they are composed.

The extraordinary employees in the Group BIP have allowed it to grow considerably even during the pandemic, and continued to support its customers with determination. This supplement by OpenKnowledge, one of our group companies, is exemplary for several reasons. It is built wholly on the value of people. It is positive and proactive. It specifies in which primary areas organisations must act. It relates specific cases of intervention. And it explains how to face the challenges that confront us by adapting courageously. To anyone who cares about their business, therefore, reading it can only be a good thing.




I am especially grateful to all my colleagues for the incredible labour of research and study that has led to the birth of this supplement and I thank them. I also extend my thanks to all the friends who have agreed to make their contribution, thus enriching this report with their testimonies in key passages.

This supplement is dedicated to the new generations that are preparing to enter the world of work, and in particular to all the authors for their incredible multi-voiced input which has resulted in this report, in order that everyone can soon live in organisational contexts which are more human and real and, above all, permit them to imagine new approaches.

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Index

6	Introduction	13	EVOLVE & CHANGE	94	Bibliography
10	OK Activation Framework	14	Culture design	98	About OpenKnowledge
12	Organisations in bloom	20	Objectives designer	99	OK Activation Areas
		24	The new sense of place		
		28	New working experiences		
		34	New paradigms for digital enterprise ecosystems		
		38	UNLEARN & LEARN		
		39	We work S.M.A.R.T.		
		43	Today's learning is child's play		
		47	Does it still make sense to talk about Talent Management?		
		50	The imperfect balance between learning and storytelling		
		55	Business communities		
		60	Grasping the informal		
		64	COMMUNICATE & ENGAGE		
		65	Sense of belonging & employee caring		
		69	True caring is self-caring		
		71	Evolving organisations through participatory mechanisms		
		74	Communication as a strategic business lever		
		77	When advertising filters fall down		
		80	Gen Z at work		
		84	The hybrid future of communication		
		88	The value of emotions in the workplace		

# Introduction

by Rosario Sica

If the title we have given this insert, *Time Regained* brings to mind the work of Marcel Proust, that is exactly what we desired. Within *In Search of Lost Time*, one of the greatest literary masterpieces of the last century, the theme of time is an essential leitmotiv, intertwined with that of memory.

This topic, however, is of great interest today, as well, in the world of organisations and society at large. Understanding the time in which we live in has never been so important.

The aid Proust gives us works on at least two levels. *“Time Regained”* is the seventh and final volume of *“In Search of”*, a work that is extraordinary for its ability to link introspective, autobiographical analysis with that of historical, social time. This seventh volume tells in particular how the events of the past take on a different meaning in subsequent phases of life.

This is the perspective with which we wrote this supplement. The phase we are living through allows the resumption of a series of behaviours from the past - which we can, however, reread with new eyes, reconsider, and partly change for the better, both in our private lives and in our organisational practices.

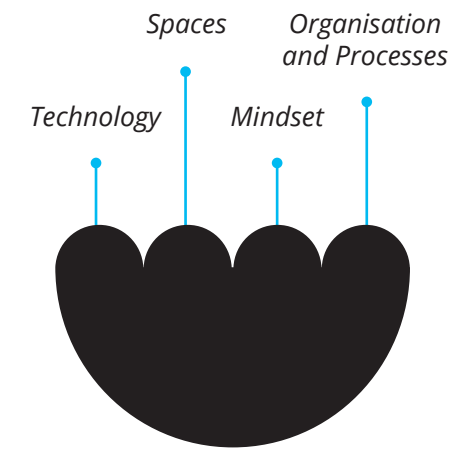
The second level on which Proust can give us inspiration concerns synesthesia. In what is probably the most famous passage in *“In Search of”*, the adult Proust renews his acquaintance with a madeleine, a biscuit dipped in tea, which unleashes an irresistible flood of memories from the time of his childhood. It is an unintended mixture, and yet an overwhelming one, combining sensory experiences with the stimulation of the spirit and memory. This is also a plan that is relevant to us today, because we all have an enormous need to get back to doing things with feeling and which we can experience fully with all our senses. Again, both in our personal lives as well as in the life of organisations.

During the pandemic, as difficult and problematic as it has been, we have had a lot more time for ourselves and our loved ones. We have had more time to devote to our passions. Now, in the recovery, we have a chance to return to our previous activities, but also to value things that formerly tended to be overlooked in our hectic lives. Organisations, in particular, can start anew if they are capable of implementing a strategy of courage; if they can rid themselves of useless things, of what Daniel Kahneman in his latest book calls “noise,” and focus on the essence of things.

What must emerge and become dominant is the empathic component: companies must be closer to people - their customers as well as their employees. They have to become truly people-centric and know how to express this orientation in everything they do. They must have the courage to get near to people, to put themselves on the line, and to express their feelings. They need to have more heart. And aim to be more positive, cheerful and truly happy. This also implies greater integrity and the ability to tell true stories, such as the truth of their brand.

On which levels should we act? To answer this question, I might take some of the content of my recently published article in the *Future Trends* supplement of HBR Italia.

To summarise heavily, the areas which companies must commit themselves to at this stage are, above all, the following four (Figure 1):



**Figure 1**  
The four areas of intervention in organisations.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

## Spaces

Workspaces today are in a dynamic balance, a phase of transformation from spaces to places. What is the difference? Spaces are where we live and work, but places are where we feel we belong. A place is made up of relationships, it is a social dimension in which the employee's well-being is truly placed centre-stage.

The evolution from workplace to place requires both design capacity and the ability to develop a corporate culture able to transform walls and surfaces into environments where employees feel good in themselves. As Rex Miller, author of *The Healthy Workplace Nudge*, states, this can be done with a proper wellness culture, one which is disposed to gently nudge employees towards high-level work performance and great economic results.

## Culture

In recent years the corporate culture in leading companies globally has made an important shift, starting with a focus on Employee Experience and leading to the notion and practice of Employee Caring.

The period of remote working has favoured a new culture based on trust, in which the worker is given more freedom to manage his own time and the possibility of defining their commitment not on the basis of performance but of the achievement of objectives.

Even that may not be enough, however. The most recent tendency within organisations places the concept

of Wellbeing at the centre. A corporate culture that is attentive to this goes beyond the concept of caring, and is aware that the office can be a place of fulfilment where one can feel happy - but only if it is designed to be so.

## Data

In contemporary businesses there are many change management needs. Changing one's own habits always involves a great deal of effort.

But change today can be supported by technology and data. How? Mainly by encouraging behaviour design decisions and solving problems of connection between people. The first aspect has to do with changing behaviour. Data, algorithms and apps are at our service to more easily effect the change in behaviour we have sketched out.

The second aspect concerns the need to support relationship needs. Technology and data can offer a way out of the organisational atomisation that remote working unintentionally brings about, identifying tacit communities and supporting free connections among employees.

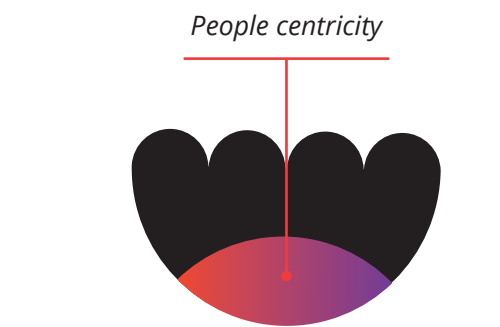
## Organisation

For the thinking activities that most contemporary employees, knowledge workers, are engaged in, the autonomy and accountability inherent in remote working are certainly attractive. But autonomy taken to excess can mean uncertainty and disorientation. Organisations need to reconsolidate and, in order to do that, they need to find new ways of working. In addition to the practice of revealing the tacit communities I just mentioned, the most effective way to do this is to encourage employee engagement, turning the headquarters into a hub-quarters. This means, on the one hand, making the office a welcoming place with a view to creating encounters, intersections and moments of cross-fertilisation; and on the other hand, to ensure that work is accompanied by moments of relaxation and gamification.

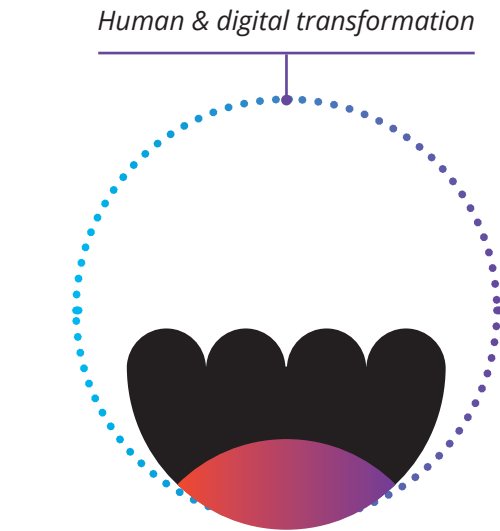
But how can organisations implement all this? The continuous activity of supporting companies that we undertake every day in OpenKnowledge puts us in contact with a multiplicity of tactical and strategic requirements, as well as specific requests for action. On this basis, we have figured out a way to support organisations facing a path of change. What point of view do we use to carry out our activities? The perspective of OpenKnowledge looks at people, individually and as a whole, and to the network of relationships, attitudes and behaviours through which the company lives.

Examining the organisation from the perspective of people centrality, we promote a human & digital

transformation that, both internally and externally, must enable resilience and the ability to evolve in a context of continuous transformation (Figures 2 and 3).



**Figure 2**  
The OpenKnowledge perspective.  
Source: OpenKnowledge



**Figure 3**  
The transformation needed.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

But how do we actually support change? What concrete actions must be implemented by organisations? We work together with people by supporting three directions of transformation, which in our opinion are fundamental at the present time. This supplement illustrates these directions in detail, with reference to the different organisational contexts in which we operate – and by inviting influential corporate speakers to share their ideas. The three categories of action are as follows:

### Unlearn & Learn

The first important action is to unlearn. Organisations need to free themselves from many concepts and practices that have been rendered unnecessary by the pandemic. They have to be abandoned because they were (long ago) obsolete or wrong. Next, the transition to the new normal must be implemented, going back to doing many of the things we used to do – but in a new way. That is why we have to rethink the needs of enterprises, and the actions to be taken must focus on learning and renewing skills. Almost every day the media reports that there is a serious mismatch between what is taught in our schools and universities and what businesses need. But the problem is not only an Italian one. Many studies report that most CEOs around the world recognise the existence of important gaps between the skills of their own workforce and those desired. Young people must be trained in a different way and, in our experience, this is possible: there is an urgent demand for action to meet this goal. After the T-shaped competences, those of the vertical, specialised type, today there is a lot of talk about the need for Comb-shaped competences, or skills which are less specialist but capable of embracing multiple fields of knowledge. In any case, it is a question of targeted action and of renewing employee training in an ongoing mode, focusing on the knowledge that is needed today, and that we will need tomorrow.

### Change & Evolve

In an environment that is changing at an accelerated pace, walking at the usual speed, as in the tale of Alice's, means standing still or going backwards. Changing and evolving today is not a choice; it's a necessity. How, then, can this be achieved; in concrete terms, to promote change in organisations? The second category of actions that we propose to companies involves working particularly on places and culture. Spaces can be recreated with the goal of pushing people towards collaboration. Transformed into places (in the sense explained above) they are able to reshape behaviours, facilitating the adoption of New Ways of Working that would struggle to develop in the old environments. Adherence to interventions to change the space, moreover, is linked to a transformation of the culture of the organisation, which often has to pass through a new culture of leadership. Business leaders must take on board the post-pandemic principles that today require abandoning the logic of control and micromanagement in favour of those of delegation and empowerment. In a short period of time remote working has accustomed employees to work not by task but by objectives, involving them in the responsibility for results.

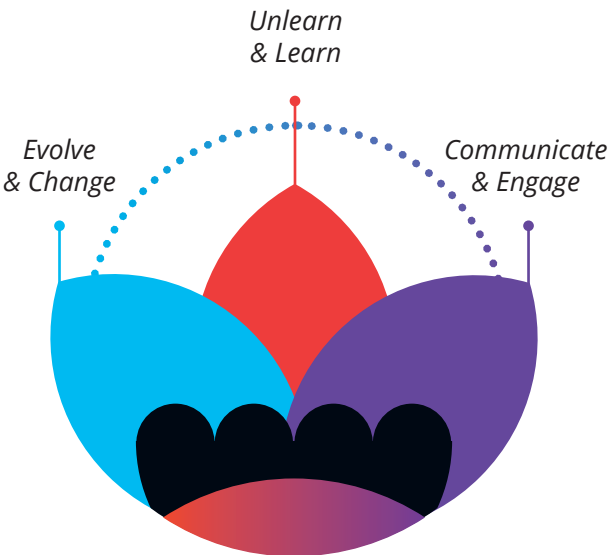
This implies decentralised decision-making systems and a marked flattening of internal hierarchies, which must be understood, accepted and bravely implemented.

### Communicate & Engage

The third category of actions is aimed at engaging people. But it is important to make it clear that this is not about initiating mega-communications programmes. The changes that need to be brought about are not top-down. Rather, they are designed with teams in an agile way. In other words, they are new operating models and behaviours that people want. The basis of everything is a macro-model of empathic engagement. We know that in large organisations it is not possible to instantly extend engagement with everyone. How should we act in these situations? The solution is to start with fast, agile teams able to create programmatic indications which inspire pilot experiences. These can then be extended to all employees with communication and engagement campaigns. In short, transformation is triggered by small groups of people acting as change leaders or ambassadors. Without this, transformation can be very slow or may not happen at all. In order to move ahead to actions of this kind, the concept of nudging remains valuable: as important as communication is, sometimes you get better results by talking less and doing more. The most effective engagement campaigns are those in which communication is accompanied by “gentle nudges” on the other action plans – spaces, culture, technologies and organisational models.

The three categories of action I have described are for us the refounding pillars of organisations, dimensions to be leveraged in order to bring about necessary change. Due to the constraints of space in this introduction, I have given only their general outline. The pages that follow, however, offer many clarifications and examples of how they can be grounded in real business life.

Now, what is the relationship between the four areas in which organisations must engage (reproduced in Figure 1) and the three classes of actions we propose to adopt? In our vision, the answer lies in a perfect integration – the one we present in Figure 4. As it will become evident from reading many articles in this issue, in the practical interventions for companies, each of the three types of action can concern only one area, more than one, or all four of the areas analysed. In other words, the Unlearn/Learn lever can concern both the area of culture, as well as those of organisational models, technologies and the use of spaces. It depends on specific needs and on a case-by-case basis.

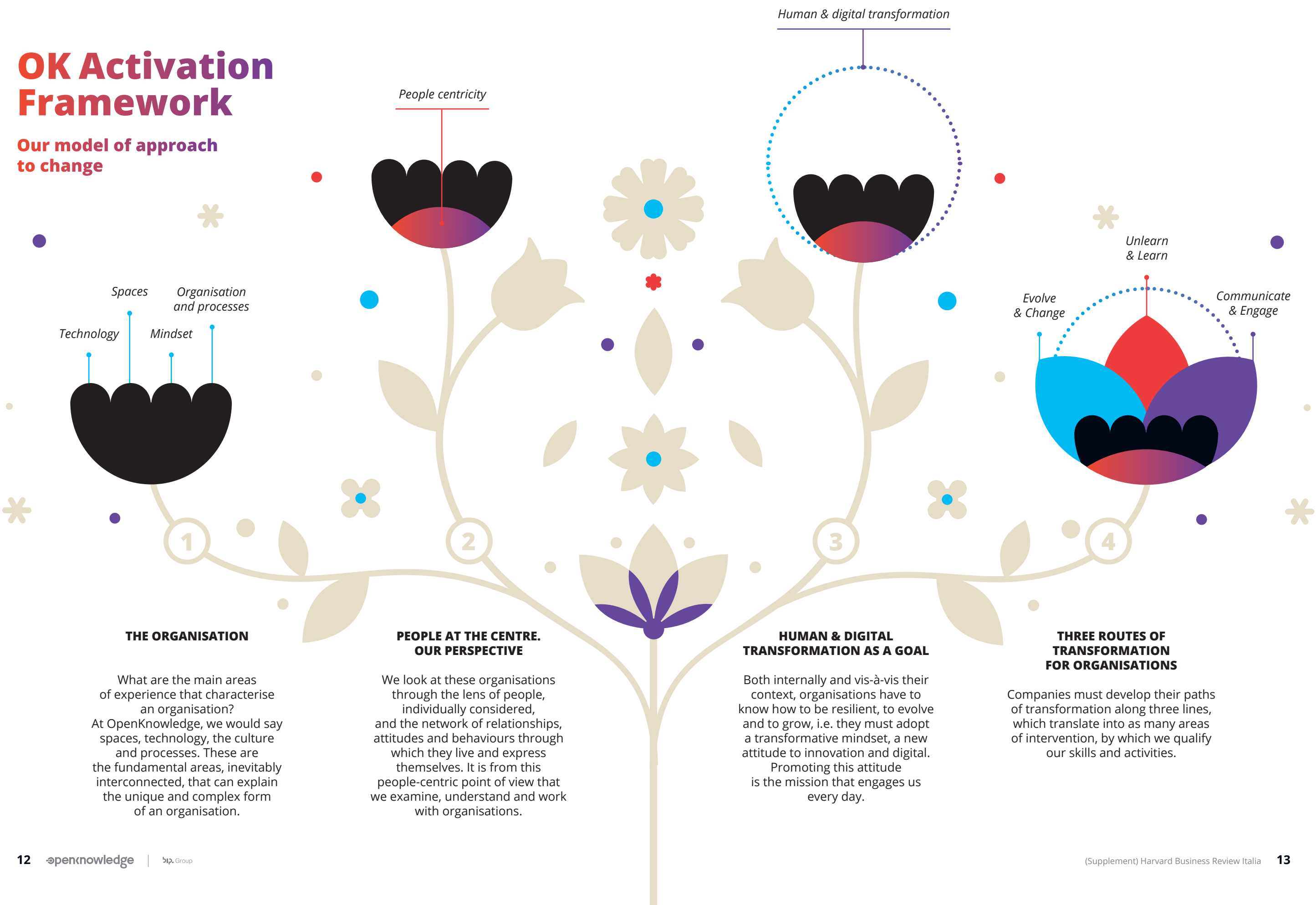


**Figure 4**  
Our framework for action.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

The distinctions I have been talking about are logical in nature and are meant to clarify the situation, making it possible to establish the purposes, contours and scope of every intervention. Today, at OpenKnowledge, we are at work in all these areas, with a heightened awareness of the importance and value of time – both our time and that of the companies we serve. This is time regained, following the experience of a collective crisis of exceptional magnitude that has caused us to reconsider many things; time, therefore, that is even more valuable, through which we hope to have developed (as Proust basically suggested) the ability to make better use of it.

# OK Activation Framework

Our model of approach to change





# Organisations in bloom

## The creative concept

We have been thinking about time, about all it implies and how we perceive it; how we would like to change it, speed it up, stop it, rewind it. We have been thinking about that incessant flow that we barely perceive, but which sweeps over everything.

Thus, we looked for something that can demonstrate its resistance to time, with its own power: something like us, able to adapt to the changes in nature and society, even the most unexpected and unbelievable ones. And also what we are going through now, which has turned our lives upside down in a way we could never have imagined.

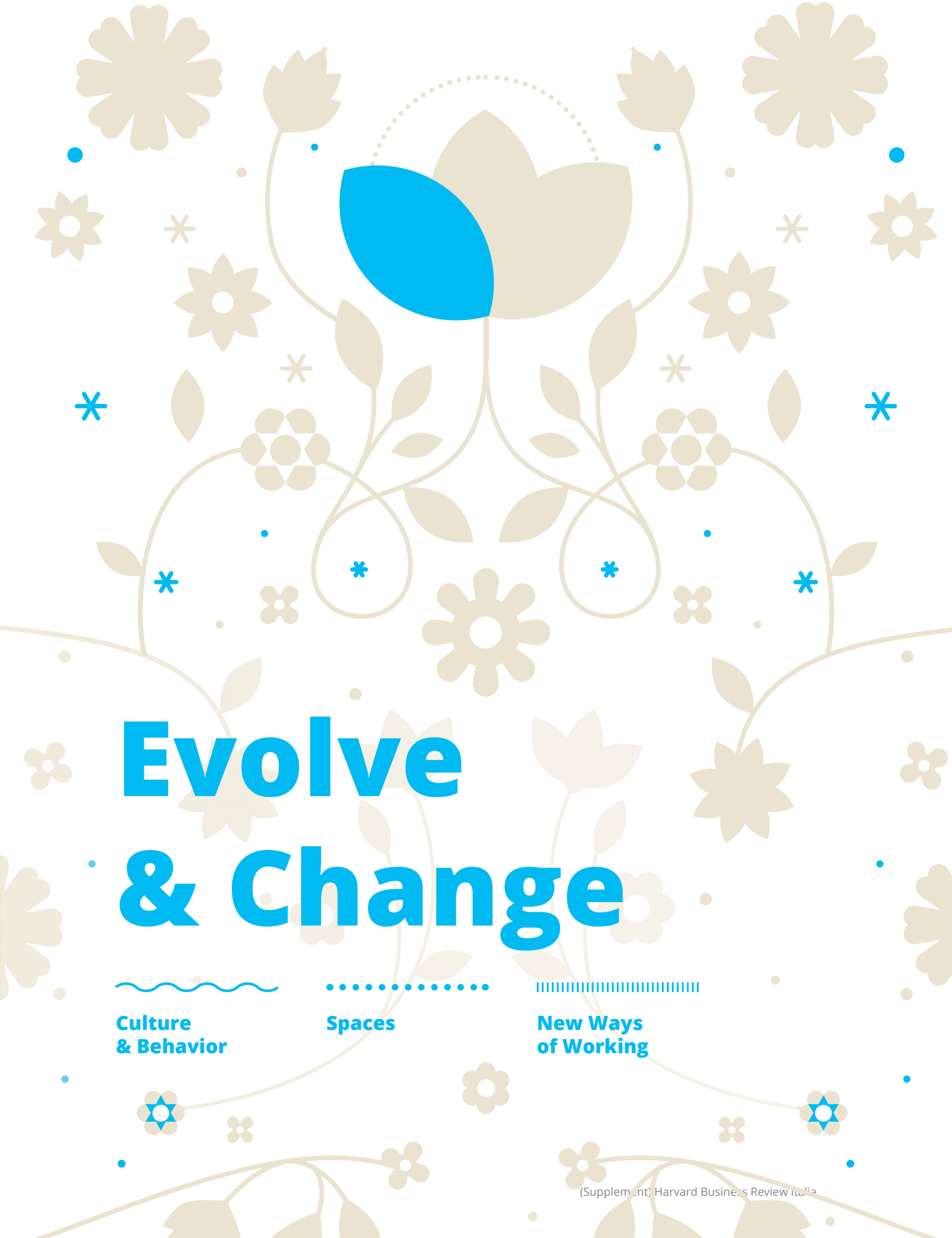
Perhaps it was while thinking about those first moments of upheaval that we found what we were searching for. Remembering that time past when we were in our homes looking out of the window.

It was at that moment that we visualised them, growing undaunted, resilient to everything, to the time that we were living through, but beyond all that, withstanding the elements and urbanisation: flowers.

Complex living beings, antifragile in their delicacy and beauty. Symbols of kindness, full of vitality, elegance and essentiality. Like us, but also like the empathic organisations we talk about in this volume.

We chose flowering as a metaphor of the present time: a powerful cyclical action, synonymous with life, strength and courage. An action that fully expresses what we are called on to do today: to start over, to open ourselves up to the world after a long period of closure, making new beauty and new opportunities bud. Keeping our roots firmly planted in our values, but swaying in time with the wind of change, always balanced. Stripping everything down to the essence, to then flourish in ways that are always different, reaching the future with ever-new forms.

*The time has come  
to blossom.*



# Culture design

## The silent value of culture in a world full of noise

### Why is it important to work on culture?

Above all, why is it being talked about so much?

It certainly isn't true that culture was unnecessary in the past. The point is that, until a few years ago, it was widely believed that the most efficient companies were those with the most timely and detailed processes. We see it every day. As the organisation grows, new rules, new procedures are created. Or, in the case of acquisitions, one tries to integrate the processes of different groups, with results that are often disappointing.

Historically, productivity has been ensured by order, an order based on prescriptive leadership, on the measurement of only visible results, on the resolution of problems at the technical level, on predictability and controllability (Deming, 1982).

Order, in whose name we have become professionally accustomed to acting with rigour and rationality, responding to a centrality that implied little need for initiative, will or intentionality. In doing so, we have built fragile organisations by suppressing randomness and volatility.

But today's companies are increasingly fragmented at the geographical level, heterogeneous in terms of generation, with a new set of ambitions, expectations and discretion (*degrees of freedom*) about the aspect of work, trying to trace the perimeters of their form and finding themselves dislocated, changeable, susceptible and open. Now more than ever, the context calls for them to be antifragile, to go beyond strength and toughness, acquiring that quality proper to complex natural systems that have survived the improbable events that govern modern times. Being antifragile means not only avoiding getting upset in the face of stress, volatility and the causality of events, but rather, benefiting from them and improving, abandoning forever the claim of total understanding and foresight of reality (Taleb, 2012). In this state of bewilderment, individuals find themselves

immersed in a context governed by errors, due to bias - or systematic distortions which our brains are continually running into - and noise, meant as undesirable variability in judgements induced by the reaction of the individual to particular cases (Kahneman, 2021).

*It is precisely here that we invoke culture, that thin sheet which lies between the raison-d'être of a company and the fuming operational machine of performance, that internal field of forces capable of stimulating an intentionality to action in people.*

Thus, in the absence of predefined rules, culture becomes the new key to the development, growth and innovation of business.

On the one hand we have the spontaneous intuition that culture plays a major role in providing and guaranteeing sustainability, understood as the ability to produce value over time, whether economic or social. On the other hand, our thought pattern is troubled when we realize that, despite the design and launch of majestic roadmaps, virtuous transformation drives, plans of innovation, development and growth, change does not happen. This because people lack an attitude, a justifiable will, which may be aligned with the greatest ambitions, or more simply because time has already passed and the roadmap has "expired" before it can even be implemented.

### Case study – the challenge

*"Culture eats strategy for breakfast" (Peter Drucker)*

A few years ago, we were at a large manufacturing company to analyse collaboration processes and the

exchange of information between functions with the aim of implementing a new Business Intelligence system capable of shaping strategic decisions. After several alignment meetings there were still many blind spots in the operation of their projects: information did not travel smoothly, but no one could explain exactly why.

So, in agreement with top management, we organised a workshop in which to bring together once and for all representatives of the various functions, with the aim of reconstructing a "typical order" and together mapping the data life cycle.

Of the many pain-points that emerged, one seemed particularly relevant and concerned the exchange of information between Sales and the rest of the structure: in a nutshell, all functions complained about a lack of attention from the commercial side to report projects in a timely way at the outset. Despite having a well-defined process, and a special tool to indicate the likelihood of new customers coming in, it seemed they routinely refused to do so.

This course of action caused significant delays in production, and consequently in delivery, weakening at the same time the ability to forecast and make decisions. The situation seemed paradoxical, since no one could answer a simple question: if the process is there, if the tools are there, then why are you not behaving as the company requires?

Something was preventing them from doing so. And it was not the lack of either adequate communication processes, nor a skills gap.

When someone finally found the courage to respond, we realised it was much simpler than that: they only entered the customer into the system after the contract had been signed because, well, it was bad luck to do it earlier.

It is a harmful belief that characterises the functions of many companies in a wide variety of sectors, but in this case, given the scale of the orders, it was responsible for much of the deluging of operations and performance. We were faced with the evidence of how a silent group belief, born in a cultural environment of low tolerance for error, of leadership that is very directive and "unkind", had given rise to a behaviour, rendered as a meme (from the Greek *mímēma* - imitation) and thus imitated and repeated over time, that was compromising the overall capacity of the company to execute strategies and processes.

On the strength of this and similar insights, we found ourselves rethinking the project that was about to start and how we should shift from the implementation of a data management platform to the design of a Data Culture.

### Myths about culture

In an attempt to reassure you of the inadequacy that we feel towards the theme, although we are aware of its importance, it is easy to choose to avoid navigating along the slippery terrain of culture and, depending on one's mental tenacity, to discredit it for:

- the vitality that has always been missing, has never existed and is therefore difficult to imagine
- a social science concept and therefore soft in its inferior meaning, unworthy and in stark contrast to the more bombastic levers of traditional management
- the sum total of all the sugary, overblown resolutions however empty and cloying
- a mystical, intangible, inaccessible concept
- a hereditary condition to be reckoned with beyond subjective wills, which cannot be treated of, and is therefore
- unworthy of design.

Hence our desire to shed light on such myths, to upgrade culture and promote it to be within the reach of all consciences and knowledge, and then suggest some perspectives to approach its evolution.

### 1. EXISTENCE. Culture already exists, even if you don't know it

*Culture arises and emerges from the relationships of a group and from interactions with the environment. It develops at the same time with being together and experiencing the context. Thus just as there cannot be a culture without a group, there is no group that does not have a culture.*

According to the American psychologist Edgar H. Schein, one of the leading theorists of organisational culture, culture can be defined as "the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems", refined and thus crystallized according to a process of cumulative adaptation (Schein, 2018).

It is a process of social learning and of imitation according to which we learn from what we see, from the point of view of survival (in some cases), of greater economy of mind and of the definition and confirmation of our own sense of identity. Culture being a group property, whenever a group shares the same sufficient experience in common, culture begins to form. Just as there can be no culture without a group, in the same way, there is no group – and, hence, no company - without culture. Whether it is recognisable or not, virtuous or not, in every company the culture exists and it has been around (practically) forever.



## 2. CAUSALITY. Culture generates impact

Culture is not an esoteric concept, belonging to the to the Platonic world of ideas. On the contrary, it has been demonstrated how it significantly impacts organisational resilience, which in turn drives not only the satisfaction and well-being of employees but also, and especially, business performance. Nearly all the texts that discuss organisational culture dwell more or less explicitly on the impact that it has on medium-to-long-term economic performance. John Kotter and James Heskett published their book titled Corporate Culture and Performance, in which they recount the results of their research conducted in Hewlett-Packard, Xerox, ICI, Nissan, and First Chicago, and of their quantitative study that collected contributions from more than 200 companies (Kotter; Heskett, 1992).

The results are clear: the authors describe how shared values and unwritten rules influence the economic performance of companies, both good and bad. Throughout the study, they refute the classical association between strong corporate cultures and excellent performance, emphasising on the contrary how strong cultures that are not aligned to their own context of business can lead people to adopt forms of behaviour that systematically endanger and destroy the organisation's ability to survive and prosper.

Likewise, cultures strategically appropriate to their own context may not lead to economic results in the long term if they do not contain standards and values that will support the company in adapting to a changing context.

## 3. IDENTITY. Culture is unique

There are no organisations with the same culture, just as there is no such thing as the same way of acting with different cultures. On the contrary, every organisation is unique, a mix of individuals, context and evolution that makes it unrepeatable. Any attempt to "replicate successful cultures" is, therefore, doomed to failure.

Groups tend to develop their own culture, which is nothing more than the way in which a large group of people live or work: the behaviours, beliefs, values and symbols which they accept, generally without thinking about it, are transmitted via communication and emulation from one generation to the next, generating a product of shared learning (Edmondson, 2012).

Thus, if we read culture in relation to the patterns of behaviour of the members, being each group of people quite specific, the culture that exists between them cannot be other than unique, unrepeatable and intimately connected to the context in which it is generated and in which it lives.

Not only that: in a company, a complex system orchestrated by departments, functions, personalities, goals and skills, it is hard for a pure, unambiguous culture to exist. This field forms, rather, the fertile ground for the emergence of minor cultures, sub-cultures or micro-cultures, extremely diverse and characterized by their own system of values, languages and schemes of behaviour, tending towards equilibrium and interchange with one another, called upon to act in a collective and synergistic way for the company system to survive and to produce a specific value.

## 4. PHYSICALITY. Culture is tangible

Organisational culture does not exist as such, as an entity that is abstract, but is instead something concrete, tangible and observable through people's behaviour, themselves observable and measurable, and through the environment and contextual artifacts.

We come across the proof of its existence and the strong power with which it influences work above all when trying to implement new strategies, or new dimensions of efficiency based on collaboration, openness and exchange. It is precisely here that one comes up against the collective consciousness, people's behaviour and the ingrained beliefs behind them.

If culture lives in people's behaviours, the obligation of examining in depth how and why we act in a certain way is inescapable. For many years it was thought individuals act as rational beings, capable of calculating the cost-benefit of choices and always orientated towards the most advantageous option. Behavioural economics has helped us to understand that this is not the case in reality.

Under conditions of uncertainty, human nature follows heuristic rules (simple and efficient rules, based on intuition and contingent circumstances to solve complex problems) rather than the laws of rationality.

All of this is just to say that culture contains unwritten scripts for everyday situations, often passing unnoticed, which are a tangible expression of its physicality on which it is possible to act concretely (Figure 1).

## 5. STATE. Culture changes

Culture is not something you write on walls. Instead, it is dynamic, evolves and takes shape from the continuous exchanges and interactions originated by the external context and among the individuals who create it. And it is precisely by acting on these exchanges that we can affect it over time.

If culture is born from shared learning to solve the problems of external adaptation and internal integration of a group, its qualities of dynamism, impermanence, and

continuous evolution emerge clearly. This overcomes the concept of culture as something static, age-old and stable in favour of a much more fluid and progressive vision.

We can easily find ourselves in Lewin's equation (Figure 2) who back in 1988 called our behaviours a function of the person (including history, personality and motivations) and its space (both physical and social), or one that envisaged an interrelationship between behaviour and environment (physical and social). And just as our behaviours alter as the environment changes, behaviours influence the relationships we have with the group and with the context, modifying every day, in a more or less imperceptible way, the culture we are a part of.

It has been said that in this period of being away from the office and redesigning the way we work, there is now more need than ever for culture as a social glue, but that may not be the case. It is the very culture of organisations that is changing and evolving, and organisations have to give a new answer to the question "how do we organise and support ourselves as a group?"

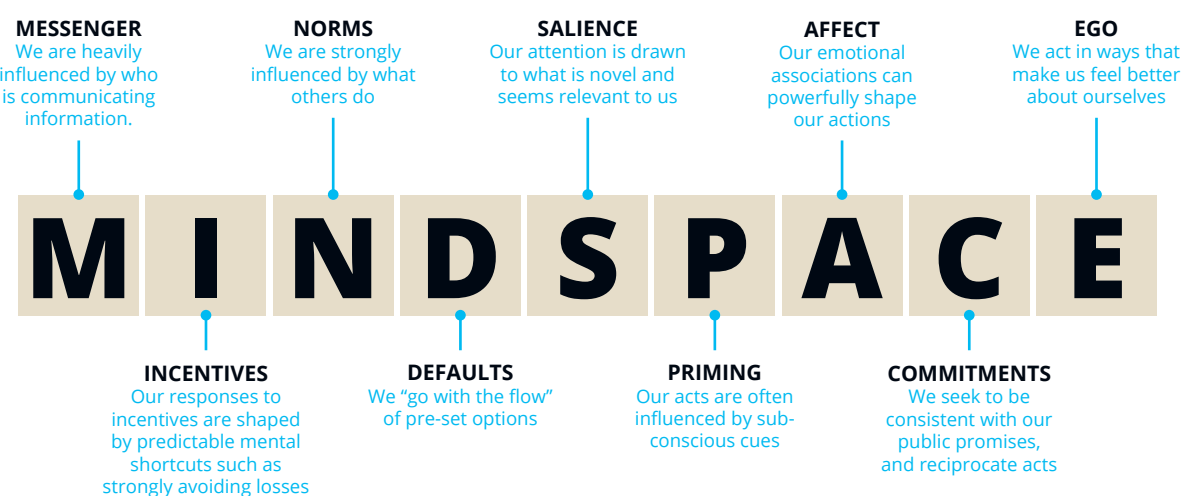
The pandemic context has severely altered the work context and prompted experimentation with new survival strategies, which have quickly accelerated a learning process from the context. That context, different in space, language, interaction, sociability and values, has greatly modified subjective validities, and has therefore altered the culture overall (along with operations).

That process of adaptation that originates culture is therefore exploring new challenges, waiting to define the new system of beliefs, values and norms until they become new assumptions, no longer accessible to consciousness. What we are experiencing is an opportunity like no other: now is the time to act.

## Designing culture and its capacity for evolution

This overview does nothing but inform us of how the culture is shaped by the ideas and stories that we share, by the way we think and feel, defined by the way we execute strategies, by how we operationalise systems and processes, by how we interact with people inside and outside to the organisation and how we incentivise or discourage behaviour.

Our proposal is to guide these changes by working to create a new culture or to evolve one's own in a virtuous way. Although culture is expressed through collective behaviour, it is about working not in order to act in a coercive manner on controlling behaviour (which, by the way, is not possible, least of all in adaptive and dynamic systems such as companies), but to treat the context as a lever to influence those behaviours which, once established as habits, will become an integral part



**Figure 1**  
Checklist designed by The Behavioural Insight Team that maps the 9 most robust (non-coercive) ways to influence human behaviour.  
Source: Institute for Government (2010)

Behavior  
(individual or group behaviour)

$$B = f(P, E)$$

Person Environment

**Figure 2**  
Kurt Lewin's field theory, which describes behaviour as a function of person/group and environment.  
Source: Lewin (2005)

of the group's culture. It is therefore possible to act on culture by designing experiences of meaning, consistent with each other and with what one desires to be. In this way, culture takes shape and lives, making explicit the values and beliefs that nurture spontaneous behaviour.

Case Study - Project Activities

From the analysis of dynamics to intervention initiatives

This is the perspective with which we approached the challenge of the aforementioned manufacturing company, whose business challenge (implementing a Business Intelligence strategy) was immediately reinterpreted as a challenge of cultural nature (fostering a culture of data that makes it possible to implement a Business Intelligence strategy). In order to meet this challenge we, firstly, involved the top management in the definition of a a common understanding of what it meant to be Data-Driven and the business behaviours that this implied - the desired cultural attitude. Next, together with 30 managers, we explored the culture in its social dimension, reconstructing on the value chain the current dynamics of data exchange, behaviours, interactions and social norms, to assess their distance from such a vision, and especially their causes. We went on from there with a dive into the more personal and contextual dimensions, exploring, on the one hand, the value that data held for each department, and, on the other hand, the environment and the artifacts within which the data was moving.

In this way, we discovered how the “jinx” element, for example, was concealing a series of of beliefs, past sales experience, ambiguity of roles, mistrust between departments, tools with poor performance, inadequate collaboration, unclear processes and unsatisfactory technical preparation. Uncomfortable silent truths. Aware of how the work of reconstruction, in itself, had already created a common base of awareness of the value of data and the responsibilities of each individual, we were finally able to work on drafting with the work team a list of 15 initiatives relating to technology, training, regulatory, operations, communications and behaviour, capable of reversing the negative dynamics, and facilitating the adoption of the desired behaviours: a range of initiatives that represented the plan for that infrastructure necessary to evolve its culture and make it capable of executing the business strategy.

IN-DEPTH STUDY

OK Culture Design Canvas

In a scenario composed of atomised companies that aspire to become antifragile, it is good to ask not only “What is my strategic objective?” but also “How does my culture help me get there?” At OpenKnowledge we work in this way to design a context that inspires, authorises and enables employees to perform new strategies, in a compact and synergistic manner. This means designing systemic experiences (Figure 3) defined on 3 dimensions:

- the individual, more intimate and personal dimension, linked to ways of thinking, personal beliefs and to one's own needs and history.
- the social, community and exchange dimension, the dimension of group interactions (no longer just physical to physical and digital to digital, but also physical to digital and digital to physical), of the dynamics of organising activity, transmission of rituals and shared habits, of social norms.
- the environmental dimension, linked to the appearance, atmosphere, artifacts and active and passive interactions with space, be it physical, digital or hybrid.

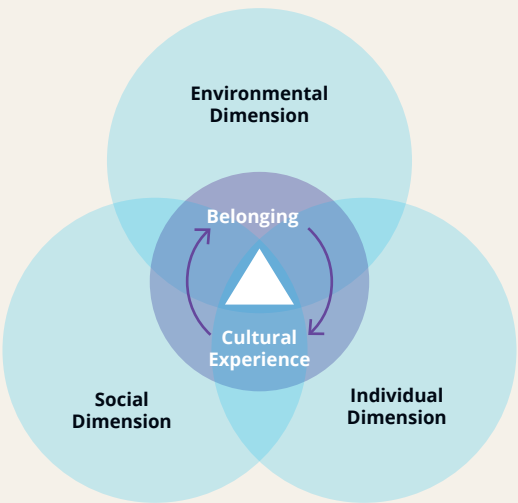
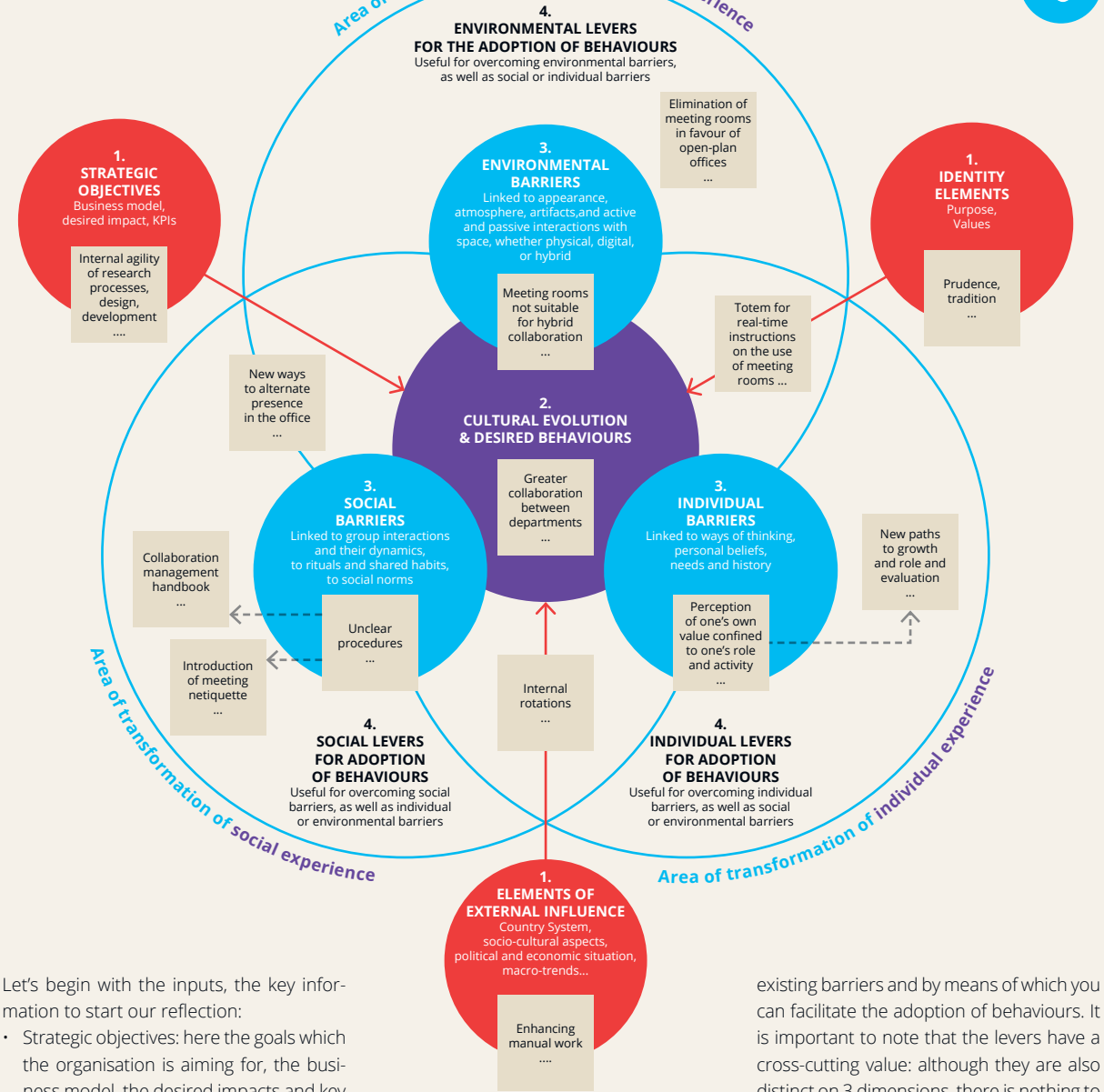


Figure 3  
The dimensions of the approach to culture by OpenKnowledge.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

For this reason, we designed the OK Culture Design Canvas (Figure 4), a methodological tool that guides organisations in identifying barriers to behaviour and which describes the desired culture and the actions to be taken to overcome them, reflecting precisely on the correlation between the individual, social and environmental aspects. How does it work?

Figure 4  
OK Culture Design Canvas  
Source: OpenKnowledge



Let's begin with the inputs, the key information to start our reflection:

- Strategic objectives: here the goals which the organisation is aiming for, the business model, the desired impacts and key performance indicators must be clarified
  - Identity elements: the purpose of the organization and the values that sustain it.
  - Elements of external influence: it is not possible to disregard the knowledge of the larger scenario in which a company is situated; think for example of the impact which the geographical location could have on the culture of the organisation.
- Once these elements are clear, you can indicate the central *desired behaviours*: these are specific actions reflecting the culture you aspire to in a tangible way. The third step requires an analysis, which it

is preferable to do both individually and in a group, in order to identify the main barriers to the adoption of the desired behaviours. Such barriers are sometimes traceable in the way individuals think and live the business context; in other cases, they are related to social dynamics and the interactions that take place between teams and individuals, while in still other cases, they are related to the environment in which and with which they interact. The last step refers to the identification of the right levers capable of breaking down

existing barriers and by means of which you can facilitate the adoption of behaviours. It is important to note that the levers have a cross-cutting value: although they are also distinct on 3 dimensions, there is nothing to stop you from using an environmental lever to overcome an individual barrier, or a social lever to tackle a environmental barrier. For example, it will be possible to imagine new rituals or rules to counteract the impossibility of some teams to work together in the office. Regardless of the starting point, the goal is always the same: to design experiences that nurture the culture and sense of belonging; because culture, while being silent, impacts in a massive way on individual and collective ability and willingness to act.

# Objectives Designer

The gentle push for change in the company

## Making sense of organisational change: beyond the concept of resilience

In today's business environment companies are faced with the complex challenge of making organisations "future-proof" - a challenge that cannot be ignored when coming to terms with what one naturally fears: the unpredictability of events, destined, in contemporary society, to be increasingly pervasive. Nassim Taleb has dedicated an entire trilogy to the uncertain and the unpredictable (Taleb, 2001 - 2012), going so far as to coin the term antifragility - the exact opposite of fragility - thus going beyond the concept of resilience.

An effective and immediately understandable metaphor describes resilience as the ability of a tree to bend to the will of the wind during the storm, without breaking, remaining unchanged in its original form.

If we were to describe antifragility on the basis of this metaphor, then we would say that an antifragile tree is not only able to resist and adapt to the stress of the storm, but is even capable of thriving in disorder and disruption (Taleb, 2012).

The paradigm shift from resilient to antifragile lends itself well to describing what organisations are called on to do today: not to defend themselves behind an apparent rationality and capacity to control, but learn, rather, how to take advantage of volatility, chance and the factors of stress, thereby becoming, in fact, antifragile.

Antifragility is a quality that calls us to be proactive as regards change, open to the new, ready for experimentation, innovative in thinking and in actions. Because change means first of all abandoning one's comfort zone, which is the state in which things are familiar and "controllable". A fundamental part in this change of step is played by individuals: that is why change is possible, but only if people's behaviours change, triggering an evolutionary process that flows into an organisation's new behaviour: the organisational culture.

## Is wanting always power? The limits of will and rationality

Every day, we make decisions on a wide variety of issues and, unfortunately, we often make bad choices. We can think, for example, about all the health advice we receive, about how many times we hear people say (or we tell ourselves) that we should exercise consistently and follow a balanced diet. Yet, even though we know that changing our lifestyle would benefit our well-being, we do not do it. Even though we tend to think our rationality is infallible, when we take on the role of decision-maker, we often cannot adequately process all the relevant information and choose the best option for ourselves. Why?

*Subjective decisions and individual behaviour are not always rational, they are strongly influenced by emotional aspects and cognitive hurdles that lead, more often than not, to a clear detachment between forecasts and results.*

The two cognitive systems involved in the decision-making process and behaviour are different but complementary: *system 1* is automatic, fast and involuntary, while *system 2* is more rational and reflective. The first one allows us to experience fear, to recognize and avoid a situation of danger, while the second one allows us to solve a complex mathematical question (Kahneman, 2011).

Based on several theories developed in recent years, derived from economics and behavioural psychology, addressing people's behaviour by leveraging system 1 and therefore "mindlessness", is more effective than a prohibition, a sanction, or a ban on doing anything.

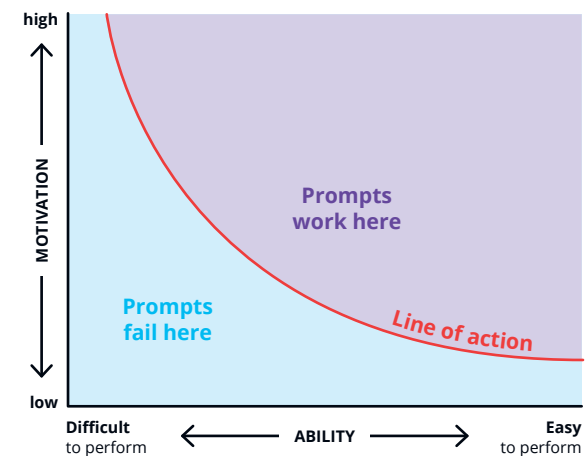


Figure 1  
Fogg's model  
Source: Stanford Behavior Design Lab

## Behavioural design: the starting model

BJ Fogg, founder of the Behavior Design Lab at Stanford University, has structured a model capable of supporting and helping us understand human behaviour more deeply. Fogg's model provides a useful guide, a map that can be used to encourage positive habits or to discourage habits that you want to inhibit.

The basic tenet of the model is that in order to accomplish an action, people must not only be sufficiently motivated and capable, but there has to be an element that pushes them to act at the right time.

Here then are the three elements of Fogg's model: Skills, Motivation and Triggers (Figure 1). Motivation is the only internal element and is the most difficult to design because it differs from person to person. There are three main Motivators that drive people to act in a certain way: pleasure/pain, hope/fear, acceptance/rejection. There are six factors of Ability: time, money, physical effort, mental effort, social deviance and non-routine.

In other words, if it costs too much, or requires too much effort, it induces unconventional and unaccustomed behaviour, then acting out a certain behaviour will be anything but simple. Finally, there are three types of Triggers: motivating, facilitating, signaling (buttons, real or abstract, that make you want to do, that take away difficulties or that remind you that yes, it is the right time to do something).

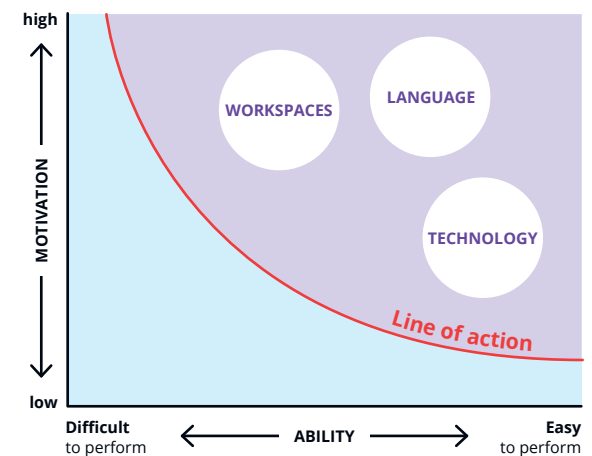


Figure 2  
Triggers enabling change  
Source: OpenKnowledge

## Nudging: change the form to change the substance

Behavioural design is often directly associated with the concept of nudging, the technique that proposes positive reinforcement and indirect suggestions as strategies to influence behaviour and decision making.

The famous image, and probably the most explanatory example in summarising the concept of nudge, is that of the adult elephant giving a little nudge to its calf to help them along.

Nudge was born in just that way, with the intention of leveraging cognitive biases (i.e. the systematic errors which our brain runs into all the time) to nudge and thus to induce and persuade individuals to change their behaviour. And if - as Thaler teaches us in his bestseller "*Nudge*" (Thaler, 2008 - this is true in life, in economic choices, in health and nutrition, then it also applies to organisations: creating relationships, generating a sense of belonging, supporting desired behaviours, encouraging the adoption of correct tools and processes, etc. Because we are human beings both in and out of the office.

And, so, where do we start? (Figure 2)

- We redesign workspaces, offices and corporate areas. Because the place where we work has an enormous impact on what we do and are able to do.
- We co-construct and promote a new language. Because language is not just a means of communication but also, and above all, a tool for interpreting reality, with which we influence it and orient ourselves.
- We make technology a key touchpoint in supporting new practices and habits, enhancing the digital Workspace as a new space capable of accompanying the person in the implementation of virtuous behaviour.



**Workspaces: the playground of change**

How many times have we heard the concept “learning through fun”? The Fun Theory - or the entertainment theory - is a theory of edutainment that is based on a very simple concept: the most immediate route to change people’s behaviour is to have fun, or rather, make certain actions and daily routines fun. The playful approach, at the basis of more traditional school education, proves enormously effective also for training adults because fun becomes a form of reward. So, how do we encourage physical activity in the office, persuading people to choose taking the stairs over the elevators? We turn the steps into a giant piano keyboard. How do we keep desks and workstations tidy and clean? Let’s revolutionise recycling by turning waste-paper baskets into basketball hoops for coworkers to compete with on coffee breaks.

**Language in the company: when saying is also doing**

When approaching cultural transformation, language is to be understood not only as a means of expression, but as a means of change: the words become stimuli and the language a “mediator” of the construction of reality capable of modifying the image that we have of the world. This thought is widely expressed by the philosophy of ordinary language of the second half of the 20th century, thanks to the treatises of several linguistic philosophers, among whom we will mention John L. Austin, referring specifically to the theory of speech acts. Austin argues that saying is always also doing (Austin, 1974). Most statements, therefore, serve to support and promote real action, and exert a particular influence on the world around them. This is why, even in change management interventions,

communication and language become a strategic lever to which particular attention must be paid. In these contexts we speak of performative language, a language that in itself helps us “do” and “change”. We therefore design communication strategies that include the use of language and narratives capable of positively influencing the recipients of the message, calling them to action and active participation in our change objectives.

**Technology: nudging is also digital**

With the support of technology we are seeing a radical transformation of spaces and work tools in the direction of an ecosystem that is increasingly hybrid and liquid. Digital Nudging allows us to intervene effectively on the characteristics of virtual environments by orienting peo-

ple towards their desired choices. An excellent ally in the architecture of digital-based choices is the HI - Habit Inspiring - platform, a digital coach than through Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning, supports people to create and maintain new habits during work activities. Change in behaviour is stimulated through nudges, digital pop-ups built on the basis of a real coaching plan, which challenge the user and stimulate good practices in the adoption of specific tools, in the management of work-life balance, and in promoting effective communication, etc. The strength lies in receiving the suggestion (or nudge) at the very moment when you should be performing the action, or when you are not going to do it, creating that very trigger that Fogg talks about in his model.

INTERVIEW

**A2A Paperless: let’s turn over a new leaf and build a sustainable culture together**

*with A2A managers of Operational Excellence, Internal Communication and Change, Sustainability Projects and Reporting, Group Information Communication Technology and Digital Enablement*

A2A Paperless is a project which forms part of the company’s sustainability-related initiatives, in line with the Sustainability Development objectives of the UN 2030 Agenda. The project seeks to promote cultural change, empowering individuals in adopting sustainable practices that bring organisational benefits and help the environment. Based on these needs, in collaboration with OpenKnowledge, A2A has structured an action plan to progressively support a shift from key messages to practical concrete behaviour by the entire company population, in a perspective of shared change.

*The A2A managers of Operational Excellence, Internal Communication and Change, Sustainability Projects and Reporting, Group Information Communication Technology and Digital Enablement talk about the genesis, ambitions and value of the initiative.*

**Why has A2A chosen to become a Paperless company?**

The first motivation is linked to a theme of identity and values. Let’s underline an important premise: A2A recently revised its

position as a Life Company. For us, being a Life Company means improving the quality of life of our customers, our people, but also the entire community, thinking about the future of the planet. Paperless is an initiative that fits perfectly within this scenario, becoming an important enabler to achieving sustainability objectives, the cornerstone of the Industrial Plan. Furthermore, there is a theme relating to culture and educating people to respect the environment as well as responsible, conscious management of resources, where every day, as a Life Company, we want to do our part. Finally, from the mapping of efficiency enhancing activities within the company, the need for dematerialisation and the digitalisation of processes have emerged, a step change which, in order to be implemented, cannot ignore abandoning paper as a physical working tool. The second motivation is linked to an issue of the evolution of the way of working. In the company, we had embarked on a journey of technological transformation even before the pandemic, but as we know, the Covid-19

emergency has greatly accelerated the processes of change, also enabling a major breakthrough for the Paperless Project.

**What are the strategic levers that drive the Paperless Action Plan designed along with OpenKnowledge?**

In defining the project we started with a careful case history that has developed in two main directions. Starting in February 2020 we have been intervening in the more hardcore aspect, focusing on printers and their use. In collaboration with the A2A ICT & Digital Enablement and Supply Chain, we have started reducing the number of printers in the offices and at the same time directed appropriate digitisation measures for processes which involved a considerable production of paper documents. To achieve the desired results a more systemic change was needed, so, as of June 2021, we started an accompanying path capable of encouraging new practices and supporting the dissemination of a real paperless culture.

**Within a project like Paperless what are the resistances that you meet?**

When people saw a procession of printers leave our principal premises, for many it was a shock and, in some cases, some people grumbled. That’s because, as with any change, what has a significant impact on the traditional *modus operandi* is initially disorienting. A2A comes from a culture strongly linked to physical space: think of the archive, which was fundamental to us, managed until a few years ago entirely on paper and which is now evolving in an increasingly digital perspective.

**What role does the workspace play in a project such as Paperless?**

A2A Paperless goes hand in hand with the new ways of working to which we are progressively orienting and which will lead to a “revolution” in space management. Paper - as well as being a tool for work - is also the means by which we circumscribe our own space: “my desk, my office, my documents, etc.”. This is an attitude we want to change, moving in the direction not only of sustainability, but also of sharing, thanks to new environments capable of supporting an agile and flexible approach to work and to support the development of new mindsets.

**What is the role of communication, instead?**

Paperless needed a narrative that was engaging, distinctive and impactful to involve all our people and ensure active participation. The creative concept “Let’s cut it out! Paper doesn’t grow on trees. It destroys them” is the communicative solution which we chose for its immediacy and the power of the message. The idea behind it is to start with an everyday expression “Let’s cut it out!” – and by repositioning it at a level of concreteness and actionability to sanction the transition from words to actions. This play on words ties in with the need to move from ideology to reality by calling people to action, so as to take the Paperless culture from being a utopia to something tangible. Of course, a creative idea is not enough to do it, but we need a communication and engagement campaign - developed along this conceptual theme - which includes actions that involve the whole company population. The campaign started with information and awareness raising activities, leading to environmental initiatives. In addition, all outputs bear a closing “signature”: “When we take care of the environment together, life is more blue”, a direct reference to the Life Company’s values and business strategy.

**What are the critical success factors for the Paperless Project?**

First of all, it is essential to make it clear that Paperless is a project that not only benefits the company, but also people and the environment. Each one of us can - and must - make a difference even through small acts, a message that must be forcefully reiterated. In other words, we could say that the critical success factor is value consistency, the individual’s adherence to the values of the Life Company and the Industrial Plan, to be Ambassadors for the change that we want to see in the world. Finally, we must mention teamwork as a key element: collaborating in a cross-functional team allows us to look at design and sustainability from many points of view, defining a synergistic and systemic strategy. The collaboration brought about in recent months between the various company functions has become a best practice to be valued and remembered for the future.



# The new sense of place

In the last two years, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, organisations have literally been overwhelmed by the many changes the crisis has brought about in people's personal and professional lives. One of the first effects of the pandemic was the emptying out of workplaces, in order to maintain social distancing among workers. The effect has been a consequent isolation of people and an atomisation of organisations, factors that have undermined the capacity for team cohesion and collaboration and often, even more so, people's sense of belonging to the company and their engagement with it.

### The new role of spaces

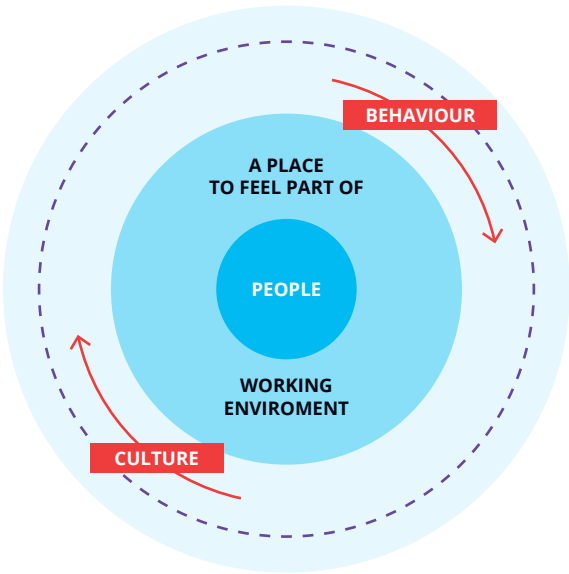
In this context, the very action of going to work, something immediate and simple, has taken on a drastical-

ly different meaning: going to the office or not has today become a choice in most cases and, as such, it needs a reason. It has therefore become essential to initiate reflection on the redesign of work spaces with a view of the relationship between the organisation and the employee, starting with the dual function of the working environment (Figure 1):

- A space renders the corporate culture tangible through all the elements that compose it: from the position and distribution of workstations, down to the aesthetic elements and details of employee care. Every characteristic, in fact, transmits the company's values.
- Secondly, spaces influence behaviours. As Lewin's field theory reminds us (Nencini, 2012), the behaviour of an individual is in fact a function of living spaces, which in turn are made up of people and environments.

*It then immediately appears evident how working environments represent a strategic asset for value generation, including economic value, for organisations, with a direct impact on company performance in terms of efficiency, collaboration, loyalty of its talent, and innovation*

The World Economic Forum (2014) estimated that through an effective rethinking of work spaces it is possible to achieve a 20% increase in productivity. Other studies from the School of Psychology of the University of Exeter (2010), estimated that it can increase productivity by up to 32%, involving employees in co-designing their own work spaces. Further relevant impacts on other strategic dimensions should also be considered, such as: people engagement, motivation and branding (both employer branding and



**Figure 1**  
Spaces and people as closely interconnected elements.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

brand positioning). Several reports by JLL (2017) highlight the fact, for example, that employees, when they are immersed in an environment that is clearly and favorably unique for their company, feel a deeper sense of pride to be part of the team. By designing comfortable and welcoming environments, and customizing the space with respect to corporate culture and to the specific needs of the population that will inhabit it, we can then improve well-being and communicate the company's sincere attention to people.

### Create places of belonging: from Spaces to Places

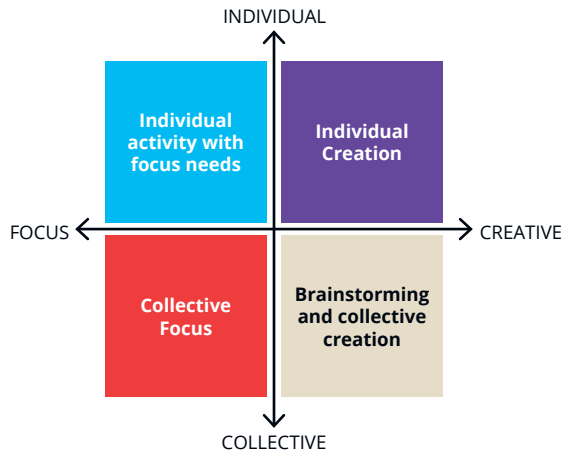
In light of what has been shared so far, it appears necessary for organisations to switch from Spaces, locations in which to carry out their daily activities, to Places, where people recognise themselves and develop a sense of belonging to the organisation.

*Places are vital, imbued with corporate culture and values, relationship enablers and dimensions in which employees develop their own identity as part of the organisation*

To create Places, you need to put the focus of your design on the employee, responding to questions such as:

- Which archetypes best describe the behaviour of our employees?
- What is the experience our people have at work?
- What ritual spaces should our offices embody?
- What values should be expressed in the workspace?
- What behaviours do we want to drive?

As an example, we can cite the path followed by BIP that,



in order to design its new offices with a view to encouraging a new way of working, defined a set of personas representative of the different professional roles (e.g. consultants, data scientists, designers, staff and so on) and - for each of them - researched in depth the daily employee journey. The result led to innovative, articulated and modular spaces that today can better meet the various needs of the entire company population.

After gathering people's needs, we were able to aid design by combining two perspectives:

- The perspective of wellbeing, leveraging a series of elements that can increase well-being (see, for example, the UP150 case study), the quality of the relationships, and a sense of belonging.
- The functional perspective, with which we can map workflows within the activity-based matrix (Figure 2), to ensure that the space becomes an enabler of each person's talent and needs.

### Stimulate people's creative expression

Focusing in particular on the activities of a creative nature in the matrix, we have tried to investigate what the components are that influence creativity, and which can be translated into architectural components or nudges to facilitate people's creative expression (Chesters, Mahoney, 2021).

Specifically, based on the literature (Legaard, 2019) and on our project experiences, it may be appropriate to highlight a few factors:

- *Priming.* This is the effect by which the exposure to a stimulus affects the response to subsequent stimuli. In the case of creativity, individuals exposed to stimuli linked to the creative artistic sphere - such as elements of furniture design or visual art - are actually more motivated to innovate (Friedman et al 2003).
- *Safety.* To give their best, it is necessary that a person feels free both to express themselves without risk either of judgment or making mistakes (Duhigg, 2016). Space can play a crucial role in transmitting this kind of culture. (Why not have, for example, a space where the best failures are displayed? All successes are successes because they are preceded by a series of attempts).
- *The role of play.* Play facilitates the cognitive processes involved in creativity, and provides immediate rewards in terms of fun and sociability. It follows that a team game can be a decisive positive element

**Figura 2**  
The matrix of characteristics of an activity in the workplace.  
Source: OpenKnowledge



also as part of the workspace (Legaard, 2019; Fluegge-Woolf, 2014).

- *Pressure.* A Harvard Business School study (Amabile, Mueller, Simpson, Hadley, Kramer and Fleming, 2002) showed that when we are under pressure our creativity decreases by 45%. A space that helps reduce stress can, then, positively influence performance in an organisation.
- *Exploration & Interaction.* Finally, creativity and innovation can only be amplified by a space that pushes people out of their comfort zone and leads them to venture into different experiences (Pentland, 2015).

## Space in the making

The reflection on the new role of spaces must necessarily consider some specificities that characterize this precise moment in history, when the scenarios regarding how and when/by how much we will return to filling up corporate spaces again, still appear to be in flux.

Numerous data confirm the desire of a large proportion of employees to continue their work either totally or partially remotely: FlexJobs, a recruitment company, estimated in April of this year that 65% of the workforce wish to remain as remote workers.

This phenomenon therefore requires more and more companies to move towards Hybrid Working modes. (See the box on “Hybrid Working” for further information on the subject.)

In this perspective, alongside physical corporate spaces, the design of digital spaces needs to be undertaken: the two dimensions must be integrated into a model that allows both those physically present and those working remotely to participate in a given activity in an appropriate manner and with the right level of inclusiveness.

Furthermore, it appears important to us to reflect on the relationship between working spaces and the country. How can organisations create real Places, encouraging at the same time decentralised spaces in the country that adhere to models of 15-minutes cities (polycentric cities in which the buildings and neighbourhoods are being redeveloped for new uses, including work activities in a logic of proximity)? And how can employees try to recreate Places for themselves in new spaces, not exclusively reserved for their organisation, such as co-working spaces?

Finally, other questions arise from the realisation that, in an increasingly complex and disorderly global context, the organisations that are most likely to thrive are those that Taleb (2013) defines as antifragile: companies that

are able to adapt, accommodating the unexpected and the uncertain.

Reflecting this in spaces means adapting to the changing needs of contexts and people: will our companies be able to consider, in their design, themes of genderless or intra-generational inclusion, as well, of course, the issue of environmental sustainability?

## Conclusions

What we can hope for today is that in the future spaces can also rediscover their role as places open to the community and the country.

Spaces without barriers to entry, spaces without social distancing, spaces for the entire ecosystem that revolves around the organisation: Places that can also belong to customers, suppliers and partners. Spaces that can activate the virtuous circle of dissemination of culture and enabling behaviour for all stakeholders.

Spaces that will enable the collective well-being, integrating at full capacity in the surrounding area.

Spaces in which the concept of contamination will only have a positive valence, to indicate mutual relational, cultural and intellectual enrichment within the organisation. Spaces that will make people happy.

## UP150 Case Study

Places, as we have described them, are those locations where we can finally realise what Rex Miller (2018) thinks may be the promise of workspaces that are genuinely aware of well-being and health: bringing the best version of people into the office and leading them out at the end of the day happier and fitter.

With this in mind, OpenKnowledge participated in a collaboration with a number of technical project partners, in the experimentation on UP150, an ecosystem of personalised services for the employee based on a concept of unconscious motor activity.

UP150 aims to facilitate the development of exercise by integrating it into the normal flow of professional activities thanks to three main drivers: the reinterpretation of spaces (BIP has made its new offices in Piazza Liberty, Milan, available for the experiment), the inclusion of specific equipment that – for the simple reason of being used during the working day - provides targeted and quantified movement, and the Digital Trainer app that can provide employees with personalised movement tips. The goal is to prove that the 150 minutes of moderate activity per week suggested by the WHO to allow people to consider themselves healthy, are compatible with office life and can be integrated into the working day.

## Energy & utilities case study

In order to understand the needs and requirements of individuals more fully, so as to build real Places, a particularly useful tool can be found in Organisational Network Analysis (ONA): a quantitative methodology to analyse the way in which communications, information, decisions and resources flow through an organisation. ONAs are used in a variety of fields, from management to the behavioural sciences and help us to better understand the dynamics of interactions – formal and informal – that take place within a group. In the case of the design of spaces, this information can then be used to facilitate collaboration between network nodes that most require proximity or to push interaction between distant nodes, thereby encouraging random collisions, for example. The project followed by OpenKnowledge had the specific objective of conducting a survey on the demand for proximity and meetings by the various functions in order to better plan the distribution of people in offices. The results of the analysis on information and collaboration

flows highlighted, for example, how some business functions were particularly barycentric compared to others - having more contacts and collaborations with the rest of the company - and could therefore benefit from greater proximity to the others.

Another pertinent result was the emergence of heterogeneous subsets by function within the network derived from the ONA, from which the strategic importance of proximity for groups working within the same project becomes clear.

## IN-DEPTH STUDY

## Hybrid working: the future is already here



The expressions "going to the office" or "reaching your workplace" seem outdated today as the physical place where we carry out our profession is increasingly "mobile", "personalised" and "individual" and therefore needs a logistical specification.

In the era of Covid-19, the mode of work has broken with tradition and opens up a perspective of fluidity and freedom: individual companies decide how their employees should work and sometimes the employees themselves choose whether to work remotely or in person.

This is the case with so-called hybrid working, i.e. the possibility of creating a profitable compromise between working in the office and remote working.

This hybridisation of work not only provides greater flexibility in terms of location and movement, but also seems to bring results in relation to the quality of leisure time - time occupied generating a positive impact on people's work-life balance.

The freedom to choose the style of work

that you most prefer invigorates employees who are led to a higher rate of retention, engagement in company dynamics and productivity. According to Microsoft's Work Trend Index, over 70% of workers want flexible remote work options to continue, while more than 65% want to spend greater time in person with their team (Microsoft, 2021).

In order to best manage this change, 66% of company decision makers are considering redesigning physical spaces to better adapt to hybrid working arrangements. In order to activate this model, you have to start with the design of a new employee experience that, contrary to what has been done up till now, prioritises and enhances digital transformation alongside the redesign of office space.

The introduction of digital touchpoints will become crucial: touchpoints that allow you to manage safely the influx of people into the office, book desks and other workspa-

ces (hot desking), or introduce hardware and software that enable digital collaborative experiences that are as safe, inclusive and challenging as the those in person. Hybrid work is destined to forever change our way of working and it is only by activating dynamics of employee caring and listening that it will be possible to generate a transformation that is sustainable, lasting and valuable. An enormous change is taking place that starts with people, the beating heart of organisations, and we cannot afford to ignore this in the future.

# New working experiences

## Designing the evolution of work as a hybrid experience

### The emerging dynamics that are changing work as we know it

The most obvious consequence of the pandemic in the organisational field is undoubtedly the increasing remoteness of work. In a constant balance between the physical world and the digital one, over the past year and a half our experience of work has become hybrid. But what do we mean by that? Under the term work experience we define here all the interactions that a person experiences within the company, both individually and collectively, and which are, on the one hand, oriented towards collaboration and business purposes, and, on the other, towards an ongoing dialogue with the organisation as a workplace.

The evolution towards hybrid determines two fundamental transformations: both the form in which we think about the experience of work and the meaning we associate with it have changed. The boundaries that helped us define it have faded: the workspace is no longer codified, the time that we associate with work activity is fragmented and overlaps with personal life, the rituals that accompanied our interactions have changed or disappeared.

The hybrid dimension has challenged these boundaries, leading also to a reflection on the meaning that we attribute to the experience of work. Now that we have discovered new frontiers of autonomy, we are inclined to keep them. Because of this, the relationship between the organisation and people is changing: the vertical orientation, that of command and control, is being replaced by an increasingly horizontal flow, which promotes people's independence and requires leadership to know how to govern this new structure effectively. Managers are now required to direct action towards listening to the organisation as a collection of people, guiding it towards the

achievement of business objectives and with an increased focus on people care.

In this hybrid context, the role of digital tools is changing. No longer just a means by which to complete work, the platforms and tools we use on a daily basis are becoming an instrument of culture, a fundamental point of connection between people collaborating, a channel through which to disseminate the values of the organisation and convey a new sense of belonging untethered from traditional rites and places. Governing technology as a tool for internal culture is, therefore, becoming necessary and strategic, both for the creation of value for the business as well as for the organisation as a workplace. Hybridisation, in fact, introduces new elements and new dynamics into the work environment, which lead people to interact in a context that has an increasingly diffused and branched configuration.

*Presiding over the theme of experience of work means appropriating a strategic asset: responding – through the definition of a new form and a new meaning – to people's emerging needs supports the achievement of business objectives.*

### How to look at the new work experience

The change brought about by hybrid work in terms of work experience is so significant because it puts the four areas of the organisation we consider as core – spaces, technology, mindset and processes – under discussion, intervening in the salient dynamics of each and modifying them to the point of requiring revision and redefinition of their contribution to the life of the organisation.

In this sense, governing change means finding a new role for these attributes, and this can only be done by looking at them from the point of view of the people who bring them alive, that is, people in the organisation. Adopting a people-centric perspective means thinking about how the ecosystem of relationships between people, tools, spaces and interactions that take place on different planes, either physical and digital, animate the organisation, which is therefore no longer a static and defined entity but a complex system, which must be observed in its dynamism. A path of analysis and design of the hybrid work experience that adopts a systemic perspective allows for this point of view of the organisation, its information flows and interactions that pass through it, enhancing the complexity of the structure instead of considering it as an obstacle to be overcome. The systemic view, in fact, allows the discovery of levers of action to support the identification of expectations and people's needs, i.e. points or junctions of the system where it is strategic to intervene, in order for change to become an opportunity for improvement in the organisation, both in terms of the definition of its own corporate culture and in terms of business objectives.

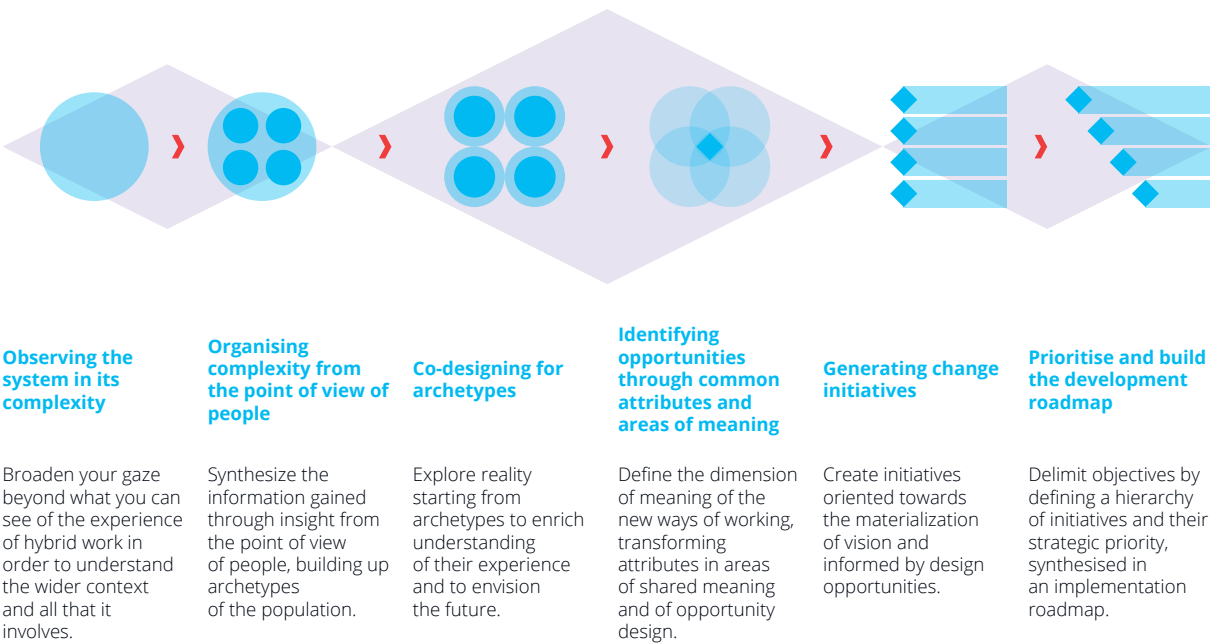
### Designing hybrid experience with people at the centre

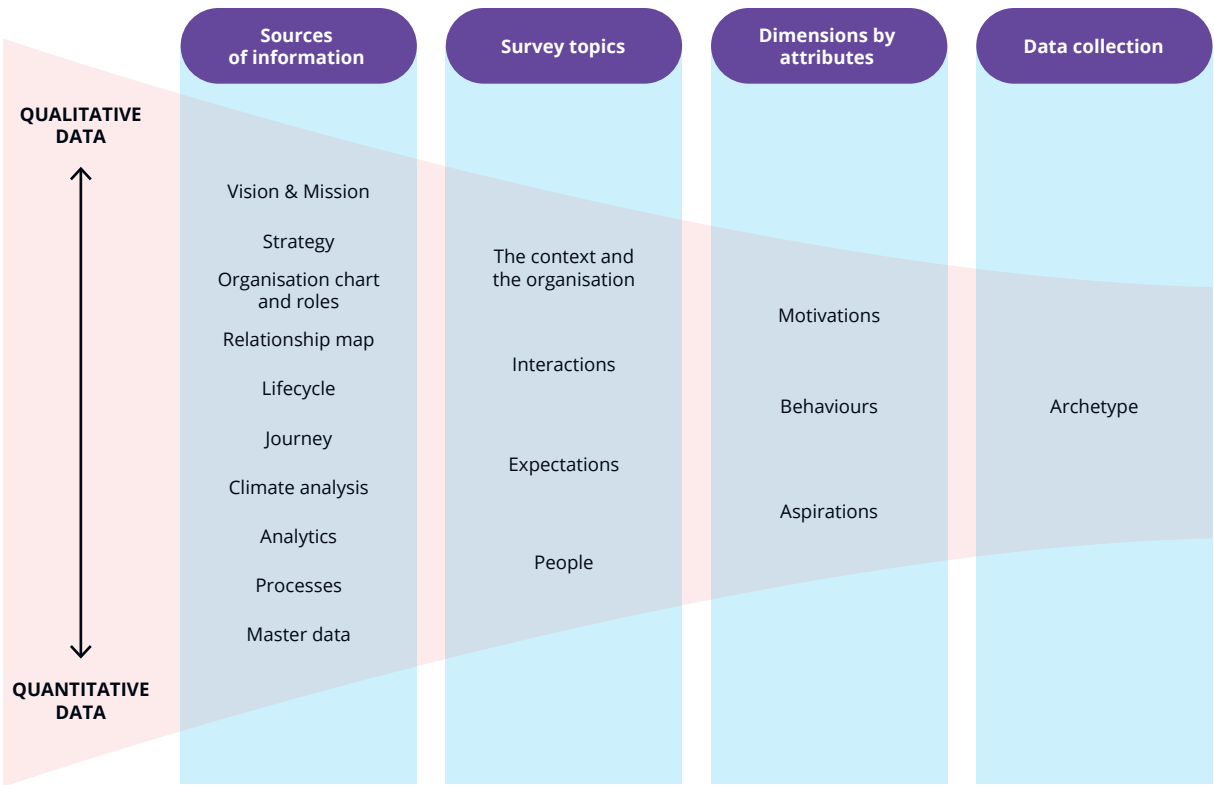
Accompanying the evolution of work experience in the hybrid context means working on two horizons: the one of the current experience and that of the desired experience, constructed from an analysis of the present and of the possible areas for improvement. The two horizons must be explored through physical and digital dimensions in which the experience is articulated: the environmental dimension - which concerns the relationship between spaces and people, the individual dimension - which concerns the behaviour that people adopt, and the social dimension - which concerns how people interact. This observation is effective if conducted together with people in the organisation whose knowledge of the context and its heterogeneity enrich the content analysis.

To design hybrid experience you first need to understand how change affects the dimensions of the organisation's core, changing its shape and what work means to people. But we also need to recognise a vision of change, a goal to strive for that represents a new horizon for the organisation, a new way of understanding the relationship with people and business. The design process of the hybrid work experience (Figure 1) starts from understanding this vision.

Once you understand the horizon towards which to

**Figure 1**  
From the complexity of hybrid experience in organisations to the definition of strategic interventions.  
Source: OpenKnowledge





**Figure 2**  
From data to the construction of archetypes of meaning for the context being investigated.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

orient yourself, you need to understand the impact of this in terms of work experience. The union of the two dimensions of analysis - the general one of a vision of change for the organisation and the particular one of the hybrid experience - occurs through the definition of archetypes of the population. These tools help rationalise the mass of available information by segmenting it and defining models of meaning that express people-centric insights, that is to say, those able to describe people's point of view.

The first step in the construction of archetypes (Figure 2) is the collection of data - both qualitative and quantitative - about the organisation. This data, a mixture of big data and thick data, i.e., data that informs in a broad way and data that explains things specifically, are investigated in order to understand the context, people and their interactions and expectations. From this survey you can segment different sets of attributes, which describe motivations, behaviours and aspirations, leading to the construction of archetypes that express the different attitudes of people towards their current experience of work and its desired evolution.

The work of investigating experience - present and desired - performed using the archetypes co-designed with employees leads to building a dimension of shared meaning about the opportunities and levers for change that emerge from the analysis. These levers are transformed in a process of ideation that further sees employees involved in concrete initiatives, divided in a detailed way and evaluated according to their feasibility, impact and priorities. This work, together with a strategic evaluation carried out by the management, lays the foundations for the construction of a practical and immediate implementation roadmap of change, providing the path to follow in order to evolve work experience in a hybrid way that is with the goals of the organisation.

**Generate successful hybrid work experiences**

How can we ensure the effectiveness of the experience design of hybrid work? The specificity of each organisational context prevents us from offering formulas for universal success. The application of a design flow such as the one described here and the use of modular tools,

such as archetypes, allow us to maintain spaces of freedom, to be filled with the specific contents of each reality, while maintaining a structure of work and an unambiguous design direction.

In this sense, it is important to stress the need to approach this type of design as continuous experimentation, an iterative process in which we learn as we explore and where the lessons learned are capable of sustaining the construction of solutions, in a continuous feedback loop that must not be interrupted by the definition of an intervention roadmap, but, rather, must improve the solutions implemented on a cyclical basis.

The voice of the people in the organisation and their direct contribution to the design of change initiatives and the construction of the hybrid work experience are essential to ensure the adherence to solutions designed for the reality of the needs and expectations of the corporate population in all its manifestations, but they will not be adequate if they are not accompanied by real engagement by the organisation in the process of defining experience. This manifests itself both in terms of practical participation in design at all levels necessary - from decision-making to, indeed, participation - as well as in theoretical terms of the clarity of the vision.

*To generate an experience of effective hybrid work that meets the needs of the business and people, it is essential for the organisation to know how to articulate its vision of change and how to direct the design management towards manifest and reachable goals.*

Finally, it is important to remember that the success of the design of a hybrid work experience does not materialise with the definition of a set of initiatives for change and an implementation roadmap. Designing a new form and meaning of the hybrid work experience means recognising the organisation as a dynamic ecosystem and putting in place the tools to orchestrate it by governing the new frontier of change in the experience of work.

**Enel Case Study, New Ways Of Working: applying an innovative approach to co-design the future**

In an environment that has led many companies to have to abruptly change their way of working, integrating into

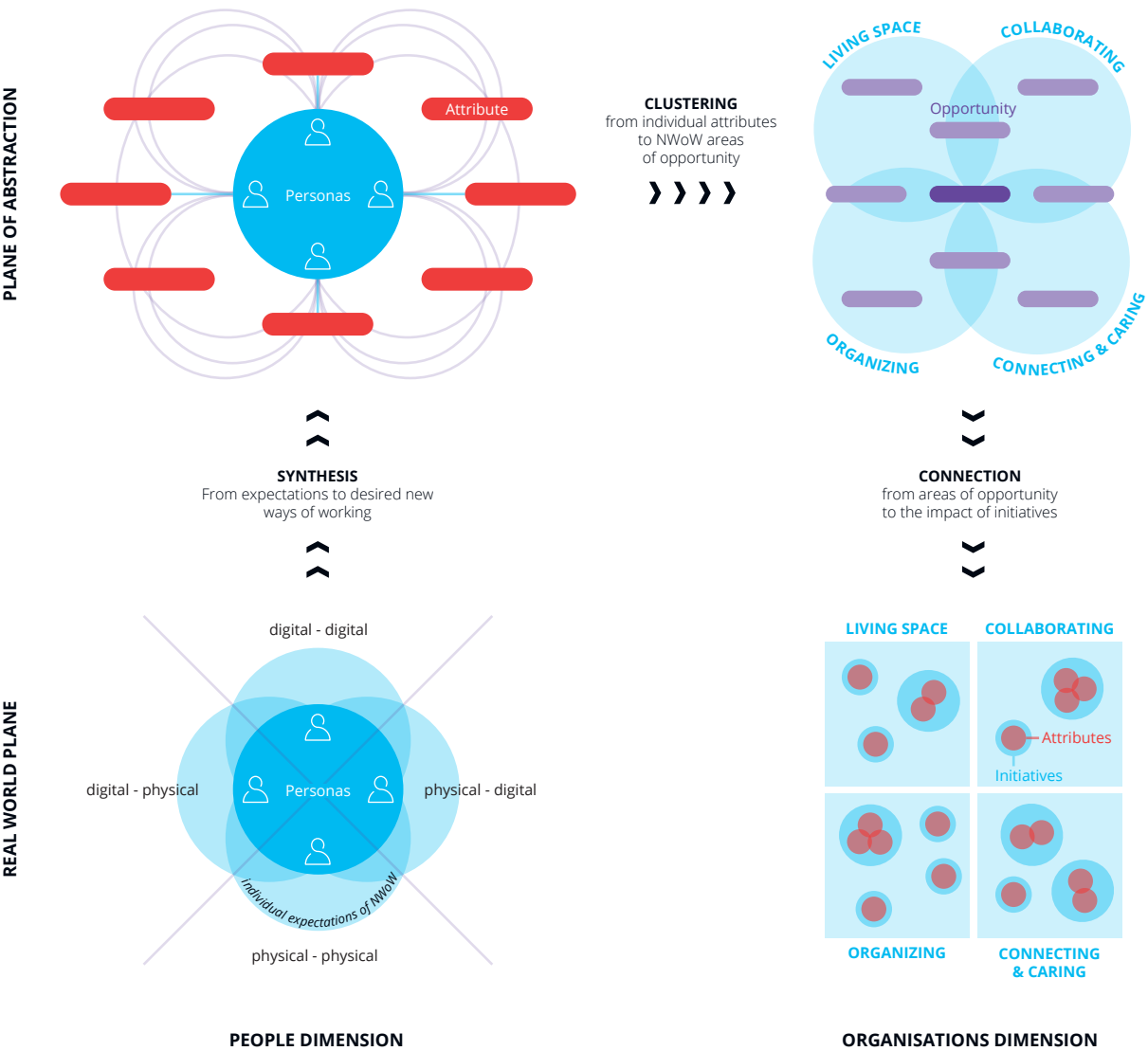
their work experience the new requirements of remote working, of hybrid collaboration and new ways of bringing the organisation closer to its employees in a flexible context, the approach formulated by Enel channels the lessons learned, transforming them into opportunities towards new leadership and working models for all its members globally. At the heart of the path of change can be found a new vision of leadership, so-called "gentle leadership", a term coined by Guido Stratta (the Group's Director of People and Organization), which enables a fundamental transformation in the culture, roles and the way in which the people experience their work, influencing the future evolution of collaboration, relationships, caring, processes and spaces. Our intervention is part of a broader set of actions to design the transition to New Ways of Working, which has required a fundamental effort of understanding of the organisation in its present form, in the way it is experienced and in the initiatives in place.

**Investigate, involve, plan**

The project, which lasted 9 weeks, was a groundbreaking test of our methodology, based on moments of divergence and convergence to transform organisational complexity into guidelines for the design of future experiences that are aligned with expectations of the population and the organisation's vision. At the heart of this process lays intensive collaborative work, carried out over 3 weeks of daily workshops held remotely with Enel people, distributed throughout 10 countries and different organisational levels and areas.

Starting from Enel's change framework, we adopted a people-centric perspective to address the themes of hybrid work with a particular focus on Diversity and Inclusion. The first tool we used in our work was quantitative company and contextual data, cross-fertilised through ad-hoc frameworks to give life to four corporate population archetypes that, by incorporating multiple dimensions (from biographical to aspirational) evolved into data-driven personas representative of the complex reality of the company. The personas played a leading role in the survey on the current work experience, carried out in co-design workshops using typical service design tools such as a journey map, lifecycle map and relationship map. The information collected in this way added further detail to the personas, describing their motivations, aspirations and pain points. This work of understanding working modes formed the basis of the definition of the future work experience. Again, thanks to co-design, core values were tracked, and then successively applied in a future vision of the journey and lifecycle, and subsequently in strategic initiatives for the





**Figure 3**  
the process of sense-making for the transformation of expectations into initiatives.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

transition towards New Ways of Working (NWoW). Designing change initiatives is a process of sense-making guided by the set of information revealed in the workshops (Figure 3). This information was abstracted in order to identify the design pillars, which in turn guided the concrete definition of the initiatives. Subsequently, the initiatives were ordered in an implementation roadmap that took into account the variety of work experiences (determined by the differences in company profiles and types of business) to bring change to all levels of the company, from managers to the operating staff, from Rome to Bogotá.

The intersection of people's varying perspectives, taking into consideration the different dimensions in the organization, and the enhancement of the long-term objectives, led to the construction of initiatives aligned with the company vision, consistent and oriented in a strategic manner. Taken together, the initiatives constitute a portfolio of transformative options for the organisation and for the employee experience. To make this effective in the future, moving along the project path, it is essential not to lose sight of the contextual perspective, integrating the roadmap into the daily reality of the organisation.

**Designing for NWoW:**  
**what to reach and what to bring with you?**

At the end of the project, we identified 21 initiatives to guide the future transformation, defined 11 new NWoW pillars, and explored 4 personas in 3 weeks of work with more than 20 participants from 10 different countries on 4 continents. This was the testing ground for a set of methodologies and experimental approaches, not only for the innovativeness, but as a consequence of a rapidly changing context with ever-increasing and varying demands. This challenge allowed us to validate our approach and, among the conclusions we were able to draw, one stands

out above all others: the importance of equipping oneself with complementary and diverse skills and knowledge within the team. Only thanks to this contamination of skills and experiences it is possible to effectively resolve the complexity of projects defining hybrid work experiences, because the variety of viewpoints and skills allows you to adapt the approach to the context and create appropriate tools for the challenge. By combining the knowledge of change management, behavioural economics and organisational culture to those of service design, data analysis and strategic evaluation, we were able to transform a vision of the future from its principles to its materialisation in the reality of everyday work.

**INTERVENTION**

**The path to a new employee experience:  
from hearing to seeing,  
from co-design to experimentation.**

by Carlo Albini  
Head of Innovability, People and Organization, Enel Group

At the end of 2020, after 9 months of remote working forced on more than 50% of our corporate population, we found ourselves facing a blank page with the task of interpreting and developing the most fashionable and generic theme of the moment, the so-called "Next Normal".

We decided to do this by first putting our people at the centre, defining an organic listening and engagement plan with colleagues, consisting of separate channels to explore ideas and expectations about future working models:

- A hackathon involving 20 colleagues and 30 university students in the design of social interaction models in a "hybrid future."
- A Call for Ideas open to all colleagues, which garnered 120 proposals on various dimensions, from operational models to spaces of work, and from well-being to leadership.
- Two surveys dedicated to the "New Way of Working". An initial questionnaire, addressed to all Group employees, collected around 44,000 pieces of feedback on Engagement, Well-being, Leadership, Digital tools, Models and Workspaces. The second survey, instead, involved over 4,000

managers of elementary organisational units in the entire Group, aiming to define the main place of work (office or otherwise) for each organisational unit and the minimum attendance frequency at the headquarters, depending on the types of activities and the high synergy team moments.

From this path, it emerged that for us the change will not correspond to a single, centralised model, but will be characterised by an empowerment pushed towards the periphery of the organisation for the definition of levels of flexibility and hybridisation of working models, which will correspond to new paradigms of collaboration and new management routines for teams.

With this awareness and the enormous wealth of insight gleaned from colleagues, we entered a new and exciting phase of our project (described in the Enel case study), with the objective of co-creating a portfolio of initiatives to shape the New Way of Working and manage the transition, always maintaining a strong focus on the value of the future employee experience. To guide our vision, we chose 4 dimensions of change, our 4 "new ways of..."

- Collaborating: how will we overcome the constraints of space and time to maximise effectiveness and the interaction of our teams?
- Organising: how will we build our new routines by leveraging responsibility and autonomy?
- Living spaces: how we can design a new diffuse "architecture" of places to support new collaboration needs and meeting opportunities?
- Managing relationships and care: how we redefine patterns of social interaction, to support relationships and ensure attention and care for the well-being of our people?

The implementation of the new working models will undergo substantial and lengthy experimentation with organisational solutions, supporting tools and layout of workspaces, but in any case, we believe that listening to the needs, expectations and feedback from colleagues (both as individuals and as part of the teams) will remain central, in order to calibrate the approach and solutions so as to maximize their impact on people and organisational effectiveness.

# New paradigms for corporate digital ecosystems

## How to rethink the way we interact with knowledge in hybrid work contexts

How will the new normal work for employees? To answer this question, many organisations are restructuring physical spaces, reviewing company processes and adopting new technological tools. For this reason, it is important to design digital touchpoints that enable a new employee experience, taking into account changes in context.

We are not just talking about smartworking. In fact, we should not overlook a broader perspective of transformation, linked to working arrangements characterised by different forms of hybridisation.

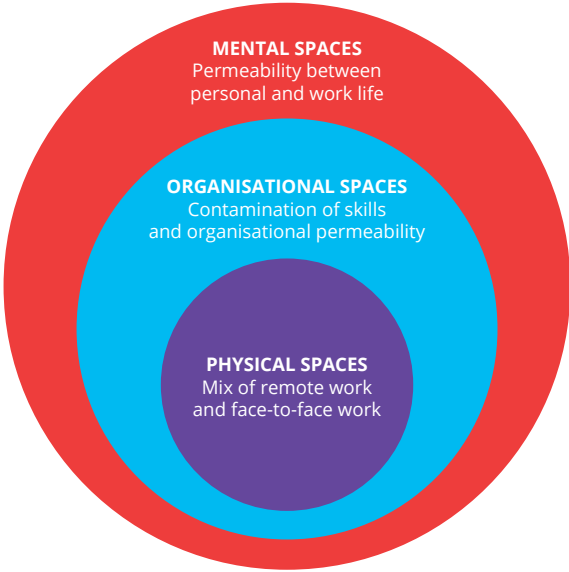
**Not just hybrid work: hybridisation as a new paradigm of workers' lives**

The most obvious form of hybridisation, commonly identified as hybrid work, is that which pushes towards a non-necessity of physical spaces as an element of an organisational reality. Hybrid work enables the concept of a dispersed office, where geographic distances constitute weaker barriers, but where, at the same time, the importance of physical places is preserved for certain types of activities.

Trying to broaden the field from a concept of purely physical space to one that includes mental spaces and their organisation, reveals other facets of the hybridisation paradigm.

Various agile frameworks being deployed in enterprises promote the removal of organisational barriers that slow down the processes of idea generation, innovation and fast delivery. Business agility is facilitated by contamination and multidisciplinary, rather than by structures made rigid by organisational silos.

Among the manifestations of hybridisation most evident in recent times there is the permeability between work and personal experience, which also has implications for how technologies are designed for the employee, and for the needs of the latter within ever less compartmentalised days.



**Figure 1**  
Forms of hybridisation that impact the employee experience.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

*The absence of defined boundary lines between work space and personal space makes clear the importance of not just talking about smartworking, but also of smart workers, i.e. people capable of adopting new personal organisational solutions, supported by appropriate technological instruments.*

**Immediacy and ubiquity: the keywords for new ways of interacting with knowledge**

The experience of remote working yesterday and hybrid work today reinforces the need in the online experience to take care of aspects that in the office are handled informally.

There is, therefore, a need for the same immediacy, but without the possibility of having close physical proximity.

*For this reason, it is essential that however you choose to proceed with hybrid work, nothing is left to improvisation and all employees are placed in a position to proceed in line towards a common goal and be supported in every aspect of the business.*

Hybrid work is already a reality for all those workers who do not spend most of their time in an office among desks and meeting rooms. Even before the pandemic, those in professional areas such as consulting and sales, as well as personnel in the field in construction, utilities and the energy sector, needed ubiquitous solutions to stay up to date with the latest news from the company and to be involved in training projects and professional growth initiatives.

These needs have quickly spread to the majority of employees of all those companies that have started or are starting to adopt hybrid work solutions permanently.

**The virtual coach as a complement to structured training actions**

A useful tool for all those companies oriented towards continuous learning strategies is that of virtual coaches. These are bots that provide suggestions and reminders,

to which the employee may refer for a quick answer to specific questions; they can provide information to swiftly enable users' actions and at the same time, they can guarantee the availability of contents, referring the user to the insights they are looking for.

Some examples of the application of virtual coaches are projects supporting the adoption of technology. The implementation of strategies for the adoption of new habits is also a compulsory step to obtain the benefits promised by technological tools.

Since it is often difficult for the worker to stop their ordinary activities in order to devote themselves to structured training courses, it is both useful and effective to complement courses and manuals with short training activities adapted to the needs of the individual user. The virtual coach can act as a link in the training path, reflecting a holistic perspective that is fundamental to reaping the benefits of a well-designed employee experience.

**From archiving in folders to optimising for findability and content relevance**

Two priority needs we see in working with several of our clients concern findability and the relevance of corporate files and content.

Navigating through an ever-increasing volume of data which is rapidly updating is becoming a need felt even more strongly by those who work remotely. Traditionally, the answer to the demand of findability of information has been the creation of filing systems in strict hierarchical folders.

The availability of virtually infinite cloud storage space and the introduction of increasingly advanced search algorithms is shifting the value for the user from logical rigour and order to the immediacy of finding relevant information.

The young people of Generation Z, born after 1997, already think this way, so companies have to get ready because GenZers are already entering the world of work. In fact, they have always been accustomed to finding any website, folder, or file by typing keywords or partial phrases into Google or any other search bar. And they can do this at any time or place, thanks to smartphones and cellular networks (OpenKnowledge, 2021).

It has already been noted in universities (Chin, 2021): students of this generation have no real conception of a place where files live and how they are structured. The concept associated with their way of reasoning is rather that of a container from which objects of interest to them are drawn according to their demands.

Adapting to this new approach can lead to gains in productivity and efficiency, as shown by the speed in



searching and finding information. The time freed up from the cataloguing activities can consequently be spent on activities with a higher added value. Of course, one must consider the importance of practices that enable the expected benefits to be obtained from increasingly advanced search algorithms. To work well, an algorithm needs to take care of mapping the metadata needed to find each file. In a similar way to what is done by SEO experts to make content findable via search engines, it will be appropriate to do the same for business content, especially because of the ever-increasing amount of data to be managed and arranged. It is, therefore, important to train people to develop skills for improving the traceability of documents, thereby overcoming problems typical of digital archiving systems, such as the dispersion of information and the overabundance of storage channels. Often, one cannot speak solely of findability, a concept that assumes that the user knows what they are looking for. In other cases, it is important to ensure that the user can discover relevant content through knowledge recommendation systems. To increase the relevance of the content found by the employee, we will have to rely more and more on the usage data of the files, collaboration data, time spent working on them and other useful information. Also, in this case, the acceptance of these mechanisms can take place only if the benefit is mutual, with advantages for both the organisation and the employee, and if the use of the data is not so pervasive as to infringe privacy rights.

New content formats

Limited attention and the need for clear, condensed and timely information, are concepts that underpin the production of social content. It is interesting to reflect whether the same will happen with information exchanged for the purposes of work. As illustrated in our report on Generation Z included in the November edition of HBR, time is a precious asset for this generation, used to selecting content on their devices with an unprecedented speed and immediacy. Introducing ways of using corporate content that is fast, on demand or contextual, could have the advantage for the organisation of reaching the employee more easily, and for the latter to be updated with little effort. The preferred format to inspire GenZers are short videos designed for mobile-first or mobile-only use, such as those spread widely via TikTok, or Instagram reels, which, for example, are now a standard of journalism to provide concise, clear and timely information. This is not just about top-down communication: sharing knowledge in forms more suited to the changed context

is also a theme of collaboration. Slack, for example, has released clips, a new feature that allows you to record short videos, with audio, video or screen recordings, designed to help teams communicate between different time zones and to reduce the increased number of online meetings, which have become a regular and predominant part of the remote worker's day.

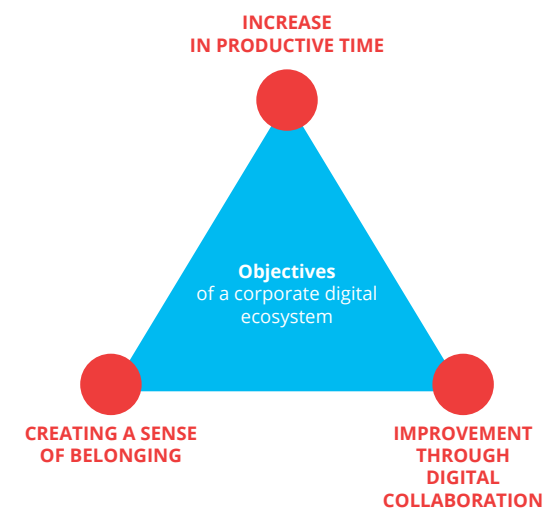


Figura 2  
Macro-goals of introducing novelty into an organisation's digital ecosystem.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

Objectives and indicators for conceivin and designing a corporate digital ecosystem

At this point, given these trends, it is important to understand how to approach the conception and design of a corporate digital ecosystem. The starting point is the identification of the objectives to be achieved and of certain measurable indicators to monitor results. There are 3 macro-objectives to refer to when introducing an innovation, such as those described above, into a digital ecosystem: the *increase in productive time*, *improving collaboration* and *creating a sense of belonging* (Figure 2).

But how do we find indicators of success? We can measure and detect a reduction in the number of e-mails (one of the most time-consuming elements of the typical working day) and demands for support to HR or helpdesks, in addition to considering metrics on the balance between time spent in meetings and individual

working time. The introduction of new digital tools should be evaluated based on how much they contribute to the cultural change desired. And if we talk about increasing digital collaboration, some verifiable metrics are the number of documents created by co-editing, the number of chats using collaboration software, or even the number of interactions linked to information content. Finally, to monitor the sense of belonging we can use employer branding indicators such as the Net Promoter Score, the rate of participation in company initiatives or the response rate to company surveys.

From trend complexity to project strategy

In approaching a project aimed at redefining employee experience we have to increasingly shift the focus, and consequently resources, towards the construction of a new, more widespread engagement and scalable governance, in order to avoid overlooking long-term goals and expectations. Initiatives of this kind should not be defined as development projects, but rather as a new way of working. We

must not be frightened by the complexities involved with these new trends, but, rather, try to master and govern them by favouring technological solutions that are already ready, using as much as possible No Code or Low Code philosophies, avoiding starting from scratch with customisations that lead to potential lock-ins and a short-range strategic vision. In addition to enablers of innovation in employee experience, such as recommendation algorithms and search optimisation, and new formats for content and training, we should always maintain as a central element the growth of the employee's value, simplifying and personalising the experience, thanks to easily accessible and relevant content.

IN-DEPTH STUDY

Empowerment Services: from employee journey to Knowledge Prediction



The services and digital touchpoints that an employee uses have proliferated to become constellations of sites, apps, plugins and widgets; and, in some cases, they substitute for in-person activities such as onboarding, workshops, conferences and training courses. These services are an ecosystem that assists the employee throughout the life cycle of their collaboration: useful, but often vertical in their type of functionality, they acquire a real value if designed and integrated into a vision of their role in the company life-cycle. With the aim of enhancing employees' capabilities, it is necessary to address the design of these tools, reinforcing the modes of

analysis to better understand how people relate to them. For this reason, we define employee journey mapping activities and design experiences which view touchpoints as an orchestration of services, designed specifically for every kind of employee and attentive to usability and accessibility. But is it enough to be able to meet the expectations of the new workforce and technological capabilities that the market demands? Those who now expect adaptive, personalised services, and similar tools, to really be a mechanism of empowerment, have to solve one of the most crucial issues for any company: the knowledge of smart workers.

By understanding how people interact with these services, and how often, the keywords searched for and documents opened, we can collect a wealth of information which, once processed using machine learning algorithms, can better profile employees and suggest content in a predictive mode (Knowledge Prediction) anticipating training needs even before they appear. These services accelerate the development of skills not only by facilitating the availability of information but by building distributed learning dynamics that are contextual and adaptable to the interests of individuals.

# Unlearn & Learn

Soft & Hard  
Skills

Adoption  
of New Tools  
& Platforms

## We work S.M.A.R.T.

### Training to support a new way of working

#### Do we work Smart?

Since 2020, during the period of the public health emergency, many companies, public and private, small, medium and large, have found themselves, in a very short space of time, having to manage their work activities away from the office. From that point onwards, the slogan “We work Smart” began to resound within organisations, as a sign of a new vision and a new way of doing things.

Today, we have become accustomed to smartworking, and we are learning to come to terms with its effects on our private lives. But although the practicalities and related vocabulary have become so familiar to all of us, it is still hard to define what it really means to work “smart” (Sica, 2020).

Although there is a great deal of terminological confusion, our experience has made us aware of the fact that to work in a smart way you need projects which accompany and support technological and cultural change, always placing the employee at the centre, without restrictions of space and time. Given this awareness, employees expect to be able to make decisions about where to work and at what time, and there are those who, in order to not to lose these freedoms, are even ready to quit their job (Barrero, Bloom, Davis, 2021).

So, if on the one hand there is great strength and motivation to grasp what the last few months have taught us about smartworking opportunities, on the other hand, there are companies that want to return to the traditional work model, probably because smartworking has not yet fully earned their trust. Some people think that face-to-face interactions are the key to creating solid and constructive working relationships and to foster collaboration; there are those who believe that employees are less productive at home; and for some, the lack of possibility of monitoring certain work activities has turned out to be a threat.

The data collected in this recent period, however, affirm the opposite: not only has smartworking made it possible

to achieve excellent results in terms of productivity, but it has also strengthened networks and group dynamics, including informal ones.

#### The S.M.A.R.T. essence of training

Now, after the pandemic tsunami and the accelerating phenomena of distance working, it is necessary to outline projects that accompany and support change, that create new virtual spaces and allow people to use them to create relationships. From this point of view, training can enable all of this, but to do so it must reflect the essence of S.M.A.R.T.

This acronym, coined by OpenKnowledge, involves analysing 5 different fundamental dimensions for current and future training.

**S**

#### SENSE OF LEADERSHIP

Evolving the individual's sense of leadership for the benefit of the team

**M**

#### MIXING GENERATIONAL NEEDS

Bridging generational gaps in digital usage

**A**

#### ACHIEVEMENT OF SHARED GOALS

Building shared knowledge through collaboration

**R**

#### RELATIONSHIP

Creating moments for employees to get to know each other

**T**

#### TIME

Paying attention to time management

**Figure 1**  
The S.M.A.R.T. essence of training.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

**S for SENSE OF LEADERSHIP**

The Coop 2021 report shows that among the most important soft skills that should contribute to economic development over the next few years, 54% of the skills required will be more “classical” ones, i.e. relational and cognitive, compared to only 34% of those related to developing digital skills. But that is not quite all: 23% of the skills to be enhanced relate to self-leadership (italiani. coop, 2021).

*Often the figment of the Leader, as a mythological entity, is still mistaken for a successful management or political figure. In reality, it is not a question of roles, but of essence and vision.*

Each person, in fact, can contribute through his own actions to making a difference, both for himself and within a team. Being responsible, proactive in deciding and carrying out targeted choices, having a vision and setting specific goals, but also having courage and the ability to take risks, to be able to deal with uncertainty: these are the elements of a leader. A person who puts energy, passion and optimism into what they do, acting as if that would make a difference. And it does. So, the purpose of training must be to evolve a sense of individual leadership for oneself and for the benefit of the team.

**M for MIXING GENERATIONAL NEEDS**

There are, today, two macro-generations in companies: on the one hand, the generations born after 1985 (Millennials and Gen Z), who were born and raised in a digital dimension, and on the other hand, the generations born between the 1950s and 1980s, who can still choose whether or not to let digital into their lives. This difference in approach to digital between generations has an important implication for the acceptance of the virtual work configuration. The need therefore emerges to narrow the gap between generations in terms of proximity to digital technology, helping to familiarise them with it in the most natural way possible, by providing paths of flexible and inclusive learning for those who are dealing with a technological artifact or system for the first time. Today's work dynamics in small teams with a variety of ages, as if they were breakout rooms, are more effective than any reverse mentoring project.

**A for ACHIEVEMENT OF SHARED GOALS**

Among the lessons that can be drawn from these past few months, the importance of having an approach incli-

ned towards change and innovation stands out. And if it is true that “Change within organizations and institutions is seldom a solo activity” as says Tom Kelley, one of the founding fathers of Ideo, we see the relational dimension as a critical factor. In fact, if we think of the innovation of products, processes and services, we will understand that, besides a brilliant idea, you need a vision and a plan, which in turn require many hands to bring to life and develop. From here, we are led to affirm how the construction of shared knowledge through collaboration is key to discovering creative and innovative solutions to meet the challenges of the current scenario.

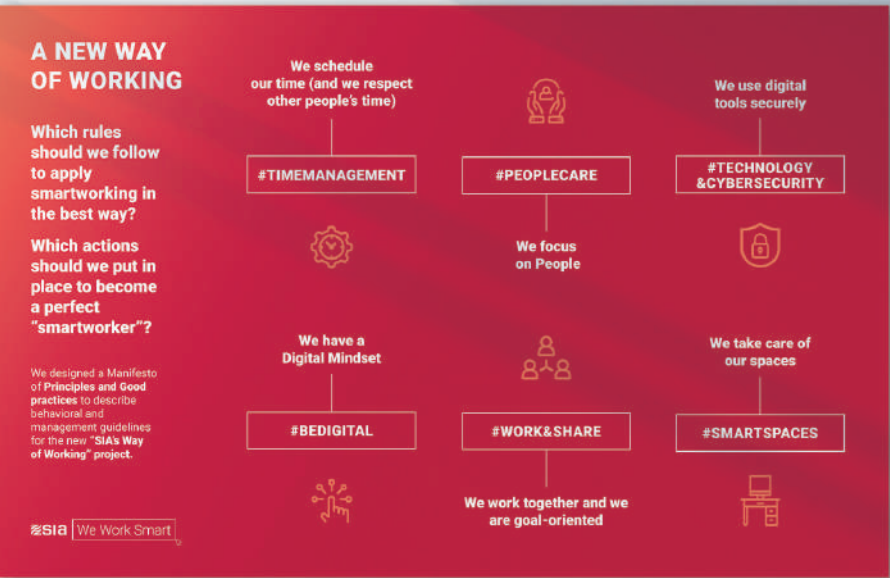
**R for RELATIONSHIP**

By working from home, we have been able to break the barrier of distance that exists between private and professional life, letting our emotions and moods warm up the endless days sitting in front of the screen. Showing where and how we live (the walls of our home, the balcony, the cat that shows up undaunted in the background of our video calls), we have been able to show the “Self”, and this has helped us make even stronger connections than the ones that have always been established face to face at work. According to the Microsoft 2021 report, those who have had closer and more transparent relationships with colleagues have experienced greater well-being and productivity. Is it now conceivable that we return to the “disconnect” between private and professional? In life, we play so many roles in parallel that it would be a shame to lose our true authenticity. Training must then be a channel to stimulate the creation of relationships, share interests and help employees to create opportunities to get to know each other and to express their true selves.

**T for TIME**

Time is a precious, important, unique and irretrievable resource. We struggle to think what our diaries were like when we were in the office or when we had business trips: the pace of working life was set by the organisation. Then, we found ourselves at home from one moment to the next, with the possibility of determining the rhythm of work ourselves, but on this occasion, most of the time, we have not been able to take advantage of it. According to the Work Trend Index 2021 (Microsoft, 2021), the number of meetings and calls during the day has increased, and each of these interactions has, on average, a longer duration than when we were in the office. The number of touchpoints for contacting colleagues and collaborators has increased, and these are often distracting, decreasing

**Figure 2**  
The We Work Smart manifesto for SIA.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

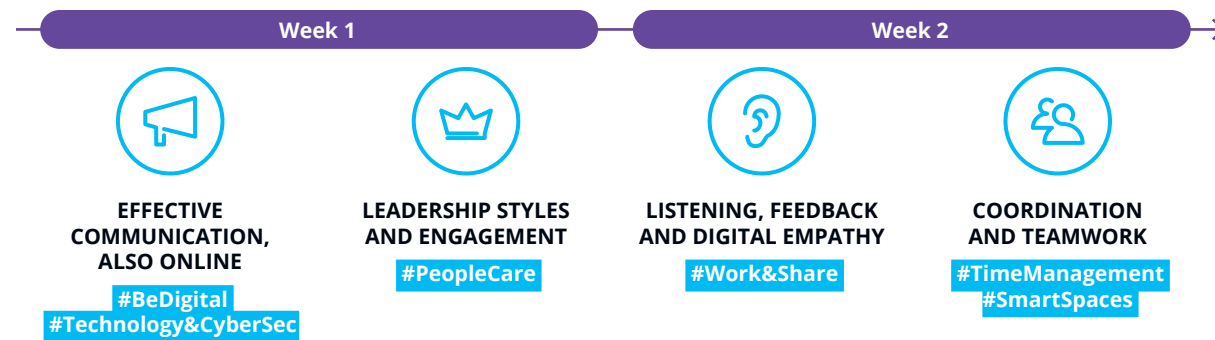


the amount of time we have each day to concentrate and carry out our own work. The result? We have maintained traditional time management and the strong wave of digital production resulting from poorly regulated remote work and focused on quantity rather than quality. This has contributed to making people feel trapped and stressed, with 37% of workers saying that today companies are asking too much of them. The time has come, then, to look back and unlearn to be “always on” and resume sustainable work rhythms: we need time not to do, but to think. This also means paying attention to time management.

**From theory to practice**

In less than a year and a half the new way of working has passed from being a long-term corporate vision or goal to real experience, without testing. To bolster this change, we supported SIA, the European leader in the design, production and management of Digital Payment Solutions, in collaboratively outlining a manifesto that interprets the fundamental values of the Smart way of acting. A few months after the publication of the manifesto, thanks to the enthusiasm of Marco Ornito, HR director, and Agnese Pompilio, Head of Organisation & Development Management, we concretely applied these values as behaviours,





**Figure 3**  
The training path for SIA.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

outlining an educational pathway with Smart traits for a large part of the company population (2,500 employees). We thus took the pillars of the manifesto and with Clara Lucca and Caterina Carrasco, HR referents, co-designed a pathway structured in 4 modules, each of two hours, in which moments of reflection were alternated with moments of play and sharing. The main contents ranged from effective communication (including online) to teamwork, also touching on other important issues such as leadership styles and engagement, listening, feedback and digital empathy.

#### How did we make the S.M.A.R.T. elements a reality?

In order to convey the Smart essence of training, we designed the course with the multimodal experience in mind, providing for the use of different channels during the delivery (not just the camera to convey the messages, but also chat, breakout rooms and the Academy itself), thus reinforcing the core themes of every argument, without thinking purely and simply about engagement.

Taking up the S.M.A.R.T. dimensions, we give space here to the words of Clara Lucca, SIA's HR manager, who expressed herself as follows on the path we took together: "At the company level, this project presented a great challenge from the inception: that of a digital streaming project, based on new but enduring themes, for the entire corporate population. For SIA it was the first ever experience of this kind.

The feedback in the various emails received from colleagues was extremely positive about the initiative. The experience allowed them to appreciate the importance of improvement and accountability (#SENSE OF LEADERSHIP). Thanks to the choice of creating varied team rooms, with people from different business functions and age groups, they were able to share diverse experiences and a common willingness to learn something new (#MIX GENERATION NEEDS - #ACHIEVE SHARED GOALS). Another

element that worked was the informality of the relationships built between co-workers who had not chosen each other: they just happened to meet each other in the same class and this helped combat the isolation of smartworking (#RELATIONSHIP). Finally, the fast pace of the classroom sessions meant the participants did not become distracted and bored, and contributed to the generation of ideas in teams with the energy required for this kind of activity (#TIME)."

#### New models for the future

The statistics and articles speak for themselves: the future of work will be hybrid. It will be both working from home and working in the company. Whether you like it or not, the way you communicate with colleagues, manage time and experience the dimension of the physical work spaces has changed. *Organisations must therefore take all this into account, overcoming the stereotype where Smart is Digital and Digital is Smart.* There is much more behind this word and training will have to be in step with this change. In the educational field, in fact, digital technology has allowed us to enhance the use and integration of tools, shifting the communication focus to multi-modality in order to be more effective and to stimulate greater attention.

#### Training courses must be designed to create and stimulate relationships and the dissemination of shared experiences.

Each S.M.A.R.T. ingredient must be skillfully paced. The next few months will, thus, be crucial to internalise this new awareness and to experience all the possibilities offered from this new scenario productively and happily, supporting young people, above all, but also seniors, in assimilating the new models and learning the fundamental skills of the workplace.

Will this be how we start talking about Smart employees? Only time will tell, and it is also time that is the key to taking better care of ourselves and our relationships. Let's act now before it's too late again.

# Today's learning is child's play

## How learning can and should respond to the challenges of today's society, and not vice versa

#### What is meant today by the term "learning"?

Already in the pre-Covid-19 period, in Italy there was an urgent need to meet the challenges of an education and learning crisis a crisis that today is still mainly characterised by a high dropout rate, the negative repercussions that the pandemic has caused with regard to equality and, above all, the fact that - if it is misunderstood, misinterpreted, and mismanaged - digital can be a powerful tool for discrimination and division.

As shown in a snapshot from the final MIUR 2020 report, in fact, Italy still suffers from a lack of "learning environments capable of breaking out of the mental cages of the twentieth century", as well as a targeted growth plan aimed at creating "an essential curriculum capable of integrating scientific culture, humanistic culture and digital technologies" (MIUR, 2020).

We can therefore say that the pandemic was not the primary cause of the current learning crisis, but, rather, a loud alarm bell that woke everyone up from the long coma of constant economic cutbacks and a "blind" vision of the future.

The urgency that characterised the first wave of the pandemic managed to unleash in terms of the construction/reconstruction of the education system, today leaves us facing a very important question, namely "where do we start from to build this better future?"

To answer this question, it is necessary to understand the best possible context, starting with the analysis of what the pandemic has managed to teach us.

The first fundamental lesson that the pandemic has taught us comes from the fact that the phenomenon of the Digital Divide, i.e., the gap between the people who have effective access to information technology and those that are excluded, in whole or in part, is determined not only by lack of connectivity or obsolescence of the devices

and software available to the user.

The Digital Divide also encompasses the fact that the "existential" connection between people has been tested, with all the fallout that this has caused, including in the teacher/learner relationship, wherever that relationship may find its *raison d'être* (school, university, work, recreation, etc).

The second lesson the pandemic has taught us (and confirmed) is the fact that learning is first and foremost a social phenomenon of a vigorously experiential character.

Education - similarly to school, sport or university - is undoubtedly one of the main tools where society can ordinarily provide equal opportunities for all.

School, for example, is a social space where education and learning create the kind of interaction between students, teachers and peers, lending it a value that is not only didactic but also humanly experiential.

In order to lay the foundations for the future of learning, Italy has the opportunity and the duty to address new behaviours, combating, first of all, negative mentalities and attitudes strongly inclined towards resignation. The idea, therefore, is to guide the future towards a vision in which training takes place with joy, clarity, rigour and transparency of purpose for everyone and everywhere.

That training takes place, precisely, when the abilities of people are discovered and developed, and the tasks become challenging but not impossible.

A successful system is one in which people are prepared and motivated to learn together.

It is where teaching turns out to be a "mission" (and not only a profession) that is socially valued. It is where resources dedicated to learning are adequate and diverse. It is where learning environments are safe and inclusive and where systems are well managed. In a word, we are talking about "Connectivism" (Siemens, 2005): the learning

theory based on the concept that learning occurs when peers are connected and share opinions, points of view and ideas through a collaborative process that allows them to legitimize what they are doing together, so that knowledge can be spread more quickly to more communities.

We at OpenKnowledge have accepted this challenge for some time now, putting in place instruments and methodologies able to adapt to the learning needs of society and those of our clients.

### Is it really possible to adapt learning to society?

To answer this question, here is a practical example created to help a precise target, a product of the Italian education crisis, namely the NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training): all those young people who are not studying or working, a group that in 2020 alone numbered over 2 million youngsters.

In response to this phenomenon, we supported Fondazione Vodafone Italia (the Vodafone Foundation, Italy) in the realisation of LV8: a learning game that allows young NEETs to develop basic digital knowledge through the typical dynamics of online gamification.

Google and its applications, Canva, SEO and the basics of Social Media Strategy, the rudiments of Content Management Systems and coding are just some of the topics covered and proposed within LV8.

As pointed out by Marinella Soldi, President of Fondazione Vodafone Italia: "It's an accessible, concrete, practical and digital opportunity, in order to get back into the game and regain one's own future" (Pennisi, 2021).

Designed to be used on mobile devices, LV8 is structured in 8 levels of increasing difficulty and, through timed quizzes and mini-games, allows you to obtain Open Badges, i.e. digital certifications recognised throughout the European Community, and which participants can put on their CV (Wired, 2021).

Once the user has downloaded the app and activated their private account, they have the possibility of living their own adventure, choosing from two different scenarios: opening the brewery of their dreams (BeerUs) or launching a successful app (HereWeApp).

Two different approaches to the same game allow the user to simulate his or her own rise in the world of work in a stimulating but still practical way. So, in a game experience of this kind, what is the role of learning?

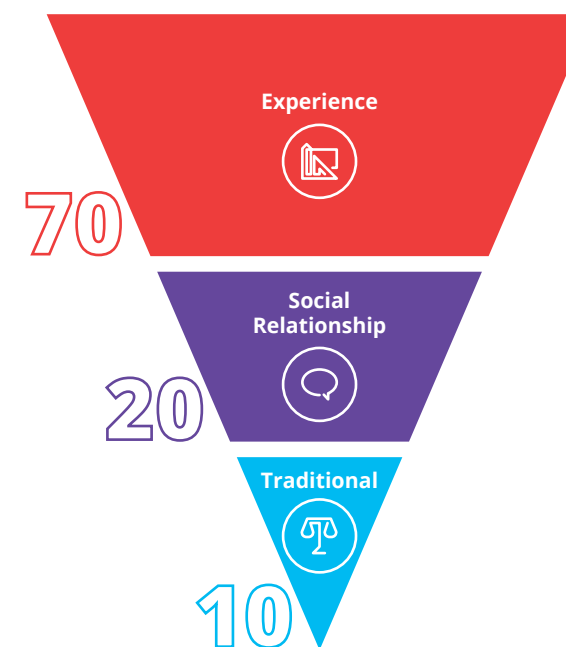


**Figure 1**  
Infographic of LV8's offering.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

### The aspects of learning that make up the offer of the LV8 experience

LV8 for OpenKnowledge coincided with the ability to implement new learning trends and training policies.

*The framework in which mobile learning projects are conceived and take place is characterised by the need to deal with the present. Change, which today more than ever we understand as evolution and not as a loophole, is realised from its embryonic phase: listening to the community and its needs.*



**Figure 2**  
A representative funnel of the 70-20-10 method.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

In the face of these expectations, the main challenge is not only to intercept a wider target, but to turn into a service that effectively engages with the community itself. This takes place in a low touch environment, where contact is not reset, but transformed into a direct and immediate relationship between the content and the user, between game and player.

To date, the designated criterion for accomplishing this is the 70/20/10 method (70% experience, 20% social relationship, 10% traditional learning).

The experience, i.e. the main contribution of the method that we have adopted, is to create a game environment where the player determines their own level of difficulty, immersion and experience. The game varies according to the player and not vice-versa.

The structure of an educational experience according with this method starts with the possibility of fulfilling requests of the user in-game, effectively shifting the user's interest within the game itself without simulating a community, but actually becoming part of one through the experience of its key players.

*Now more than ever, connecting users with the world and the community is essential: in this present age of ours, you don't learn on your own anymore: you learn as part of a community.*

This is where the *social relationship* component emerges, which includes the user in a complex, but immediate, network of links to notions, channels and people. While social input plays a minor role in the method we used, the social dimension is definitely the structure, as well as the element, that designates success in a portable and always connected learning experience.

LV8 is a mobile learning game which, although not meeting all the training needs of NEETs, offers them a more concrete look at the digital world.

Here, experience plays a leading role, since mobile devices - for better or worse - are the new window on the world and the reason why the characteristics of new training and education experiences require a component that is engaging, customised and able to create an authentic loyalty to the product, on a par with the ultra-functional apps that today characterise the sectors of mobile banking, food delivery, trading and fintech.

This is not achieved via a quick win or from within a formal and traditional space, but, rather, by trying to transform the unusual training needs of the active player into intentional learning activities, linking people together, not just the characters.



Challenges and edutainment content narrate the experience directly from a person with educational content: they capture attention and become triggers, not just of social trends, but also of the know-how of the population of users.

This educational objective therefore outlines the need for an interactive space, with game rules and with a strong call to action: a mobile learning game.

LV8 sprang from an educational and training challenge capable of combining interest in the community and the management of a consistently wide target of young people who are fatally off the labour market radar.

### The final aspect of the LV8 project: the Mobile channel

Our educational challenge, conceived in the present but at the service of the future, did not actually reinvent anything. On the contrary, it was a profound observation of the present, of the channels and trends that characterise it. An itinerary of analysis that allowed us to create - with the support of Vodafone Foundation Italy - a product whose purposes were in line with the needs of a public represented not only by NEETs, but by all those who own a device.

In fact, from the research carried out into this subject, we could understand how it was necessary to use the most popular channel: mobile.

In a survey on the subject, We Are Social draws the conclusion that “smartphones are in the pockets and in the hands of 97% of Italians” (We Are Social, 2021).

This derives from the fact that mobile applications include and have a direct impact on every aspect of our lives: for example, to keep in touch with friends and family, watch movies, monitor our finances, find love and shop. We need only consider that in 2020 eCommerce for products in Italy recorded a growth of +45%.

The mobile experience therefore offers not only a temporary solution to social distancing and the dematerialisation of some services, but also an immediate evolutionary alternative characterised by a high level of interconnection between the user and the surrounding world. In short, the smartphone is a tool that allows you to relate to today's reality, while technology has become an essential part of the daily life of all of us.

LV8's highly experiential and social structure is constructed from these cognitive elements, which in our aims are translated into our product choices.

The less rational part, the part connected to the imagination, however, led us to consider the phenomenon of intentional learning: where loyalty or the ability to partially predict the present transforms the user's casual interest into activity.

In a landscape significantly characterised by the question “are we building the post-Covid world correctly?”, the most interesting challenge has been to create and provide training that is both on-demand and improvisational, and which meets the requirements of sustainability while maintaining a high level of efficiency.

Perhaps this is because such an approach combines innovation with restoration, and thus the ability to evolve by exploiting the present, adding that “dormant value” which has remained latent during the crisis. Transforming the use of devices from commonplace to smart creates and re-activates the network between the present society and NEETs. It forms a gateway that qualifies the activities of individuals and re-establishes a relationship of dialogue between the present and our future

# Does it still make sense to talk about Talent Management?

**Short answer, yes.**

**Long answer, “basically” no.**

In December 1997, McKinsey published a study a mere 15 pages long, the result of an analysis of 6,000 executives from 77 different companies, with three charts in total. The study somehow analysed (perhaps without even having intended to) the ways in which people were thinking and acting in organisations with respect to human capital and which influenced organisational models and how HR departments support business.

You probably do not need reminding that the name of this study was “The war for talent.” (Chambers et.al, 1997) and that it starts with some reflections from the recent past (and the even less-recent past). Before we begin, let us be clear about what the word “talent” means.

The concept of “talent” has been around since ancient times: to the ancient Hebrews, Greeks and Romans it was firstly a unit of weight (varying between 30 and 60 kilograms) and then became a unit of monetary value equivalent to the same weight in pure silver. Throughout history, the meaning of the term was enriched with the Parable of the Talents.

The Gospel of Matthew tells of a master who, obliged to go on a journey, entrusts his eight talents to three of his servants: five to the first, two to the second and one to the third. The first two invest and manage the talents to double the amount; the third hides the talent received. When the master returns, he praises the work of the first two servants and condemns the conduct of the latter.

“The war for talent” list some ideas, which are still valid today after 25 years, with respect to talent management in companies:

- All organisations are vulnerable: “Companies that manage their physical and financial assets with rigor and sophistication have not made their people a priority in the same way” (Chambers et.al, 1997).
- Companies need to commit to creating a winning Employer Value Proposition.
- Taking risks is a growth accelerator, putting people to work even before they are ready must be an imperative for those with development goals.
- Establish a good feedback process

Almost a quarter of a century has passed, during which different approaches have been used to define talent management. To simplify things, we will break them down into three clusters:

- The view we will term “processive” regarding talent management (Lewis and Heckman, 2006) that grafts the theme of talent onto the typical HR activities, such as recruiting, selection, development and succession planning.
- The so-called talent pool. In this approach, the view of HR areas is abandoned and transferred to the view of the employee, to the need to manage employee development processes through the professional categories, on which to make assessments.
- The perspective on talent within organisational boundaries or for specific “positions”. There are two general assumptions that substantiate the concept of talent in this perspective: talents are defined as high performers and those with high potential and can therefore be included in a quadrant of two axes of a matrix (the 9-box matrix model or General Electric matrix, evolved over the years into other models and formats) (Hughes, Rog, 2008).

For each of these perspectives, different models of talent management have been configured. In the first one, managing the performance of those talents and their positions is strongly recommended (Lewis, Heckman, 2006). In the second approach, talents are valued as a source of competitive advantage for the organisation and need to be stimulated, motivated, engaged and pampered. In the third one, a greater systemic vision situated within the organisation's strategic planning process is needed (Hughes, Rog, 2008).

And so what do we have here? A study from 1997, years of practice, management departments and talent development in all large organisations, trends, megatrends, ultratrends, and here we are wondering whether all this has served any purpose and whether it is worth talking about anymore.

### Talent Management: so we don't talk about it anymore?

We are seeing a general change in the way of looking at people in organisations and, therefore, even so-called talents are something different from what they might have been 20 years ago. What it really makes sense to talk about today is not so much the concept of talent and its management, because all this is related to an organisational context that has changed radically compared to when, in 1997 or earlier, there was talk of building systems to measure the individual irrespected from the environment in which they were based.

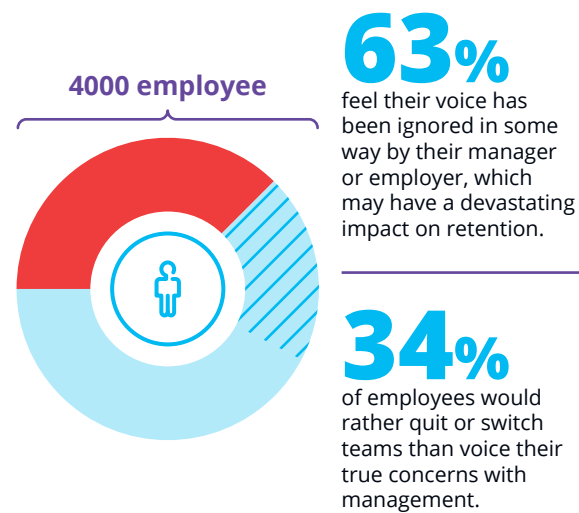
Organisations today tend not to measure the individual as a pivot in their own right, but rather as a node within the network of which they are an active part, through the the relationships and exchanges they establish, the skills they train in and bring together within increasingly “conversational” contexts.

*Today it is worth more (at least at the level of intent) putting the person at the centre of the context in which they operate, with their distinctive expertise, rather than defining a number, a role or a level. A person who delivers results, which may be more or less in line with the company values and objectives, and who, therefore, can be defined more or less as a talent in moving the organisation towards its expected results.*

Values, goals and the person within an organic context: this is increasingly what drives the processes of Talent Management in companies today, and while it is not an unambiguous definition, it helps us to understand what talent, what set of hard and soft features will enable the company to reach its desired goals.

In this new context increasingly focused on people and not on the positions they hold, the processes of talent management become part of the language of the organisation itself. An even better statement in a post-pandemic context that invites companies to reinvent themselves and employees to expand their multidisciplinary, developing new skills in different areas, in which “T-shaped” is no longer a destination but, rather, a starting point towards a wider, “comb” model of competences.

There are essentially three assumptions to start with when we talk about talent management today:



**Figure 1**  
Workforce Institute @ UKG survey data telling of the growing need for inclusion, dialogue and discussion within organisations.  
Source: Workforce Institute @ UKG

- Careers as we know them no longer exist: the offer of ever-changing experiences to talents and particular attention towards internal upskilling & reskilling are the reasons why GenZ and Millennials value one company over another.
- Employees demand that organisations behave ethically, deal fairly and have an empathic culture that fosters open dialogue and attentiveness to inclusion, through increasingly strong connections and more frequent conversations in all directions (top-down, bottom-up, peer-to-peer).
- There is a need for simplicity: HR processes, communication and collaboration (no longer differentiated from each other), that are smarter and enabled by new, simple and intuitive digital technologies, to help people fit into and grow in an increasingly hybrid organisational context.

### A “new” topic for discussion: the employee (really) at the centre

We know very well that companies find themselves reckoning with a model of increasingly driven hybrid working, with impacts on a number of aspects of employee experience that we have until now managed in more linear, simple and defined ways: inclusion in the organisational context, connecting and networking among peers, the visibility and recognition of the efforts (and talents) of everyone, continuous listening and feedback processes.

A recent survey by the Workforce Institute @ UKG, conducted in early 2021 involving more than 4,000 employees, noted that more than 2 out of 3 employees do not feel comfortable expressing their opinions or ideas on the management of the modalities of post-Covid-19 employment. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of employees feel that their voices have not been heard and a third of them (34%) would prefer to change team rather than express their concerns with the management (Workforce Institute @UKG, 2021).

What seems to be missing, besides listening and openness to internal dialogue, is also the very perception of the tangible impact of development actions and programmes put in place by HR. These data are a mirror image of a reality that, with a view to the retention and loyalty of young talent, should set alarm bells ringing in organisations.

It is becoming critical for companies to rethink the way that people can freely express their opinions, confronting their managers in a constant and continuous manner, especially in a context of transition towards a work hybridised model between remote and face-to-face working, and between physical and digital.

It is becoming important to legitimise a new organisational ecosystem able to transform a strong business need (proximity to/among employees) into concrete organisational behaviours (ongoing dialogue and conversations). How can this be achieved? By means of digital tools that enable people to talk, collaborate, confront each other and grow in an open, decentralised manner.

### Shall we make a proposal? Conversational Talent Management

Together with our client, a leading European group and world leader in industrial production, we addressed the issue of Talent Management, starting from these inputs. The goals we set for ourselves? To design a talent management process that, above all, was recognised internally not as a stand-alone, time-constrained process, but rather as a constant and continuous element in the life-cycle of the organisation itself, capable of delivering concrete results, in full alignment with organisational development, as well as talent growth.

We have therefore identified the key elements of Talent Management in the organisation, summarised here:

- *Accelerating Talent Growth*: A Dynamic Process that evolves with the organisation and allows to unlock the growth (organisational scalability) of people, increasing business performance.
- *Dialogue, dialogue, dialogue*: continuing conversations about performance and development are linked and help talents to be fully effective in the here and now,

with a feedback-based approach that does not focus on yesterday's performance but on how functional it is to unlock tomorrow's ambitions, directing future behaviour.

- *Fact-based decision making*: the entire process is based on an HCM platform that collects, monitors and guides decisions through clear and transparent KPIs, at individual, team and group level.

Along with key elements relating to talent management in the company, we identified 3 distinct sets of behaviours which represent the fundamental drivers of the Talent Management process:

- *Strive for Excellence*: ambitious and resilient people;
- *Foster Partnership*: people with natural collaborative leadership skills who are strongly customer-oriented (to either the end customer or internal customer);
- *Accelerate Sustainable Impact*: people oriented towards strategic execution and the development of those who create a concrete impact on their daily activities.

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These three distinctive aspects define the overall scalability of talents, and thus the potential to effectively perform a higher, broader role (in terms of scope and size) and a more complex one. But more importantly than each rating, finally disengaging us from an approach which would inevitably pigeon-hole people in a matrix, it is essential to define a fluid, dynamic and widespread Conversation Culture at all levels of the organisation. For this reason, each employee should have meaningful and continuous conversations with their own manager, starting with the drivers identified above, and all employees should be able to have an individual development plan, constantly monitorable and modifiable throughout the year by means of a “hybridised” process between online (with a cross-process HRMS platform) and face-to-face interaction.

# The imperfect balance between learning and storytelling

## The right mix of training and storytelling for a successful Experience

*"People will forget what you said,  
people will forget what you did,  
but people will never forget  
how you made them feel."  
(Maya Angelou)*

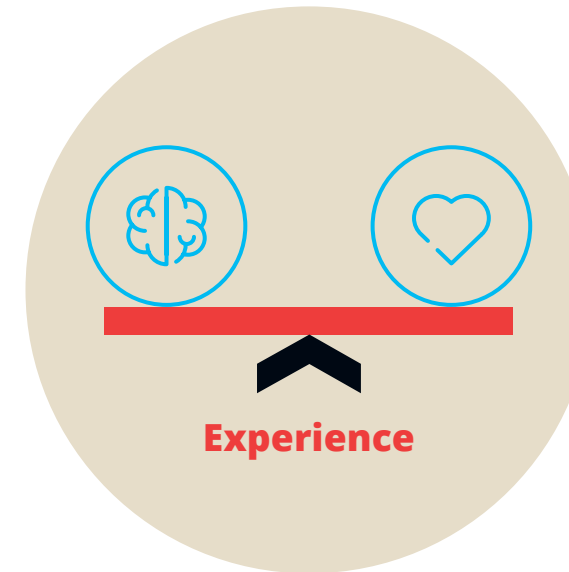
This sentence conveys very well how learning and storytelling are two very close worlds. The purpose of training is not just to learn, but to ensure that what you have learned will stick in your memory. Making training memorable is a very great challenge, especially when it comes to corporate training. And that's where storytelling comes in. The use of storytelling is one of the most important expedients that can be applied to create an engaging and impactful training path. As a number of studies have shown, in fact, narrating and listening to stories is a human constant that - if incorporated into a training project - is able to promote the memorisation of concepts through the development of cognitive empathy. Put more simply, storytelling creates an emotional bond between the person and the training topic. Stories not only ignite the curiosity of the listener; they are also an undeniable source of entertainment. These conditions are very useful for learning.

It is practically impossible to conceive of the formative process without the emotional element, especially these days where multiple environmental factors - cognitive overload due to the excess of information; the contraction of the attention threshold; and the "needs" of digital natives - make the process of memorising information (knowledge) and the acquisition of new skills (know how) difficult.

### But why are we talking about imperfect balance?

It may sound like wordplay, but it is not. The relationship between learning and storytelling is comparable to a recipe, where the ingredients must be measured out and cooking times controlled to ensure that the dish is cooked perfectly and deemed a success.

Let's imagine learning and storytelling this way, as two weights placed on the same scale, where, to find their own equilibrium they are forced to oscillate in a continuous and often uneven motion. And it is this perpetual movement that gives rise to what we nowadays call experience: that is, the sum total of all those events where learning and emotion act, and where the person finds themselves making their own journey (Figure 1).



**Figure 1**  
Representation of the imperfect balance between learning (reason) and storytelling (emotion).  
Source: OpenKnowledge

### The first aspect of the Experience: IL LEARNING

*Learning is a constant process of discovery  
– a process without end.  
(Bruce Lee)*

### Discovery Learning: training as a journey of discovery

To make learning and storytelling work in harmony, it is important that a reciprocal contamination is triggered, such that, as the training progresses, the learner also advances along the narrative path.

For this reason, our approach to experience adopts the discovery learning model. Here, the effectiveness of learning through exploration is based on the stimulation of reasoning, so as to guide the learner in connecting their experiences, and at the same time, build the perception of a shared purpose.

Discovery, on the other hand, to represent a training experience as stimulating and not frustrating, must take place within a context, that, at the very least, is guided. The guide that is realised in the first place is a one of nar-

rative character, represented by the figure of a mentor: a digital "Virgil" [Note: Dante's guide in the Divine Comedy] who accompanies the learner along the way.

### The structure to address and support the learner

To be effective, exploration must be directed at the learner and facilitated in the fruition of the training contents. If the figure of the guide responds to this need, what tools we should use within the training content?

In today's working environment, training based on direct instruction, although it may continue to produce positive effects in the short term (Dean & Kuhn, 2006), is less and less adequate in a context that requires increasing adaptability.

It is therefore more effective to build the elements of the learning journey by explaining the application and benefit for the learner or, rather, the purpose of the training content you are going through.

At the same time, it is important to place the learner in front of a "simplified" scenario, in which the essential elements for understanding the training content are highlighted.

For example, interfaces can be simplified, some features can be disabled, or a limited number of use cases can be provided, limiting the learner's degree of freedom in the initial stages of their exploration.

In this way, it is possible by means of suggestions or hints, to address and highlight the key elements of the topic, thus providing models that are easily imitable in future and more complex contexts (Bartolazzi & Blau, 2014). This approach, also known as *scaffolding*, is an element which plays an essential role in the design of learning experience, and is intended to make the learner feel encouraged and motivated at all stages.

### The importance of microlearning for the creation of functional content

In the construction of such an articulated path, the use of microlearning helps to respond to the need to address the training path by breaking down each subject into its fundamental units, the Learning Objectives. We can then build those connections that allow us to guide the learner along a path of increasing complexity, permitting us to develop content with different degrees of freedom.

In terms of engagement, microlearning has obvious advantages. However, these advantages are not obtained automatically.

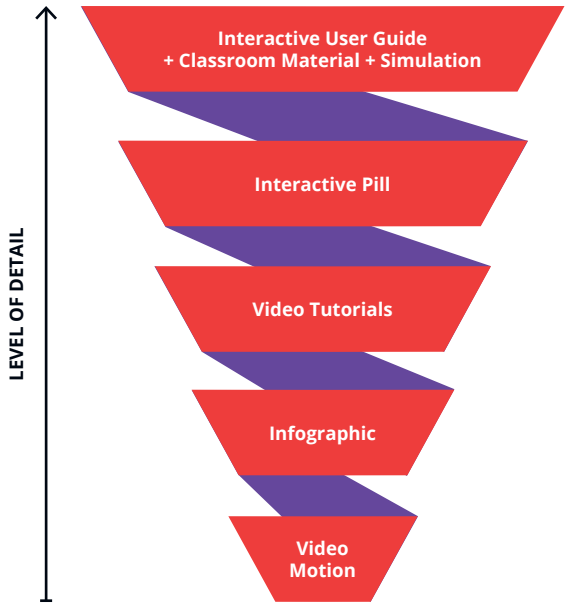
**Figure 2**  
Training funnel in which the topics are articulated according to increasing complexity and through different media.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

*To be effective, microlearning should be placed in the context of an experience that enhances it and contributes to making sense of the activities carried out in this mode.*

The use of microlearning is therefore a solution that not only promotes a shorter and more concise use of the content, but also allows for the customization of the training course that has been sought in the organisation by episodes.

**The Learning Funnel concept**

Content creation takes the form of a training funnel in which, starting from the most comprehensive material - designed for classroom initiatives - content is “distilled” which will be developed in microlearning mode. By analysing the various learning objectives of the topic, it is possible to order them according to their complexity and the need (or not) of prior knowledge on the part of the learner in order to understand them. In this way, the moments in which the learner will meet them along their training path according to the level of in-depth study are defined, while the choice of the typology of microlearning is consistent with the evolution of the learner’s path and with the degree of complexity expected (Figure 2). At this point, after defining the method and approach for the creation of the training path, it is the moment to shift our attention away from the logic tied to the rational sphere of learning to the dynamics that belong to the sphere of emotion. It is at this level that storytelling comes into play, providing the essential elements for the realisation of a genuine learning experience.



**The second aspect of the Experience: LO STORYTELLING**

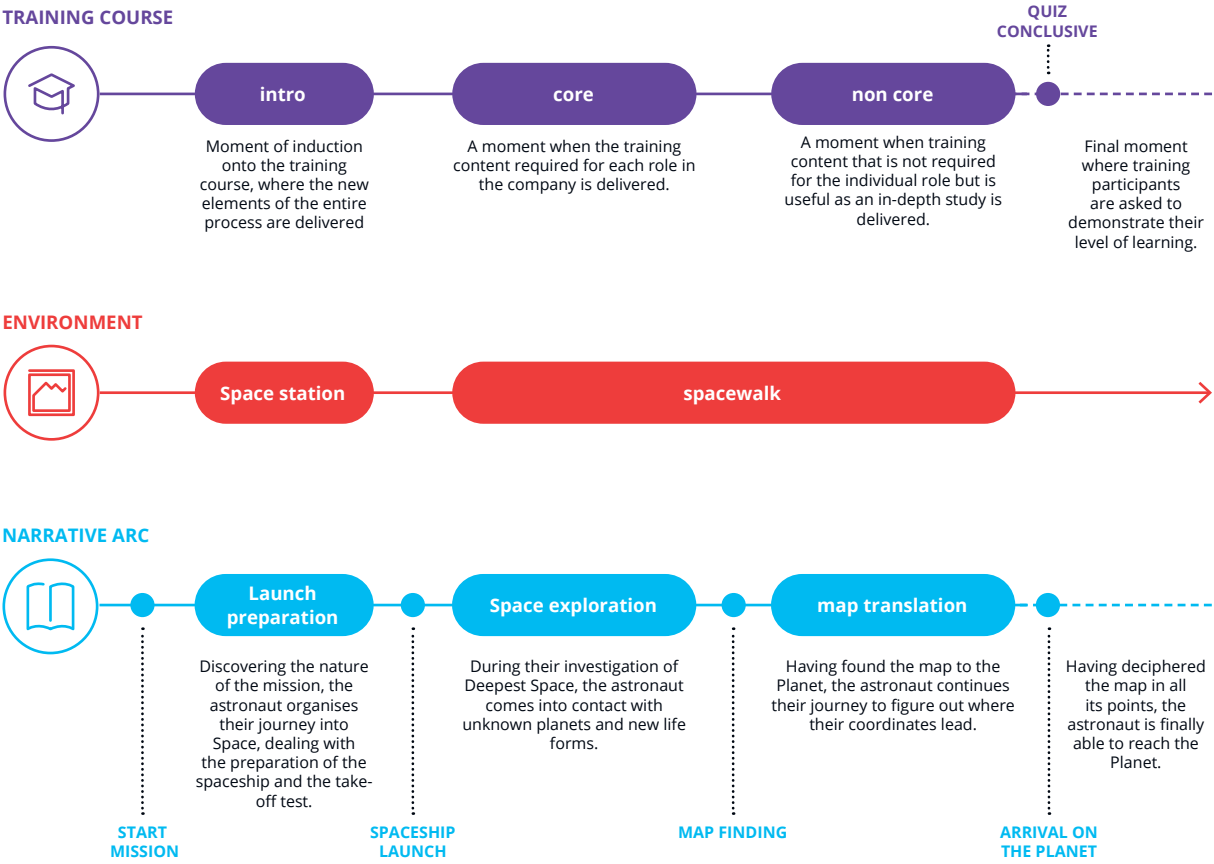
*What unites people? Armies? Gold? Flags?  
Stories. There's nothing in the world more powerful  
than a good story. Nothing can stop it.  
No enemy can defeat it.  
(Tyrion Lannister)*

**Storytelling as a trigger for engagement**

When you are faced with a particularly complex training course, designing the storytelling that accompanies people along the journey becomes necessary so that the learning experience takes place with enthusiasm and continuity.

*Activating engagement is a fundamental requirement for a complex experience, where storytelling plays the role of “bridge” between training content and learning. If you engage people, you get their attention. If you have involvement and focus, you create learning.*

But in concrete terms, how does storytelling manage to become part of the experience?



**Figure 3**  
An example of storytelling architecture, realised according to the characteristics of learning journeys. In the example, the storyline chosen is “Journey into Space”.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

**Narrative anchors**

The learner is going on a journey into space, an adventure to discover hidden treasures or a challenge to create a successful business, so they need some fixed points to accompany them throughout the journey. They are logical-symbolic elements that act as narrative anchors: that is, metaphors designed to help both the learner to orientate himself in the different logical “jumps” between the narrative and formative spheres, and to generate a “sense of belonging” and strong “engagement” in the learner with regard to the proposed experience (Fontana, 2016). Thanks to the narrative anchors, therefore, the learner will be able to not just feel emotionally invested in the experience, but also to quickly identify those guiding figures who will accompany them and support them du-



ring the whole course.

These primary elements can have a more or less rich content depending on the type of training course that are called upon to “rig out”.

There are, in fact, complex training paths that require particularly complex scenarios, complexities that can depend both on the type and quantity of content and on the target audience

## How to make the Experience from serious to serial

How, then, is it possible to create storytelling of value within a complex educational structure?

Of course, it is not enough to rely on its metaphorical power to ensure an effective and memorable level of experience.

The narrative arc, in fact, must be able to convey the purpose and specificity of each phase of learning in an easy and comprehensible way, without neglecting the essential qualities of a story: emotional involvement, sense of curiosity, the challenge with which to test yourself and the “compelling” aspect proposed by the adventure.

A case in point is the project we undertook for a Global Telco Operator. The project had as its purpose accompanying the entire company population towards the adoption of an innovative working method.

The variety of topics covered and the different target groups to which they were addressed, made it very challenging to create an effective learning experience.

The choice of accompanying the learner through the training course with the metaphor of a "journey through space", made it possible to manage the multiplicity of training content elements in an almost endless story stream, studded with countless places and with a strong emotional component given by the search for, and then the discovery of, an unknown world.

The management of the learning time and its division into phases led us to consider the construction of a story arc with an entirely contemporary approach: seriality.

Just as TV series, which nowadays are distinguished by their ability to tell stories with dynamic, rich and complex narratives, so storytelling divided into “seasons” manages to break up a dense plot, thus making it simple (Figure 3).

If seasons have the task of tracing "the itinerary journey" which, from a certain beginning must end in a unique finale, the episodes - so to speak - determine the innumerable intermediate "stops" along the way (from those already calculated to the most unexpected and unforeseen).

When seriality is dropped into a learning context, the nature of individual episodes is defined by the type of relationship that exists between the different formative moments, which can be preparatory or - as in the case of our learning experience - independent.

In this regard, in order to allow the learner to experience an agile and modular learning journey (depending on the needs that characterise each role within the company), the option put in place is to implement “self-contained” episodes, i.e. they start and end their own micro-plot within their own perimeter, independent of and unrelated to each other, yet still remaining connected to the main story arc.

The potentially infinite dilation of time, the interruption of space/time between episodes, jumps in time from present to past and future – these are some examples of how seriality applied to storytelling has the ability to create compelling tricks through the development of the time factor.

This is all because the constant mutations of time granted by a narrative structure stimulate in the spectator the use of their logical-mnemonic skills: that is, the part of the brain that stops you from losing the thread of the story and helps you to organise the different elements on the temporal axis. This is a stimulus that - if trained constantly - allows the learner to deal with the rational part of their experience (learning) in a way that is even more receptive and pleasant (Pozzato et al., 2007).

## In short

Thanks to the presence of numerous studies and examples of best practices, it is now clear how powerful the emotional aspect is as a lever for engagement and predisposition to formal and informal learning.

This is because it has finally been realised that the human being is a complex system of rationality and emotion. And it is here that our theory of imperfect balance has its origin: a relationship that, because it is calibrated on the unknown of the "*personality of the person*", cannot be formulated as a simple mathematical equation, the same for everyone, but must be designed in a modular archetype able to take account of the evolution of needs and of the learner's level throughout the whole period of their learning experience.

# Business communities

## Virtual places of collaboration and exchange

## New hybrid connections in a post-pandemic context

The brain is undoubtedly the most mysterious and complex organ of the human body. Billions of neuronal cells and an incalculable number of connections. But what is most fascinating about this perfect machine are its fundamental building blocks, neurons: these are cells that are specialised for the collection, processing and transfer of nerve impulses. The total number of connections that the neurons in a human brain can determine exceeds the number of all the celestial bodies in the universe. Brain connectivity - nowadays defined by the term "connectome" - can be fully represented through the concept of *corporate networks* and the nerve impulses between the neurons that make up the brain are comparable to the *collaborative exchanges* that *happen between employees*: information sharing and content that is never unique but takes on value because there are other neurons to connect to, in a constant relationship of interdependence. The pandemic and the difficulties of remote working have weakened the efficient propagation of impulses between employees, wearing down those certainties that were previously taken for granted. But as with our brains, even in organisations there is the possibility of preserving and strengthening these fundamental connections to sustain themselves. In an increasingly complex, unstable and fragmented, post-pandemic context, the creation of solid connections, contacts and exchanges between people has become a fundamental element for a valuable employee experience and for the survival of the organism-company. Experiences, information and best practices, if properly oriented and shared, acquire even more strength by becoming fundamental building blocks for the creation of these connections. We are all geographically more "distant", and yet never before have we had the opportunity to *come together thanks to digital spaces*: the virtual place, that before was perceived as a simple "plus" available to companies, has become a

necessary meeting place where we “hybridise” our workdays, we get to know new colleagues, get closer to the organisational culture and even learn new trades and skills in a logic of continuous upskilling and reskilling.

Of course, the challenges imposed by the new hybrid working mode range from the need to rethink processes to reinventing ways of safeguarding the corporate culture. The main principle, underlying all others, remains that of finding effective strategies for keeping up the spirit of cooperation and avoiding the disconnect between employees and company. Organisations are called upon to keep pace with the continuing changes in society and emerging needs of their people, favouring and promoting spaces for sharing initiatives related to “new” dimensions such as diversity & inclusion, sustainability and work-life balance in a context of hybrid working. It is now becoming a priority to allow employees to organise their activities so that people who work remotely do not feel like they are on the margins of the organisation, lacking those relationships and constant connections that make up the indispensable corporate network.

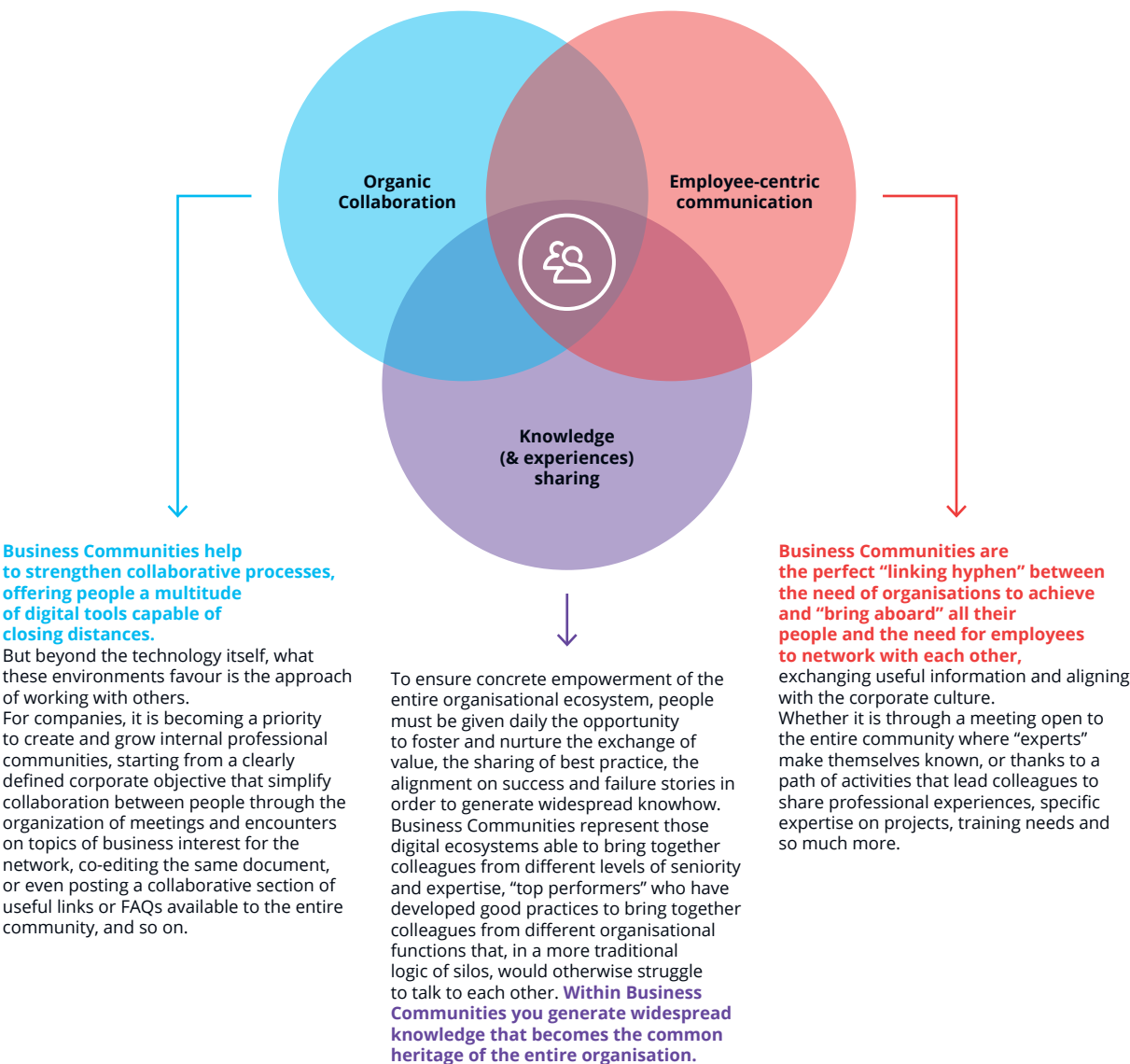
From the numbers collected between February 2020 and February 2021 by Microsoft research “*The Next Great Disruption Is Hybrid Work - Are We Ready?*”, carried out by interviewing more than 30 thousand employees or self-employed full-time workers in 31 markets, including Italy, we observe that if interactions with a smaller team have strengthened with the shift to remote working, the connections in wider circles have diminished and weakened.

Working alongside a more junior resource, alignment meetings, in-person training workshops, and even the exchange of information that used to take place at lunch or at the coffee machine are often replaced by a chat room, a video call or a post on Teams. The new, increasingly hybrid working normality, which sees employees free to choose where and when to work together, therefore, is pushing companies to *redefine modes, technolo-*



gies, times and places of collaboration. Through increasingly “self-service” technologies in the cloud, we are able to open virtual spaces of collaboration with our peers to beat the clock on work projects: this requires, on the one hand, a more flexible, agile mindset, which welcomes new “hybrid” ways of working between physical and virtual space, and, on the other, for organisations, a continuous effort of innovation and resilience.

**Figure 1**  
The levers on which a Business Community works in organisational contexts.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

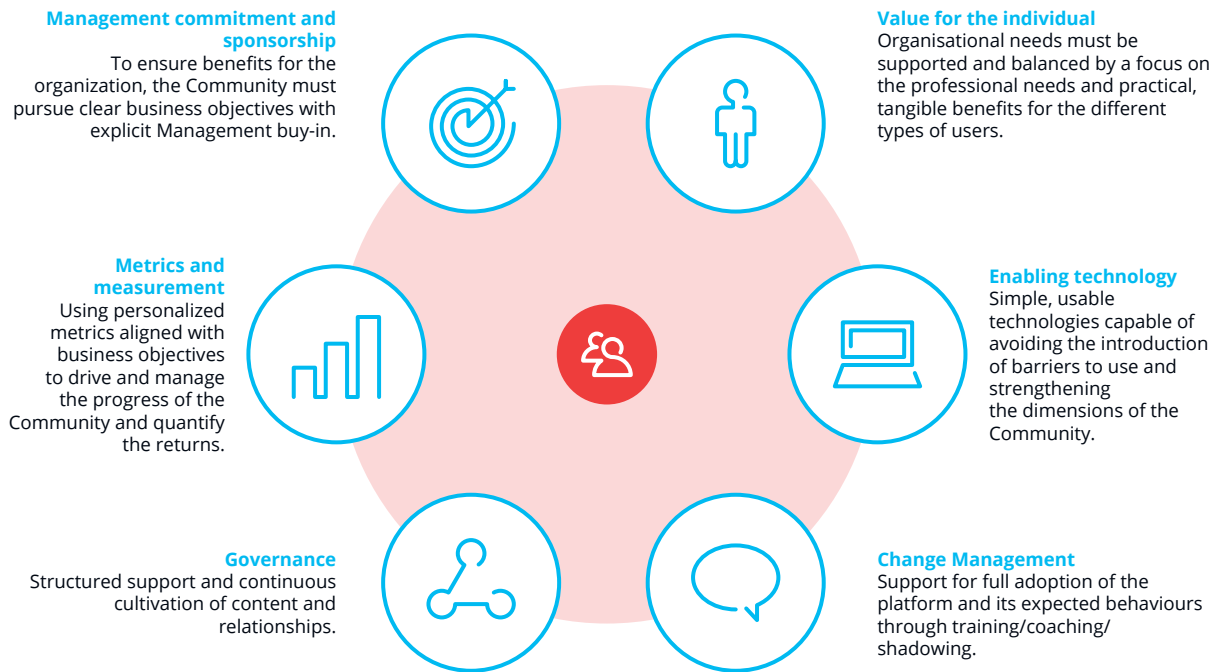


**The response to the challenges of hybrid working: Business Communities**

To best summarise the meaning and value of these collaborative digital environments, we will borrow the words of one of our participants in a design workshop from a few months ago. During a listening activity, preliminary to the creation of a virtual community of Data Scientists within their company, they defined Business Communities as “a collection of people who come together for a common interest or goal.” This is a simple but effective statement that helps us understand well the added value of creating and growing a digital community within an organisation, big or small.

Of course, “communities of practice” have been talked about for several years now: as defined by Etienne Wenger, the Swiss scholar who first realised this concept, communities of practice are substantiated as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact on a regularly” (Wenger, 2002). The objective of these centres of aggregation is, therefore, to facilitate interaction between colleagues in order to improve their work practices. According to Wenger, communities of practice function to the extent that there are always present three elements: knowledge to share, a network of relationships between participants, interests and passions. On this balance, at the point of intersection of these three drivers, sustainable communities can be created. Of course, if we were only talking about knowledge without the two other items, we could solve everything with a document repository, or if we were to rely solely on networking, probably recurring meetings would suffice: it is through the coexistence of each of these dimensions that a community of practice has a reason for growing and thriving within an organisation.

**Figure 2**  
Critical success factors for Communities.  
Source: OpenKnowledge



*Here, then, emerges the great objective of Business Communities: putting the employee and their needs for information / training and corporate networking at the centre, allowing them to discover and handle collaborative workflows, promoting rounds of conversations and the exchange of experiences and good practices learned “in the field”, eventually generating organic growth in the productivity of the entire team.*

We have talked about how Business Communities enable professionals to tell themselves and their daily story, the context in which they operate and the good practices to be shared with colleagues: to create a virtual community capable of generating added value for each of its users, it is necessary to reflect about the levers with which a Business Community is created and acts within an organisation (Figure 1):

- Organic collaboration.
- Employee-centric communication.
- Knowledge (& experiences) sharing.



**Figura 3**  
The framework for implementing a Business Community.  
*Source: OpenKnowledge*

## Mechanisms of operation of a Business Community and methodological framework

Even before designing and defining a collaborative digital environment, we need to ask ourselves this question: *how does the Business Community I have in mind for my organisation enable collaboration, communication, and knowledge sharing?* Building a virtual space capable of responding effectively to the three levers mentioned above is not enough. To function and grow in an organic manner, it becomes a priority to act on certain factors that we consider “critical” to determining the success (or failure) of a Business Community (Figure 2).

First of all, it is essential to work from Day One on the commitment and sponsorship of Management. Business Communities are often perceived in companies as yet another internal project with no real involvement of all organisational functions.

To ensure real benefits for the organisation, the virtual community must be able to pursue concrete and clear business objectives, and must be able to do so through an explicit chain-of-command buy-in. This is why, in the design of these environments, one cannot ignore an initial moment of envisioning with the Top Management and the First Lines of organisational stakeholders impacted by the Community.

But the value generated for the business alone is not enough: it is necessary to identify in the first instance the value the Business Community will offer users, focusing on the professional needs and practical, tangible benefits of its constant and continuous use.

Whether one opts for a training-oriented Community, or for a space of idea management to generate innovation, or for a community of practice or process in which one can train and be able to learn a new trade by improving one's work performance, the *professional value it will bring*

to the employee, and which will lead them to adopt the Community in their daily life must be clear and shared.

Once the benefits for the organisation and for the person have been identified, with a clear definition of the stakeholders involved, it is necessary to identify usage metrics that will determine success: these are quantitative and qualitative KPIs that, in full alignment with business objectives, define the progress of the Community, allow the management of potential slowdown points and, ultimately, quantify the returns to the company.

After the initial envisioning and listening phases (Figure 3), we come to the actual design of the Community, which includes a focus on the choice of enabling technology. The platform selected must play a facilitating role for the dynamics of sharing know-how and collaboration, without creating barriers of use: simple user experience and the possibility of accessing the system from different devices, even on the move, are some of the aspects that make adoption easier, allowing interactions between people and the enjoyment of the content. Once this has been determined, we come to a critical juncture that guarantees this virtual environment will thrive in the medium- to long-term: *this is the identification of the governance of the Business Community*, the structured and ongoing support which takes place thanks to the identification of an operational team capable of gaining the management mandate of content and activities in a perspective of continuous nurturing.

Business Communities are not self-managing: they need a group of people with a precise role, an “editorial group” capable of generating new value in the field of content & community management, through a dynamic and structured editorial content plan covering all the information / training needs of the users.

## INTERVIEW

## A Business Community for onboarding: the Webuild case

*with Maria Lamelas, Organisational Development, Talents and Knowledge Director; Samantha Buremi, Knowledge Management and Technical Training; Francesca Mininni, Knowledge Management and Technical Training; Stefania Vismara, Knowledge Management and Technical Training*

Together with Webuild, a multinational Italian group operating in the construction and engineering sector, we worked on the design and creation of a Business Community on Microsoft Teams dedicated to a specific target of colleagues as soon as they join the Group. Providing practical and organisational responses quickly and informally, allowing people to get in touch with colleagues who are experts in various topics (HR, travel, IT, etc.) and creating moments of comparison and knowledge among colleagues, encouraging the dissemination of skills and know-how and keeping people constantly updated on the Webuild world: these are just some of the goals of this community that we achieved.

Maria Lamelas, Organisational Development, Talents and Knowledge Director of Webuild, comments on the added value that the Business Community is bringing to the company: "The Community, from the owner/sponsor perspective, was an important tool for transmitting the culture of the Group through key messages." The Community is also a space where you can listen to more people, and then follow up with concrete organisational beha-

viours: "The answers that are coming to us are saying a lot about new colleagues and their previous corporate culture.

From these reactions we can imagine what to do to help them and to further integration. And this applies even more in a post-pandemic moment: the Community is the best channel to “take the temperature” of the company.”

Also interesting is the way in which the Community is embedded in the current model of hybrid working, in an environment where “it could be much more powerful if experienced in a hybrid context: one thing is to manage all communications in a virtual manner, another is to fit into a virtual context where maybe people already know each other and they’ve already broken through the initial barrier.

The digital environment in those cases could act as a very powerful accelerator, thanks also to small but very important collaborative actions that are often undervalued."

According to Samantha Buremi, Knowledge Management and Technical Training at Webuild, what constitutes the added value of the Community is the collaborative

dimension: "It is the colleagues themselves who, once they've retrieved the information, share it with others."

Working cross-functionally is also very positive because it facilitates collaboration not only towards the participants in the Community but also within the whole team". A concept reinforced also by Francesca Mininni, Knowledge Management and Technical Training at Webuild: "The Community is a window, a gateway, an important point of contact. The Welcome Coffee (an online meet-and-greet Community event with over 130 connected participants) was a fantastic initiative, well managed by fellow 'experts', from which the joy of welcoming new colleagues emerged with the notion that the Webuild family is growing". In closing, Stefania Vismara, Knowledge Management and Technical Training at Webuild picks up on overcoming the risk of exclusion we discussed earlier: "The Community removes that sense of abandonment that can occur, generating a much-needed network for people to feel - really feel - involved."

After co-designing the environment, structuring the different sections together with the team that will then have ownership of the operational management, we enter the phase preceding the launch. It is at this moment that the *preparatory change management activities for the correct use of the Community* are made concrete: training/coaching sessions to teach community managers and experts about the functionality of the platform, project kickoff moments in which to align the entire team on a shared editorial plan, and internal communication activities within the organisation to support the go-live.

Finally, after the launch there is a crucial monitoring & nurturing phase in which it becomes essential to *work every day on engaging and listening to participants*, in a continuous logic of value generation. It is necessary to transmit to people the concrete benefits of constant adoption (*"now that I have logged in for the first time, what is it that will lead me to access the Community tomorrow as well?"*) ensuring services and content of high professional value in a constant manner, taking into account the levers and challenges mentioned above.

# Grasping the informal

## The Digital footprint at the service of a new organisational intelligence

Like a city, a company is a living social organism: to grasp, through Organisational Network Analysis, the informal dynamics that take place within an organisation constitutes a strategic opportunity for companies in the post-pandemic future.

**From organisation to organism: an urban perspective of the company**  
Organisational Network Analysis is a methodology which aims at representing and quantifying information flows and social interactions within an organisation. Its roots lie in the sociometry of J.L. Moreno; in the history of the discipline, in which a large number of scholars from various fields have been involved. There was a “point of no return” in the 1970s with the studies of Mark Granovetter, who first investigated the implications of weak links in a systemic perspective (Granovetter, 1973). The discipline then developed its applications in the business field (see the works of Robert Cross), and benefited from academic research work on network science (see the work of Stephen Borgatti, Albert-László Barabási and Mark Newman). In the last ten years, OpenKnowledge has carried out ONA projects that have not only provided significant evidence to clients but have also gone beyond the field of practical application, resulting in various publications (Lock Lee et al., 2012; Sica, 2012).

*The technological change of the last twenty years has given network analysis new possibilities and perspectives, the most interesting of which relate to the possibility of collecting digital footprints left behind by humans and machines in the course of their interactions (email, chat, calendars, meeting room reservations, etc.).*

As data availability and the accuracy of data collection tools increase – primarily the platforms of the Office 365 suite for social collaboration – so has the complexity of the maps, which mimic step by step the chaos of everyday relationships and the continuous exchange of interactions typical of social and community living.

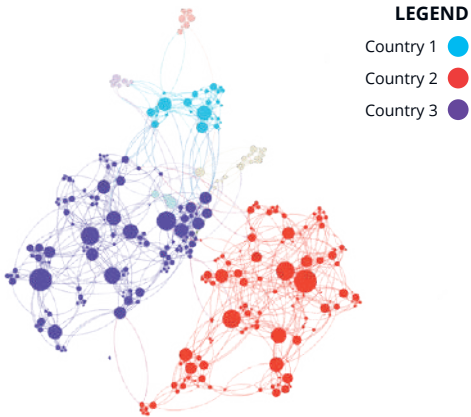
In fact, it is no coincidence that companies can compare themselves to the most complex existing social organisms<sup>1</sup>, the city. In spaces of varying sizes, first thousands, then millions of people came together to protect themselves, meet common needs, exchange goods and services, and to experience their lives in relation to others. A city has some elements that are repeated throughout the world: centres of production, religion and culture, and a road network for the passage of people and goods. These poles are served by facilities and infrastructures that provide responses to the needs of the system. The inhabitants live and work in this fabric, using its services and giving back part of what they have obtained in the form of goods, materials (products) and intangibles

(participation in political, cultural and social life). So, just like a city, a company is equipped with power centres and supporting infrastructure. In the city/company strong bonds (friendship, trust, collaboration) are created and weak ties (customers, acquaintances); through these networks of interactions ideas and words, products and services pass: in fact, the life of people and the organisation take place through them.

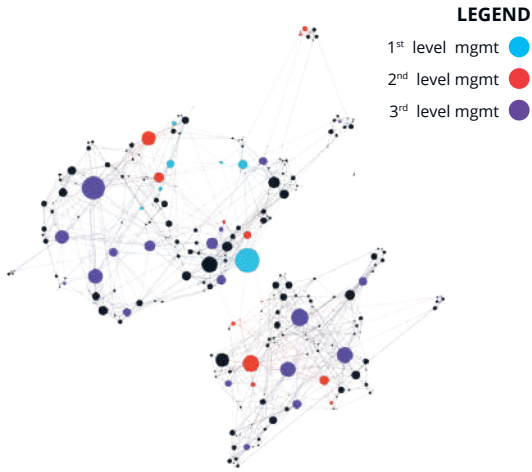
**The vision of the informal**  
An organisation thinks and represents itself through conceptual tools - organisation charts - aimed at giving order and lucidity to the complex organism to which they apply, in the same way that a metropolis organises itself into municipalities and boroughs. These structures are entrusted first and foremost with the task of meeting the needs of the territory, but also of describing it and circumscribing it into defined units. However, how much can the definitions imposed by an organising reason tell of the experiences of the organism that created them? What impact do the informal links which the organisation/ company/city have on the entities that should organise it? The formal representation can have a modest capacity for describing an organisation: instead, reading the informal and grasping its evidence can have a significant impact on a variety of business aspects.

*Network analysis provides a powerful means for leaders to understand and drive value through this seemingly invisible aspect of organizations. [...] Once networks become visible, leaders can address [...] questions in ways that have immediate impacts on performance (Cross et al., 2009).*

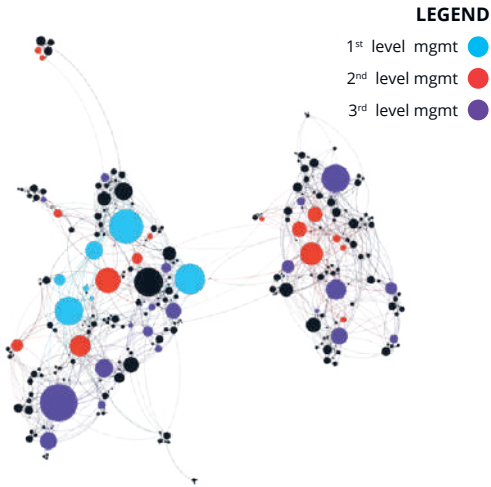
In winter 2020 OpenKnowledge supported Vivaticket, one of the leading global players in the ticketing field, in a project to redefine the model of organised ticketing. The board speculated there was a lack of collaboration and coordination in two departments responsible for product development and delivery, both locally and internationally. In addition, Vivaticket had highlighted the need to identify key people, nerve centres of the company's operations thanks to the soft skills they demonstrated (energy, creativity, positive influence on colleagues, etc.) on whom a strategic plan for renewal and bringing out the full potential of the company could be based.



**Figure 1**  
Collaborative flows between countries: the size of the nodes is proportional to the number of mentions for “collaboration”; the colour of the nodes distinguishes the countries.  
Source: OpenKnowledge



**Figure 2**  
Problem solving and managerial roles: the size of the nodes is proportional to the number of mentions for “problem solving”.  
Source: OpenKnowledge



**Figure 3**  
Soft-skills and managerial figures: the size of nodes is proportional to the score achieved in soft-skills.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

<sup>1</sup> This thesis is in the DNA of OpenKnowledge: it is the tenth of the 59 fundamental theses articulated in the Social Business Manifesto, published as a supplement to the June 2012 edition of the Harvard Business Review Italia.  
<https://www.socialbusinessmanifesto.com/>



The work was therefore conducted along two lines of investigation:

- mapping flows of collaboration, communication and problem solving;
- relational mapping of perceived soft-skills within the company.

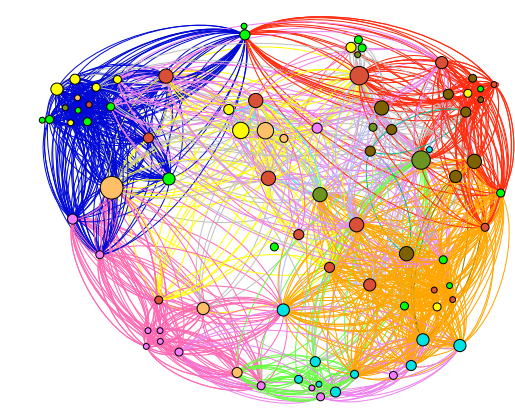
The investigation of collaboration and problem solving flows allowed the board to focus on a few issues:

- integration between the company's two main countries (Figure 1, in purple and red) did not meet expectations; the insight was particularly evident as regards the flows of problem solving (Figure 2), where a clear distinction is made between the two countries;
- the problem-solving flows were polarised around a C-level figure (Figure 2), generating work overload and, consequently, an obstacle to the process of decision-making.

The soft-skills survey highlighted that:

- the first lines of management were recognised by the rest of the company as being responsible for a positive, stimulating and creative climate (Figure 3, light blue points);
- a software developer was recognized as a great informal authority (Figure 3); the analysis, therefore, identified a possible talent in the organisation.

The evidence that emerged supported the board in defining strategic choices to improve productivity, streamlining internal processes. Understanding informal dynamics, however, does not merely have an impact on productivity and efficiency, but also allows companies to reinforce crucial interactions for innovation and the development of new ideas.



**Figura 4**  
Collaborative streams in OpenKnowledge in April 2020.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

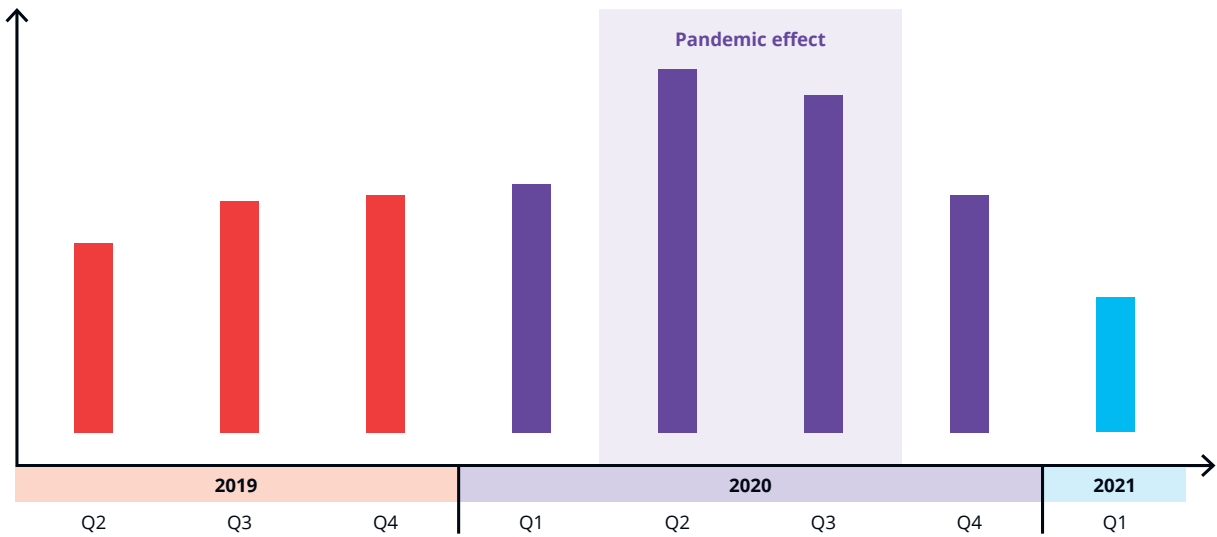
**Hybrid work and idea generation**

*During the Covid-19 pandemic, [...] informal social networks weakened and people leaned in heavily to the people and groups with whom they most identified. Anchored in facts such as that, leaders have a concrete reason for why some amount of face time is critical. That's also one of the reasons a company should invest in figuring out how hybrid social networks work best, along with other ways to help employees establish high-quality relationships, strengthen connections, and bolster trust (De Smet et al., 2021).*

The thesis, published in a recent McKinsey article, was found to be consistent with the results of an internal study conducted in OpenKnowledge during the period of the pandemic. The aim of the study was to analyse the flows of collaboration between colleagues using the total hourly amount (i.e. how many hours per month each colleague works on a particular project): the more the hours invested on the same project, the greater the intensity of the relationship between colleagues. The analysis highlighted that in the acute phase of the pandemic, the teams experienced a strengthening of strong ties to their internal group, to the detriment of weaker links with other people in the company.

Figure 4 represents the collaboration flows in OpenKnowledge in April 2020: the colour of the nodes distinguishes departments; the colour of the links distinguishes the projects reported; the position of the nodes depends particularly on the strength of the bonds, calculated from the reports. The graph shows a concentration of nodes (people) in certain areas of the network, in particular on the more solid and structured projects (the areas marked by blue and green links; and, to a lesser extent, areas with orange and red connections). This dynamic is due to a trend towards redistribution of hours to larger projects: this is to be interpreted as a company response to changing conditions (remote working). The same consideration emerges from Figure 5, which focuses on the intensity of the collaborative ties in the company between the beginning of 2019 and the beginning of 2021; in the acute pandemic phase (April-June 2020) there is a visible increase in intensity of connections at the expense of weaker connections.

The presence or absence of a certain type of bond impacts directly on the creation and dissemination of ideas. A paper by Morten T. Hansen (Morten, 1999) emphasises how weak links (occasional contacts between people) encourage the search for new information: in fact, they decrease the risk of redundancy (i.e., it is more likely that the “encyclopedias” of the people involved are complementary) and generate greater efficiencies, given their lower cost of maintenance on equal level of information capacity (low cost, high gain). Similarly, as Alex Pentland points out (Pentland, 2015), weak ties are



essential for creativity and the innovativeness of an organisation, because they enable the exploration of new ideas, otherwise unreachable through strong bonds. The latter entail the risk of an echo-chamber effect (which is experienced on a daily basis in social networks) that impedes creativity and exploration of new perspectives; however, they are fundamental when a new idea is brought back to a community, discussed, selected and absorbed in solid and structured forms: in Pentland's words, the exploration of some must follow the involvement of the whole group to select and implement the innovation. In this perspective, the case study just reported is particularly telling.

*Faced with a new work arrangement (remote working) the company has seen an increase in hours worked on more stable projects and a decrease of time invested in occasional contacts, resulting in a decrease in exploratory dynamics and exchange of ideas. The observed effect is a more cohesive network structure at the team level, but less able to generate innovation.*

In the months following the acute pandemic phase, when the tools available and the ability to adapt to external conditions permitted a recovery of contacts in virtual form, there was a gradual resumption in the number of weak ties and a return to the exploration of ideas between different teams.

**Figure 5**  
Average intensity of collaboration links in OpenKnowledge from Q2 2019 to Q1 2021.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

On this dynamic of polarisation (cohesive but closed teams) and atomisation (teams that are dispersed but potentially open) lies the challenge for the future of work in the post-pandemic context. Never before have the possibilities for companies been this open, between the full return to the office, the ultimate confirmation of remote working and the opportunity for hybrid work. The managers of tomorrow will be required to recognise the signals offered by the informal fabric of the city/company, and to factor them into the calculation of variables when making strategic decisions. The tools brought to the virtual desks of workers by the pandemic, which have enabled remote working, have also generated an immense new amount of data available for the analyst. In this context, network analysis is no longer, therefore, just a diagnostic tool that allows some sort of X-ray of informal relations, but, rather, becomes a lens through which to read the systemic perspective of the information available to leverage the organisational intelligence of companies.



# Sense of belonging & employee caring

Experimenting with new forms of engagement  
to rediscover group dynamics

## What is employee caring?

In recent years, reflections on the necessary evolutionary aspects related to the employee experience have increased attention on the theme in the corporate and consultancy environment but, despite the numerous interventions in this regard, it has been the advent of the pandemic that has marked the need for a transition from employee experience to employee caring.

Employee caring is the epicentre of the relationship between organisations and their people and expresses itself through a multiplicity of services and forms of care that organisations can choose to make available to their employees.

This issue has been strongly influenced by the recent health events that have enforced remote working, marking even more the value of the presence of employees in the life of the company. It has also imposed a necessary abandonment or re-evaluation of traditional welfare models and this is dependent on the profound transformation of values and culture in which we are immersed.

In line with the concept expressed in "From employee experience to employee caring. Organisations in the post-Covid-19 era" (Sica, 2020), caring should not be understood as a parental role that the employer takes on in relation to its own employees, but, instead, should be interpreted as a systemic vision that, starting from the familiar concept of Employee Experience, leads in the direction of a much more comprehensive consideration of people's needs, including paying attention to the psychological sphere and the emotions of employees.

*The dimension of care includes a new definition of the relationship between people and their organisation: the equilibrium between listening and dialogue, a proper work-life balance, the awareness on the part of the employee of being considered an active and dynamic part of their corporate reality.*

In this regard, the most progressive organisations (such as, for example, E.ON Italia, which we will analyse in this article), have focused on and invested in employee engagement practices. Through great support from the HR and Internal Communication teams, as fundamental expressions and dimensions of caring, companies must progressively involve colleagues in business initiatives (ongoing or during the start-up process) not only to make their offer concrete and based on the experience of employees, but also to support their sense of belonging to the company.

## The employee caring approach in internal communication

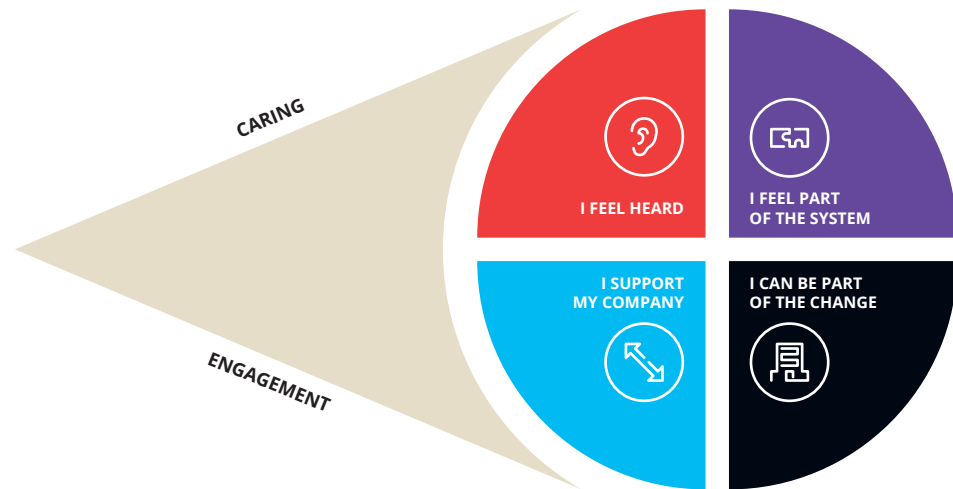
The role of internal communication, understood as an impulse towards the implementation of corporate strategies and as a lever for inclusion and change, has taken on a crucial and strategic function within the organisational fabric. Taking itself beyond its function, evolving and adapting itself to contingent circumstances, it responds,

# Communicate & Engage

Employee  
Engagement  
& Caring

Corporate  
& Social  
Communication

Employer  
Branding



**Figure 1**  
The flow of internal communication.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

through its practices and methodologies, to emerging demands related to the new dimension of caring. The overall view it provides allows a total involvement of the organisation from within, ensuring the full operation and commitment of the entire corporate population. The many engagement & caring activities and initiatives are a source of cohesion and interaction between employees and the organisation itself.

What does it mean today for an organisation's internal communication to engage their own people, taking their well-being into account?

It means acting according to an employee-centric approach (what the employee wants and looks for in the workplace), which enables the collection and transformation of workforce needs into a priority for the company. It means orienting communication strategies towards producing and conveying impactful messages to employees, through dialogue, communicating a profound sense of attention and importance to their human capital. In summary, we can state (Sica, 2020) that it means building the foundation of a trusting relationship by giving a way for all employees involved to feel that they are an integral part of the business, encouraging the dissemination (internal and external) of the company's identity and values and enhancing its reputation.

Engagement & caring is therefore the necessary condition for a virtuous circle in internal communication to become a reality (Figure 1).

Tangible expressions of this virtuous circle are:

- Empathy
- Sense of belonging
- Proactive participation
- Ambassadorship

The flow just presented develops according to a bottom-up logic, which goes through a series of fundamentals: listening to the individual and supporting close-knit contacts between teams, developing a comfortable working environment, enabling and disseminating a culture that influences people inside and outside the organisation, making them feel an essential part of the system and corporate culture.

*Today's internal communications objective, which plays an increasingly strategic role, is to support a modelling of business processes through the contribution it makes. The new models must be built on the concept of the people at the centre of the vision and must provide a full involvement of the organisation, motivated by the goal of understanding the expectations and enhancing the potential of its human resources.*

The well-being of the company is inextricably linked to employee well-being, and internal communication is the force that guarantees this bond: it motivates, generates empathy, and enables and creates value.

#### **E.ON Italia and the adoption of the people-centric model**

We are proud to mention one of our clients, E.ON Italia, who rank among the pioneers in the field of employee

caring. The internal communication team (part of the Corporate Communication team in the Marketing & Corporate Communication Department) ensures and enhances the company's commitment on a daily basis to putting people at the centre.

In recent years, thanks also to the collaboration with Bip-OpenKnowledge, the Corporate Communication function has been able to evolve its role and internal reputation, positioning itself as a strategic player for the achievement of corporate objectives.

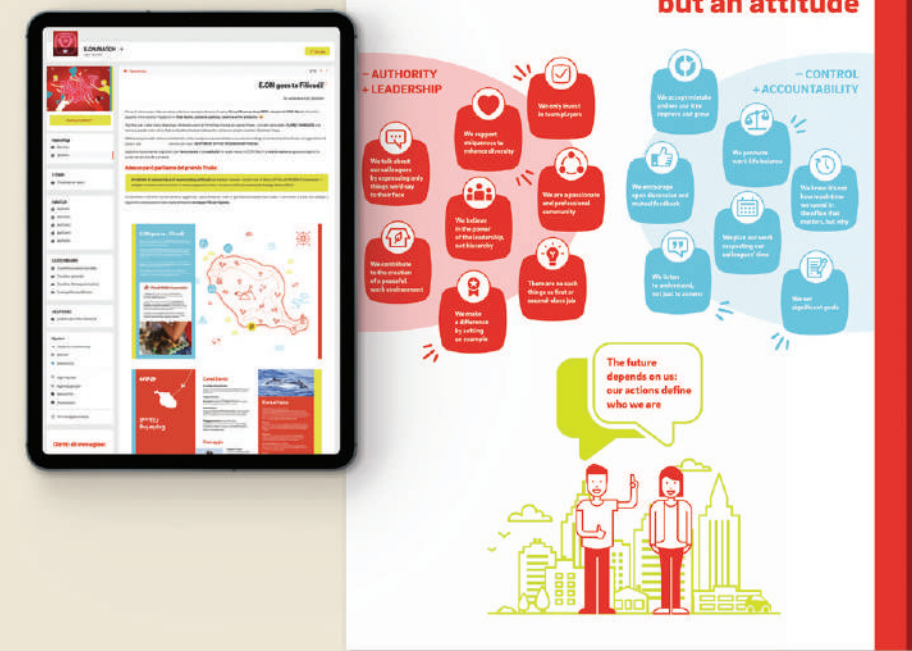
It is a strong and engaging connector between divisions and colleagues, board members and employees, and top managers and employees. Its vision includes a willingness to not just share information but make colleagues part of the communicative process. This takes place thanks to a long process of listening that often precedes the activities and allows them to be constructed using the voice of those who both know and experience the business.

Recent projects, such as the ambitious "Office of the Future," have sprung from the needs of the people who

are part of the company (Figure 2). The manifesto (constructed through various listening phases) that tells this project (also to the outside world) states that "the office of the future is not a physical place, but rather an attitude". This is a strong statement that restructures canonical corporate thinking, shifting the focus onto the importance of relationships and the fundamental involvement of all employees in making everyday work an exciting and valuable journey.

Through this project, E.ON has signalled its new approach, based on caring and no longer just on engagement, accompanying their colleagues in a new way of working that is shared and founded on a co-constructed language. "It has been a long journey based on listening and developing activities that have allowed us to hire, motivate and involve our people" comments Giovanna Di Bacco, Corporate Communication Manager of E.ON Italy. "We have been given great support by the establishment of a corporate social intranet, which has allowed us to have a strong touchpoint where we can meet our colleagues and give them space to contribute in a collaborative way to the dissemination of content". E.ON's

**Figure 2**  
On the left, an engagement message dedicated to the volunteer initiative planned for the winning colleagues of the "E.ON Match" Gamification activity. On the right, a poster of the Office of the Future: sparked by listening to their own employees, it represents the organisational attitude that E.ON wants to promote and disseminate.  
Source: E.ON



Intranet is structured so that every employee can take advantage of the content distributed by the Group and by the various Business Units, comment on articles and posts, find a space to collaborate with colleagues from the same team or other teams (including international ones). It is a real social space that allows people to stay close and experience work in a social way by feeling part of their corporate reality.

**E.ON Match: best practice for gamification**

Employee caring in E.ON Italia in recent months has found its highest expression through gamification with the E.ON Match project.

This was an initiative born out of listening to colleagues, who during the second wave of the pandemic expressed their need to feel close to the company even at a distance, and to be able to share moments of fun.

To support this need, working with Internal Communication, and with the sponsorship of the Board, we developed a 3-month engagement and caring project, during which time colleagues were able to leave the daily routine through participation in challenges based on E.ON's values and passions outside work (such as sports, music and writing, etc.).

The essential ingredient of the competition was creating engagement between people, although the ultimate purpose on which the project was based was to establish a closeness that went beyond the physical location. With a view to facilitating the exchange of ideas at all levels of the organisation, each participant was able to sign up for the project with their own chosen team or with randomly selected colleagues, which also encouraged the participation of Top Management and the Board. The particular base, on which games, activities and experiences were built, were the group's 5 values: principles that the company has always promoted and encouraged and that can also be used in everyday life. Caring was also expressed through a "mystery box" given to all participants containing some useful objects to perform challenges and customised by E.ON to increase the sense of belonging (Figure 3).

The success of the Project allowed the CEO of E.ON Italia to involve colleagues in business projects as well. Among the extra challenges (which offered bonus points) there was participation in a workshop on E.ON's new strategy (named Strategy Activation) with the goal of making colleagues active participants in creating, co-designing and building together the plan for the growth and strategic development of the company. In the survey – carried out after the E.ON Match project closed

- this was one of the main value points highlighted by employees: to have been able to contribute concretely to the dynamics of corporate and business decisions. A key boost to employee engagement was the competition and prize: the winning team went on a trip to Filicudi, where they met and worked with one of the charities that E.ON Italia sponsors and subsidises in the field of maritime conservation. It was a beautiful gift that demonstrates how employee caring can be a fundamental building block of a strong business both in terms of performance and reputation.

**Figure 3**  
Mystery box provided to all participants in the "E.ON Match" Gamification activity, including the material needed to perform 3 of the 5 tests.  
Source: E.ON



# True caring is selfcaring

## Caring leadership as an individual's realisation of how to fill the time regained with meaning

**Atomised companies: where is the leader?**

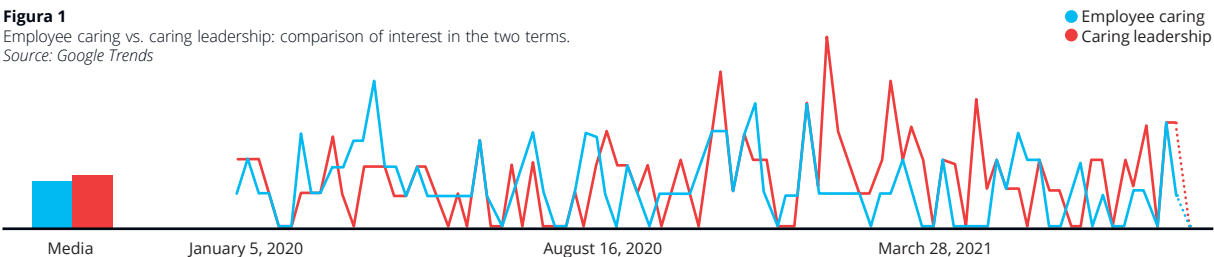
The Covid-19 pandemic, however adverse, has succeeded in teaching us an important lesson: if it is not possible to predict the future, it is essential to prepare to deal with its complexity which, among other various facets, also entails an increase in the number of resignations: according to Anthony Klotz, Professor of Management at Mays Business School in Texas in March 2021, the United States recorded a 2.4 percent resignation rate, a record number in recent American history. From a Microsoft report "The Next Great Disruption Is Hybrid Work - Are We Ready?", a similar striking finding emerges: 40% of people are thinking of resigning from their current job within the year. Among the triggers are the volume of work, the identity revolution and, finally, the responsibility of leaders (Microsoft, 2021). This is a responsibility that, before the pandemic, leveraged physical proximity, only to be atomised during the pandemic period. Indeed, there is talk of "organizational atomisation" (Sica, 2020), an extraordinary fragmentation of procedures and processes, which undermines leaders' sense of authority and brings out the dimension of time as a pivotal element of a new relationship between collaborators and leaders, the latter bearing the great responsibility to give meaning to time and to fill relationships with richness and significance.

**Caring leadership vs. employee caring: are they really that different?**

Comparing the two terms on Google Trends (Figure 1) there was a spike in interest in "employee caring" during the first month of the pandemic, when one of the biggest concerns was to demonstrate a sense of closeness to employees. As we move forward in time, searches for "caring leadership" significantly overtake "employee caring": what does this trend indicate? That employee caring and caring leadership respond to the same objective of centrality of the person, but with diverse times of awareness. The time primacy of "employee caring" over "employee leadership" is something we have seen in the projects we have been working on, such as that of E.ON described in the previous article: employee caring often stems from an intuition of the Internal Communication function which is then acquired in a second phase by the leadership.

**From control to wellbeing**

Remote working has led to the emergence of a culture based on trust, in which the workforce enjoys greater freedom in time management because it is engaged and evaluated not on the basis of hours worked, but on the basis of the achievement of objectives.





*In this context it should be specified that caring is not made up of benefit services, but translates as the leader's ability to enable employees to achieve objectives in a condition of physical and mental wellbeing.*

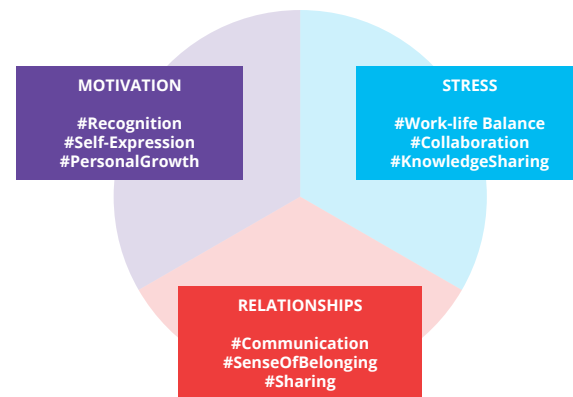
It is, however, a soft skill, indeed, almost an art, to take up the definition found in "The Art of Caring Leadership" (Younger, 2021): not an exact science with fixed rules, but a fluid thing. Furthermore, caring can be perceived insofar as employees are aware of it in their leaders: the author stresses, in fact, that "People will go the extra mile for leaders who show they are genuinely concerned not just with what employees can do but with who they are and can become" (Younger, 2021). This is a further confirmation of the trend that sees the new company leader moving away from a managerial style with a tendency to control every single aspect (micromanagement) towards a logic of empowerment. To do this, what are the aspects that a caring leader should take into consideration?

#### A tool for the caring leader: the wellbeing radar

In OpenKnowledge, on the occasion of a new leadership project, we devised a model that reworks some methodological assumptions (see Dan Ariely, J. Lyne, and P. Barrett) in a radar composed of 3 main assets: motivation, stress and relationship (Figure 2).

On the surface, these may seem like words disconnected from each other, but in reality they all contribute to the maintenance of a good balance within a team. The leader who chooses to take care – bear in mind that being a leader is not a role, but a choice – must ensure a good balance between the components of the radar, by introducing activities that can motivate collaborators (through recognition actions, self-expression and personal growth), relax them (through digital detox actions, experience sharing) and lastly, stimulate them to relate to others by encouraging teamwork.

**Figure 3**  
Daniel Goleman's model of emotional intelligence.  
Source: Digital4Biz



**Figure 2**  
The wellbeing radar: a tool for the caring leader.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

#### Caring leadership as overcoming the mere competence of emotional intelligence

The proposed radar, on closer inspection, implies for the caring leader a strong ability to empathise not only with the team, but also with themselves. The concept of emotional intelligence, popularised by Daniel Goleman in 1995 as "the ability to recognize one's own emotions, those of others, manage one's own, and interact constructively with others" moves from the awareness of the "I" in order to attune oneself with the other (Figure 3). Goleman himself, however, acknowledges that "to achieve the maximum from a team it is not enough to have excellent technical skills and a very high IQ. But neither is "just being nice or kind" (Goleman, WOBI 2021).

The caring leader, in fact, should not be misunderstood as the "problem-solving" counter, but must become an enabler of solutions. To achieve this, we need to move away from the logic of caring as "caring for others" to move towards self-caring.

It is, therefore, legitimate to ask: is caring leadership an organisational responsibility or an individual one? The responsibility of leaders has been inflated in the study of organisations many times as an institutional role endowed with charisma. What if that is not the case? What if today's leaders should "manage less" and "communicate more" with their employees by adopting a decentralised leadership approach?

# Evolving organisations through participatory mechanisms

## How to make enterprises centres of cooperation and innovation, involving employees and stimulating individual initiative

#### The context is changing, organisations are evolving

The context in which economic actors move and operate is constantly evolving and to manage the changes, and exploit their potential, organisations must be able to evolve with it.

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided a disruptive expression of an already turbulent present, profoundly modifying the experiences of consumers, employees, citizens and people in general, and imposing change at an unprecedented rate. The emergency is already behind us and organisations are field testing new approaches to the *next normal*; a tough challenge, mainly because it requires a completely new perspective, which calls into question roles and relationships in the corporate ecosystem.

In this context, employees are confirmed as the fundamental stakeholders whom organisations must team up with to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Reinforcing the terms of the employee-employer alliance is a strategic choice that cannot be overlooked, but at the same time it is also very challenging because, in order to accomplish it, the organisation must be able to offer a real and *recognisable value* to those who are part of this pact, possibly even *rethinking their own internal dynamics and mindset*.

#### A=B=C: from participation, to engagement, to evolution...

One area to work on in pursuit of this goal is that of collaboration and participation.

Talking about participatory and collaborative dynamics means, first of all, broadening the aspects affecting the well-being of employees. Involving employees in the life of the company, making them part of the decision-making processes concerning tasks and projects, as well as giving them the space to express themselves and cooperate on broader business issues, fulfils a need for community and recognition that is inherent in the individual. The freedom to participate and have one's say in the knowledge of affecting one's situation is a powerful engine that generates a sense of belonging and personal empowerment, fundamental feelings for an organisation that wants to proceed cohesively and operate successfully. But there's more.

These same dynamics represent an opportunity for experimentation and the acquisition of new skills that will be crucial in the way people work tomorrow and which represent an indispensable professional background for both employees and organisations which will benefit from their competences.

A competency model has been discussed for some time, the so-called T-Shaped model (Figure 1), which makes it possible to combine vertical professional experience with a skill-set that cuts across multiple fields. In addition



to the technical skills considered indispensable now and in the future, the T-Shaped model highlights the role of soft skills (the horizontal bar of the T).

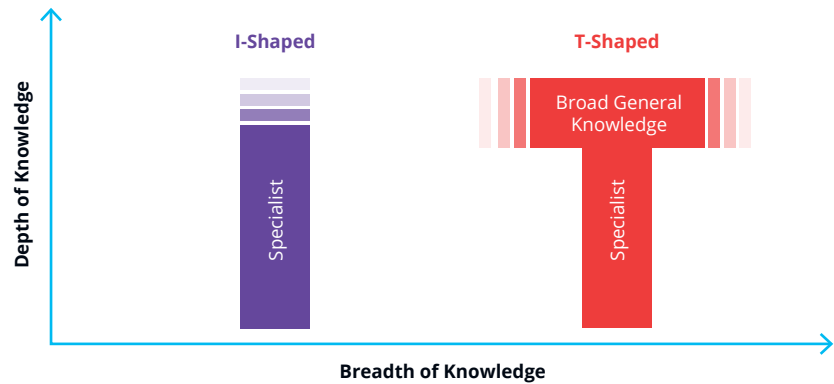
*These are cognitive skills such as emotional intelligence, creativity and problem solving, which can make a significant contribution to handling complex and changeable situations, and which are naturally cultivated in an organisational context permeated by participatory dynamics.*

Last but not least, employee involvement is also a key factor in innovation. The affirmation of individual initiative, combined with the relationships that a modern company must promote, is a key element of an innovative process that goes beyond the traditional conception of private creativity, acquiring a collaborative dimension.

**People at the centre: the strength of a paradigm**

Achieving this vision requires commitment and courage from businesses, first of all by recognising that their most valuable resource is the people who work for them, and on whose knowledge, enthusiasm and harmony of relationships define the strength they will express on the market. On paper, the concept is easily shareable, but as often happens, the depth of intentions is revealed in the transition from rhetoric to concrete action. Accepting this paradigm may, in fact, mean a profound organisational and cultural rethink.

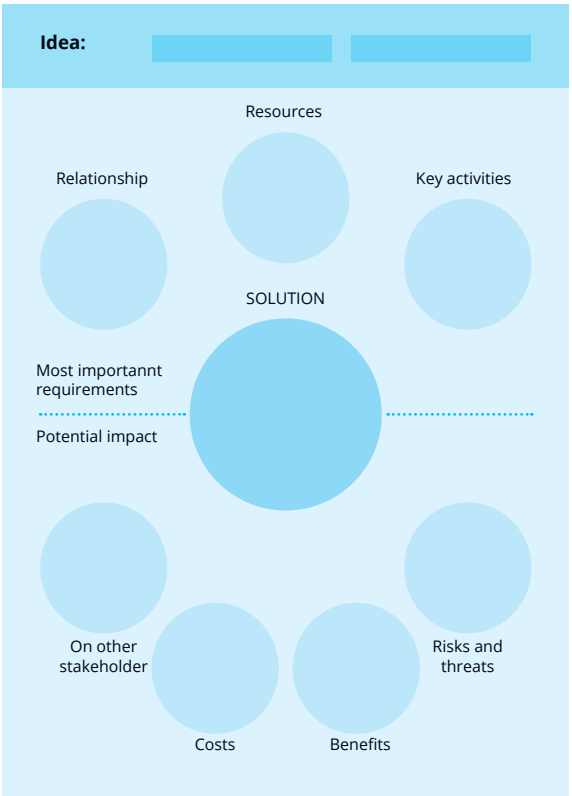
Starting with top management, all levels of the company should become bearers of a culture that gives space to the individual, encouraging the spread of those conversational and participatory dynamics in the company that underlie it. This is a complex path, to be structured in different ways depending on the level of cultural maturity in the organisation, which cannot be separated from the creation of a listening field to understand what motivates people and how you can relate those motivations to the purpose of the organisation. Managers can play a role in this process by creating the conditions for collaborative processes to be successfully implemented. However, these are currently at the centre of the debate since they are considered by many to be primarily responsible for the obstacles that prevent the establishment of a relaxed and collaborative atmosphere; bad managerialism, the kind that creates complexity instead of simplification, represents for many authors a factor that limits the freedom that is at the heart of individual initiative and responsibility. First of all, therefore, we need a deep rethink of the role of the leadership and its direct commitment, which will have to take place in relation to all of the key dimensions of change: culture, organisation, technology, spaces (Sica, 2020). For example, it will be essential to encourage opportunities for mutual exchange among peers and between different levels of the company organisation chart; connect dispersed networks to generate new value from heterogeneity; re-consider knowledge as a common good; contribute to the dissemination of a culture of failure, to experience the new and look at results in a constructive spirit; conceive workspaces in a new way, to enable creativity and talent to express themselves fully.



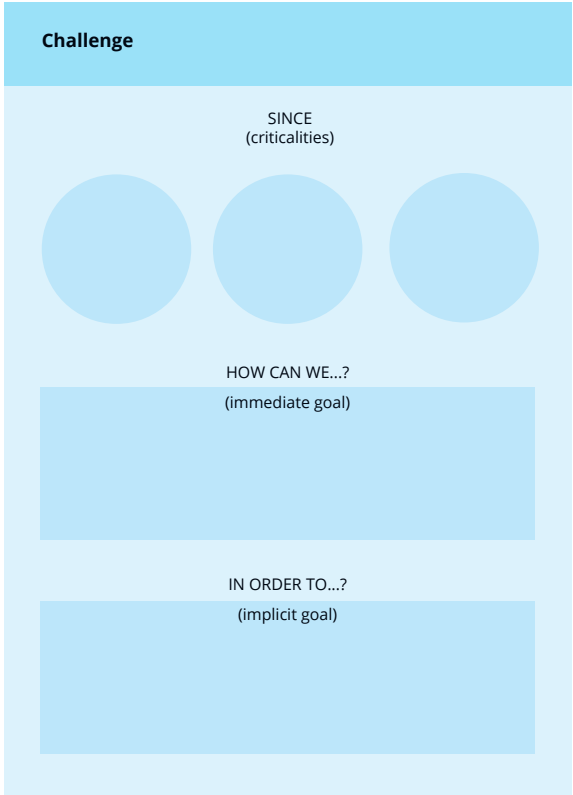
**Figure 1**  
On the left, vertical competency model (I-Shaped), on the right, the model of T-Shaped expertise.  
Source: Gartner

**Case in point:  
Idea generation in the company**

An international customer asked OpenKnowledge for support to improve its information management and internal sharing processes. Specifically, we were asked to identify the main pain points of the existing process and then explore potential solutions. Due to the great technical expertise of the employees and their propensity to participate, each stage of the work was carried out with the direct involvement of the employees most impacted by the process.



**Figure 3**  
Template for solution development.  
Source: OpenKnowledge



**Figure 2**  
Challenge Template.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

In a first step, the life-cycle of the product was reconstructed in order to accurately identify the main criticalities. On the basis of these, we then developed the idea generation activity that involved four work teams, heterogeneous in terms of function and company role, who were asked to imagine potential solutions to the problems encountered.

The work of the teams was facilitated by materials supporting the creative process (Figures 2 and 3) and ended with a plenary presentation of the ideas that emerged, followed by an in-depth discussion and evaluation. The initiative proved a great success, both in terms of the solutions identified, with some of them resulting in concrete actions, and because it represented an important opportunity to spread a model of collaboration in which the protagonists recognised themselves and felt valued.

# Communication as a strategic business lever

Internal communication has a role to play as a protagonist in business decisions through valuing and engaging people and the now indispensable support of technology

## Internal communication – from peripheral service to business partner

“Are you a soap dispenser?”

This is the question that Stephen Welch, freelance consultant and expert in communication and HR themes, aims at internal communication professionals.

An unusual, seemingly unrelated question, but which in fact perfectly describes the role that internal communication has often taken in various companies: a function at the service of all the others, a dispenser of information regarding everything the company is and does, and only intervenes at the end of the design and realisation processes of products and services.

But – and there’s a big “but”...

If internal communication wants to carve out a role of prime importance for itself alongside all other functions and participate actively in the choice and definition of corporate strategies, it has to do more than just deliver soap at the touch of a finger (Welch). And in recent years that seems to be the direction it has taken. To do so, however, internal communication first had to ask itself what the value was on which to base its own transformation from a peripheral element to a strategic lever for business, talking to people, about people, for people. Internal communication, bridging the gap between people and companies, taking care of relationships, continuous dialogue and encouraging participation, intervenes directly on the reputational aspect of the company. And, thanks to the lever of reputation, contributes to

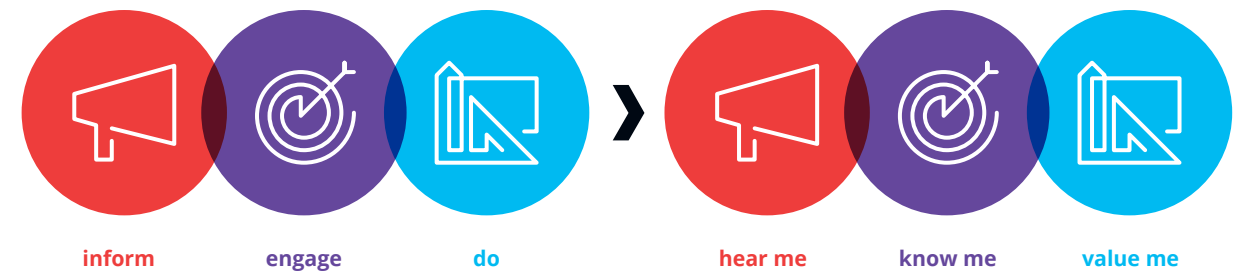
defining business strategies.

Among the various challenges that internal communication has faced in this process of evolution, the most recent has been digital transformation. In this case, internal communication has had the courage to put itself to the test and has done so by revising traditional methods and pushing the boundaries we are used to recognising, using in some cases disruptive factors such as artificial intelligence, robots, big data and algorithms to understand how to motivate and keep employees happy (Sica, 2020).

If, before the pandemic, internal communication was timidly trying, and being almost misunderstood, to redefine the relationships between people, technology and company, today - finally! - it has a fundamental task to carry out: to recreate and strengthen, thanks to technology, that common feeling that makes a company a cohesive organism.

## The Copernican revolution of internal communication

The pandemic has been an opportunity for those in charge of internal communication, since it has been possible to understand the indispensable value of engagement. The contingent moment has caused a change in perspective, one where listening and dialogue should be preferred, and where we should talk about the evolution of the organisation.



**Figure 1**  
From the traditional approach to a human-centric approach.  
Source: Gartner

In many companies, communication has become honest, empathetic and transparent, but, above all, concrete. At the centre are people, with their needs and expectations for the future. This is a full-immersion in reality for internal communication itself, which has seized the value of empathy and become aware of the impacts it may have on people's behaviour and motivation.

*The inform-engage-do approach, that has always characterised the plans of internal communication designed for our clients, has evolved by virtue of greater proximity and the need for more message customisation (it is not by chance that we are now talking about internal communication personas) and a consequent need for increased listening to employees.*

The *Inform* phase has become the *Hear me* phase: active listening, which allows you to differentiate the stylistic character of the communication depending on the recipients; *Engage* has become *Know me*, because only by fully knowing the employee's perceptions, deepest habits and needs, is it possible to create engagement initiatives that are heartfelt and involving. The *Do* stage has, finally, become richer, taking on a broader meaning and a new name: *Value me*. Value is what employees really perceive and what stays in their minds and memories. The pandemic has been a massive, open-air laboratory for this new “people by design” approach, where activities are built on the basis of people insofar as they are engines of the organisation. And the effects of internal communication on the employees of our client companies during the period of remote working and isolation

have been positive beyond all expectations: communication has really spoken about what was needed at the moment, in a direct and transparent way, shortening the distances between top management and employees, supporting companies in the building of a remote community and by being the catalyser of teams at a time conditioned by the absence of physical contact and direct interaction between employees. Technology and digitalization have served as great allies in this regard. But what happens now?

Once again, internal communication is at the centre of the story and is accompanying a new way of understanding offices - which are no longer simple spaces but, rather, have taken on a centrality for the reconstruction of relationships - towards a new way of experiencing technologies in the mix between remote and face-to-face life, and a new approach to collaboration.

*The challenge now is to create integrated internal communication capable of mixing instruments that, to date, have allowed us to work and the new hybrid modes, always keeping employees updated and involved, in contact with both the company and their colleagues.*

Technology must become the superpower of communication capable of enabling and maximising the value of relationships and exchanges between people, messages and tools, considering the employee as a whole person.

Unipol case study

A forerunner of the current times, in 2016, Unipol Group's Internal Communication decided to follow an evolutionary path that would very soon lead to the transformation from ancillary service to a strategic support function of the business.

The creation of the Futur@ corporate intranet was the first step in this direction: a digital environment that enables quick access to all the news and initiatives of the Group and promotes the efficiency of communication and information processes between the different corporate functions.

Alongside Futur@, in 2019 internal communication introduced, what would be called more than a tool - a new perspective, rather: the Digital Workplace. Thanks to the development of a collaborative area that was well integrated into the Group's digital ecosystem, the words "connection" and "cohesion" renewed themselves to make work more efficient, collaboration easier and information search faster.

The project was ambitious and required a pilot phase. The business area identified for experimentation was the Claims Department, which represents the beating heart of the company's activities, taking care of the management of settlement processes, from the claim notification to final settlement. The assessment macro-phase was led by Internal Communication, together with the Information Systems area and Management itself. While the concept and IT solutions were being defined, in March 2020 the Covid-19 health emergency blew up. In this unexpected and precarious context, Unipol's internal communication still felt the need to give concrete answers and to create a sense of serenity and security among people. It thus developed a new corporate positioning, Proudly Italians, which saw internal and external communication more aligned than ever to bring out a single, strong value proposition for the group: to be the-

re to support the community, both within the company and beyond. The campaign took place entirely online, taking advantage of some features of Futur@ to create a fluid, integrated, and compelling experience.

At the same time, in the same context, all the advantages became clear of having a co-working space such as the Digital Workplace, capable of improving the way people work, whether it is remotely or in person, and making it smart. The Unipol Group has always looked to technology, but without losing sight of the relationships it enables.

The prolonged health emergency has put the spotlight on people, the real engine that has allowed the company to respond to the multiple challenges posed by the pandemic. There were several communication initiatives to involve colleagues and create a sense of ownership, albeit from a distance. In particular, there were two engagement actions through which it has been possible to inform people, involving them in a business-oriented dialogue.

There were "Digital Talks", video interviews with Top Management on work-related and other topics, where every Manager launched a challenge related to their business, and "Digital lunches" held between the manager who proposed the challenge and the colleagues who rose to it.

Unipol Group's internal communication, accelerating the grounding of a communication strategy that was already under way before the emergency, maximised its listening efforts during the pandemic period and constantly involved employees in the exploitation of digital working tools.

Already thinking of the next phase, that of the return and the next normal, which will see the boundary between internal communication and corporate reputation increasingly blurred, an increasingly strategic stakeholder-focused role in the service of business is being carved out.

# When advertising filters fall

## For brands, being ethical can no longer be just a buzzword

Saying is one thing but doing is another, and, if you are a company, it often takes a good communications agency to get you there.

And if on social networks there are more and more users (including those who are not famous) who are singled out for the inconsistency between what they publish and the reality of the facts, for companies there is no longer any advertising or filter that holds: between saying and doing there can no longer any difference. There are multiple causes, many attributable to the pandemic that has just passed, or rather, is still ongoing.

The pandemic and the time regained to investigate deeper

We have been stuck in the house, on couches or in front of windows, without understanding what was going on outside, but with all devices available.

There is no doubt that the pandemic, especially in the early months of lockdown, had a profound effect on the organization of our days for all of us, making us rediscover a slower and less chaotic use of time, often leading us to reflection and insight.

This time has, in fact, often been filled by an erratic search for information related to the ongoing situation, but not limited to that only.

According to a ComScore study of the Coronavirus and the new online behaviours (Gevers, 2020), during the first outbreaks in Italy, there was a surge of up to 142% in visits to generalist news sites compared to the first week of 2020. A similar trend was also recorded by the Covid-19 Barometer study (Kantar, 2020) which found an increase in web traffic (+70%) and use of social media (+61%) compared to the pre-pandemic data.

The unexpected acceleration of the digitalisation process of the information path represented a great challenge for companies and institutions, but also a unique opportunity to reach a segment of the public not very accustomed, up to that time, to using products and services through the digital channel. Thus, we have witnessed a hybridisation of formats and content that has brought online, sometimes even a little clumsily, some of the communications previously delivered through the mainstream media.

At the same time, the exponential demand for content paved the way for constant corporate communication aimed towards consumers and employees, in a proliferation of messages of closeness and cohesion that, although necessary and relevant at first, were subsequently worn down by rhetorical slogans.

But what brands have really had to deal with has been the realisation that information "bulimia" has paved the way for greater public awareness with respect to the economic and social ecosystem by which they are surrounded. The majority of Italian consumers today say they are paying more and more attention to the environmental and social impact of what they buy, and are calling for companies to play a central role and to guide positive action in both areas.

True, the issue of sustainability of products and services has long been one of the communication levers of brands, but the pandemic has brought to the average consumer's attention, not just the most observant, something more: the entire production and distribution chain.

In fact, during the days of the lockdown, the commercials of the main national and international brands portrayed workers in the productive system as heroes, on a par with doctors and nurses in white coats.

Once the emergency moment passed, companies thought they could refocus attention on the more superficial

and commercial characteristics of products clashed with a new perception of ethics and sustainability, widened inexorably to the entire value chain. This perception has been increasingly influenced by the voice of the employees as well, which has become a fundamental support for the reputation of brands and now has a crucial role in external communication.

## Dropping the filter

When people turned on the TV during the pandemic period they could not tell the brands apart anymore between one commercial and another, and when they started shooting videos, which then went viral, showing that the messages and communication styles of the main ads aired during the lockdown were indistinguishable, everything became obvious. This homogeneity showed how little value and uniqueness supported those slogans, which were all the same and revealed to the consumer the emotional levers and triggers of engagement exploited in communication, thus rendering them obsolete. The filter has fallen for good.

So, while many brands continued to rush to publish spots of empty streets in black and white with melancholy piano soundtracks, others acted quickly to convert their production processes to become an active part of the effort to support the medical emergency. This made the difference between communicating and acting even clearer.

## From here, there's no going back

Businesses are faced with consumers who have become increasingly attentive to social issues, and increasingly aware of the role of communication in the perception that brands create of themselves.

In addition to these, the new generations are increasingly willing to actively engage in these issues and therefore demand even more from the companies that they buy from and relate to. Let's talk about the famous Generation Z, the most sought-after target audience for brands all over the world, and the one everyone is trying to retain as they first enter the market. The key to achieving this is authenticity: growing up at a time when searching for fake news generates over 33 million results on Google (June 2017), Gen Z is not easily fooled: they look for brands that are transparent and real. This is the generation that feels rightly betrayed if a brand talks about sustainability but images of child labour relating to it start popping up on the web (Gen Z brand relationships – Authenticity matters, IBM Institute for Business Value & NRF). (For further information on the GenZ target see the article on p. 78).

Many will be thinking that these trends were well-known even before the pandemic, that ethical brands have been talked about for a number of years now and that many of them are already making efforts through awareness-raising and fundraising events to support this new positioning.

So what is new?

What is different now is that there is no turning back: the idea at the heart of the old way of advertising, which is that you just talk about your values, create an image and communicate it in an aspirational way to consumers, is now anachronistic and unrealistic.

What is new is that, even for the communications sector, the “talking” must necessarily give rise to a “doing” movement. It is no longer possible for companies, and for those who work with them, to ride the wave with viral initiatives and catchy commercials for their own sake.

The consumer has discovered the trick, the veil has been lifted and what lies behind can no longer remain hidden.

*What's new is that brands are being called upon to demonstrate that they really embrace the values which they espouse, with the world of communication by their side, in a new challenge to use the same messages both inside and outside the organisation, regarding customers and employees as a single audience to convince and retain.*

While it may be true that the pandemic does not represent the birth of a whole new story, it does mark the point at the end of the prologue, a turning point after which the story must necessarily change.

## Communication becomes action

Now what? Now we move on and change.





# Gen Z at work

## How to facilitate the entry of the new Italian workforce

### Generation Z, identity and intergenerational comparison in the company

In recent years the interest in generations and their identity aspect has led companies from a variety of industries to question themselves on how to intercept the requests, desires and values of consumers and younger employees.

The spotlight was turned on them mostly in the early 2000s when the first research began to take place into Generation Y, those commonly referred to as *Millennials*. Today, that segment of the population constitutes roughly 50% of the workforce, but it is now less intriguing for researchers than the digital natives belonging to *Generation Z* - also known as *Zoomers* - or those born between 1996 and 2010.

They are the ones preparing to form the new and fifth workforce in the working imagination [in the anthropological sense], adding themselves, in order, to the *Silent Generation* (i.e., those born before 1945), *Baby Boomers* (now between 75 and 56 years old), *Generation X* (the 55-41 year olds) and *Generation Y* (the so-called *Millennials* born from 1981 to 1995).

There are, therefore, five generations currently living in the same work spaces and constantly sharing common information, interests and goals. Knowing how to seize the opportunities and challenges of this coexistence, enriching and not devaluing the *generation gap*, it is an opportunity for organisations to bring together the experience of their collaborators, translating their coexistence into value.

Of all of these generations, Gen Z is still being defined: understanding it is certainly the first step to grounding it within the company fabric, encouraging dialogue and lowering walls and barriers, often linked to generational stereotypes.

### Post-pandemic fears and dreams

Growing up in a world with non-existent borders between the real and the non-existent digital, under the influence of the technological component, in training and approach to life, GenZers have been able to benefit from their knowledge as *digital natives* during the pandemic, turning technological extensions into means to emerge, shorten distances, develop new ideas, start new businesses and recognise digital as a catalyst for their goals and desires.

Starting from this assumption, to understand in depth how Zoomers have lived through and experienced education and the world of work, as a group of (project) designers sensitive to *human* issues, we asked ourselves:

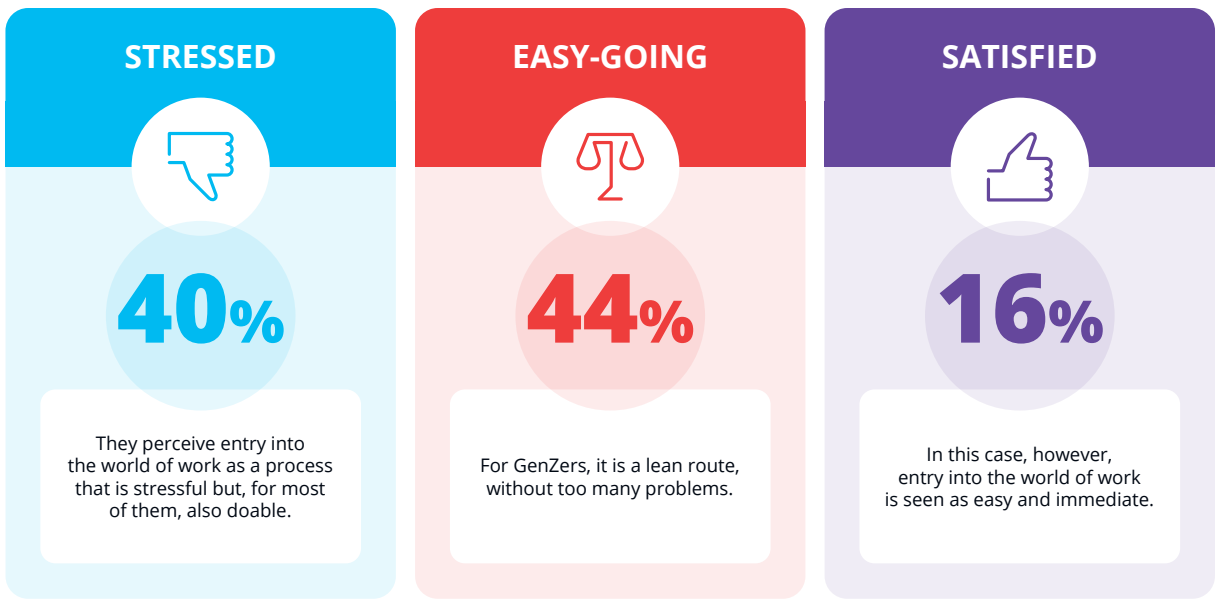
- How should universities and companies prepare themselves to accommodate GenZers and maximise their capabilities?
- How should they listen to their needs and attract them in this particular post-pandemic moment in history?
- How should they accompany them on business paths favouring interconnectedness with other generations?

### From international GenZers to the Italian cross-section: similarities and differences

Curious to understand the new section of professionals, in OpenKnowledge we developed research that, starting from a qualitative survey, has allowed us to understand how this generation will affect the world of work in Italy over the next few years.

After analysing and rationalising the aspects and most relevant information available to the international public, we formulated a quantitative survey, finalised during 2021 so that we could analyse the specificities of the Italian panorama and understand how to target new strategies and maximise opportunities of contamination and exchange with new young adults.

Together with the contribution of the *Bip Group* and part-



**Figure 1**  
Profiles compared.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

ner companies such as SIA and E.ON, interested in exploring the topic starting with their own people, we collected a series of insights related to their experience in the company, then reworked them into a report on the subject (OpenKnowledge, 2021).

In particular, by exploring trends and characteristics belonging to the international Gen Z, composed of young independents (70% work as freelancers) (Sparks & Honey, 2015) and advocates for self-taught training (55% rely on YouTube for personnel development) (Panopto, 2020), we found that even in Italy, Gen Zers prefer short forms of training, easy to find and of immediate use. According to our research, the most commonly used sources for training are in fact websites and web pages (26%), along with videos (25%) and online courses (18%).

Creative, determined, flexible and hyper-connected both as students and as professionals, Gen Zers wants to approach the world of work fully prepared. The study reveals that they seek information about the sector, enter into contact with the companies they are interested in and turn to their acquaintances to learn from their experiences and clarify future career prospects. So much so, that they often follow a path consistent with the choices made in the past, starting with their educational pathway (for 76% their current work is in line with the education they received).

We can paint them as the down-to-earth young people who prepare themselves for the future in a concrete way, leaving behind what they fantasised about doing in the past: for 69% their current job is little or not at all in line with the kind of “dream job” that they always envisioned during childhood. The ease with which some of them were selected has always been a source of wonderment. Their preparation is, in fact, a determining factor in the creation of expectations but also feeds a sense of inadequacy, both of which fuel the fear of not having enough skills to be in positions with responsibilities as professional workers.

*Dialogue is becoming increasingly crucial to provide support and establish a guide for the new class of worker, so that the relationship between professionals of different generations is perceived to be of value for growth and improvement of the entire corporate population.*

Thanks to the contamination between generations, everyone can enrich themselves and find new ideas in their interaction: a new point of view from those who are facing this reality for the first time and the valuable experience of those who, on the other hand, have had a long career.



**Figure 2**  
Most effective selection modes according to Zoomers.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

**Preferences and approaches in the selection process: 3 different profiles**

Although with varying degrees of difficulty, the Italian Generation Z agrees in how they define their entry level experience in the world of work as engaged but generally simple, fluid yet structured.

With respect to the spirit in which they approach the process of selection, however, three different profiles can be identified, namely *Stressed* (40%), *Easy-going* (44%) and *Satisfied* (14%) (Figure 1).

For the *Stressed*, the steps of research and entry into the world of work have proved to be a source of anxiety, although 77% of them found the process manageable. Beyond the difficulty of confronting a new reality, with unfamiliar dynamics and environments that are completely different from what they have been used to, additional issues related to health emergencies have contributed to adversely affect their mood. The modalities of work introduced due to the pandemic have not only made the labour market more competitive and difficult, but have also helped make entry into the company more

discontinuous because of the distance.

Those we have defined as *Easy-going* have, instead felt more comfortable during this process. For them, their first steps into the world of work have followed a streamlined route, without too many problems. The positive impact of their experience is mainly related to two different factors, that can both can be summarised by the word support. In fact, the role of universities in the early stages of research and orientation has been very positive and, subsequently, during the induction phase, the work team who helped them define their tasks and their responsibilities have also played a positive role.

Finally, we have the *Satisfied* who, due to the ease and rapidity with which they have been able to access a position, together with the speed of companies' selection processes, report positively on entering the companies they work for. Also in this case, however, among the reasons that have influenced this perception we find the human side of their experience: the relationship established with members of their team and the welcome they received (OpenKnowledge, 2021).

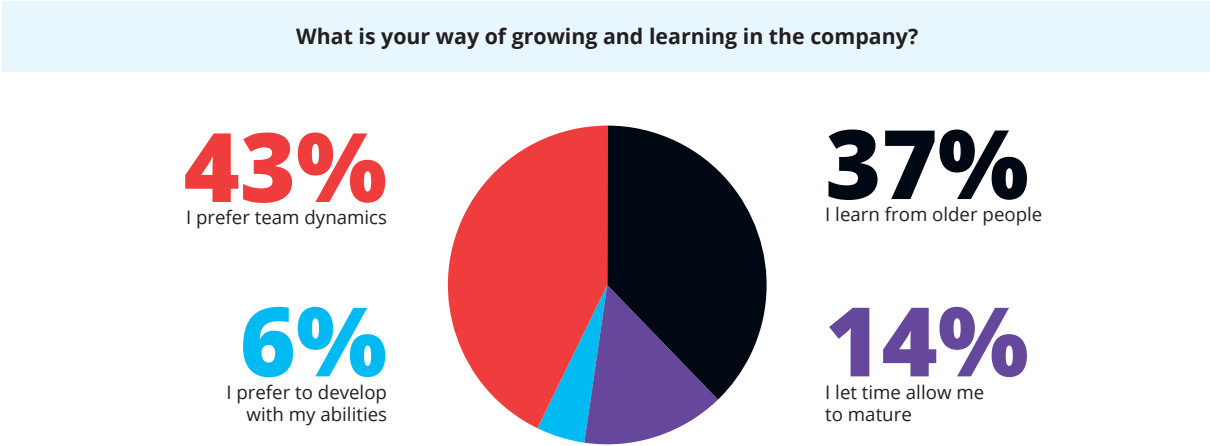
**The Next Generation in the company: the employees' perspective**

With regard to the selection process, new employees prefer a *self-centered* dialogue from the very first contact, through a one-to-one conversation that allows for an in-depth mutual understanding. On the scale of preferences expressed by the Italian GenZers in our research, the selection methods taking the first three places are as follows: the traditional interview, the online interview, the individual challenge and practical/technical exercise; whereas video interviewing, by not allowing for an actual exchange, ranks last (Figure 2).

The approach to group activities changes, however, when they are about learning. As far as professional training is concerned, exchange with others becomes fundamental and is clearly preferred (80%) over the individual modes (Figure 3).

Zoomers expect quick response times from companies and a clear, structured path starting with the modalities of *recruitment*, to help them find their way around and understand what awaits them in the years to come. The new cohort see themselves being loyal to their employers but they are also ambitious, with the desire to see their role evolve over time: 61% do not expect to change company in the next two years but 53% of these expect to change roles within the company (OpenKnowledge, 2021).

What they are asking for, then, is to be clearly guided and welcomed, starting with *onboarding* processes all the way up to the advancing career steps, always leaving



**Figure 3**  
Preferences on how to grow in the company according to Zoomers.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

the right space for dialogue and discussion with those who surround them, providing structure and human warmth.

Companies that want to remain competitive in the market and also meet generational expectations of *human capital* have to deal with these variables, to satisfy invisible needs, which not even *Zoomers* know they have.

**How to rethink GenZ life in the company: the organisations' perspective**

What GenZers experience outside the company as citizens, users and customers, are immediate solutions, simplified interactions, memorable experiences and requests at the click of a mouse. These are demands that Zoomers unconsciously feed into their first contact with the company, in an interview, in onboarding experiences, and in corporate contacts.

As a result, there is a need for companies to begin testing these mechanisms within their employee experience, proposing more contemporary formats (video, apps), practical and collaborative sessions (such as contests and hackathons) and open and flexible spaces.

If work-home balance is the priority for Generation Y and their number one priority in evaluating a job, more than half of Generation Z sees the opportunity of getting ahead a priority (Querzè, 2020).

What can we do then to listen to this new generation, which by 2030 could represent 75% of the world's workforce? At a strategic level, we can say that it will be increasingly important to listen to them, allowing them to have working experience that are in tune with their pri-

vate life. Thus, we can talk about

- Flexibility: not simply a generation of creatives, but entrepreneurs and opportunity builders
- Practicality: everything they've learned, and digital explains it well, they did it by "doing"
- Personalisation: being concrete and focused on their goals, differentiating them from the choices of their peers.

In terms of personal development, however, the desire for growth and an aptitude for a multidisciplinary approach can be satisfied by offering the possibility of internal mobility or by assigning cross projects to enrich their wealth of experience, without being forced to jump from company to company.

To conclude, what GenZers expect is an informal development based on job rotation and tacit knowledge (i.e. the kind of knowledge that is not coded because it is not contained in any text or manual). What they aspire to is a reality in which they can share experiences and practise on the job. The team they envision is one that is open and ready to listen in order to challenge them and prove their abilities in a process of personal and professional development (Weforum, 2021).

It is, therefore, necessary to design an experience for the whole of the work population, across all five co-existing generations, taking into account new desires and new logics for meeting the challenge of diversity, working on corporate culture and combating the persistence of prejudices, stereotypes and barriers related to ageism and the generation gap.

# The hybrid future of communication

## New languages, roles and skills to move in and out of the organisation

### Case study: when there is room or the new generations at the bank

Knowing the dynamics, channels and languages of the new generations is the key to being attractive not only as a provider of products or services that keep up with demands of this target audience, but also, and no less importantly, as an employer.

In order to make banks an employer of interest to a target group of high-potential young people from GenY, the so-called Millennials, a major banking group asked for our support in defining an end-to-end strategy for Employer Branding.

*The first step towards an effective strategy is to define an Employee Value Proposition. Put simply, we need a clear answer and value to the question: “Why should I come to work for you?”*

It is necessary to consider the point of view of leadership and HR, but also of current and potential employees. This can be done in a number of ways: simple interviews or surveys, participatory workshops and analysis of social media and online conversations.

Once we have a sufficiently clear picture of current perceptions, we are able to realise what we call an Employer Brand Identikit, a tool based on Branding and Storytelling techniques which allows the company to reflect on the way the Brand wants to position itself in relation to its target audience.

It forms the basis for the communication concept and the related ecosystem of initiatives.

In this specific case, the implications of the main insights that emerged were as follows:

- The financial sector itself was perceived as unattractive. In particular, the bank, although regarded as solid, was positioned worse than its competitors with regard to aspects such as innovation and teamwork, both considered a priority by the target employee group.
- Social media communication was not considered as meeting expectations, just as the candidate selection and recruiting channels were viewed as obsolete.
- Generally speaking, recent graduates and young professionals tended to trust their peers more than institutional communication.

To respond to these needs we created a hybrid team, capable of mastering multiple disciplines, involving different areas of expertise: marketing, UX/UI design, platform building, internal engagement, social media and creativity collaborated in a synergistic way to implement a range of complex initiatives.

To begin with, in addition to the corporate website, which was redesigned to enhance the new positioning and improve the visibility of open positions, we worked on a multi-channel strategy that would take into account new channels and touchpoints more related to the target: from professional social media such as LinkedIn, up to the realisation of an App dedicated to recruiting where at the end of a game set in space, and only after testing their skills, candidates could send their CVs with one click.

We then created a communication campaign to enhance the centrality of people expressed by the new Employee Value Proposition (EVP), and responding to the main need expressed by the bank itself: to change its own language to get closer to the target audience. The visual style was, therefore, completely detached from the usual Brand, introducing contemporary, dynamic and direct elements. The flexibility and effectiveness of the campaign also allowed us to do two follow-up campaigns, making employees the protagonists: we involved a number of new recruits in relating their positive experiences, set up a photo and video shoot, then published the material on corporate channels.

With the same desire to be at the forefront of communication activities, we also engaged employees as ambassadors, launching a programme of structured advocacy,

allowing them to post Brand-related content on their personal channels.

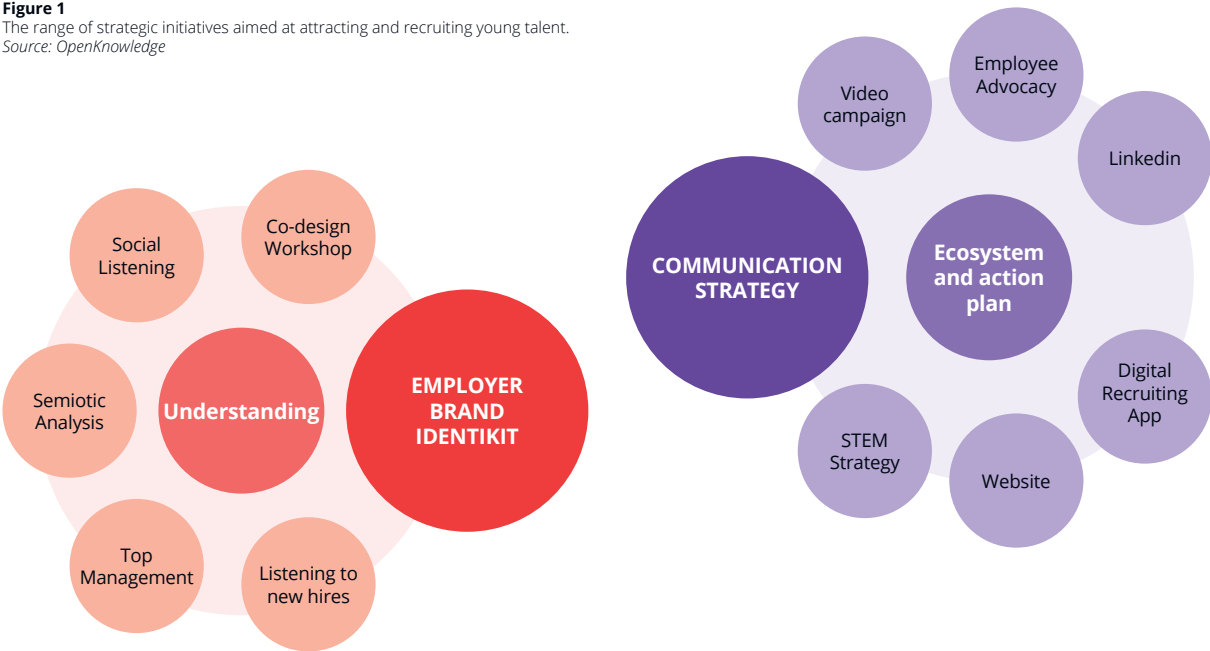
A complex path, made up of actions to approach the public, which allowed us to help the bank change its image and get ever closer to those new talents that it was aiming to attract, and which, from the first months of activity, led to very concrete results both in terms of participation and performance.

### Internal and external communication: two sides of the same coin

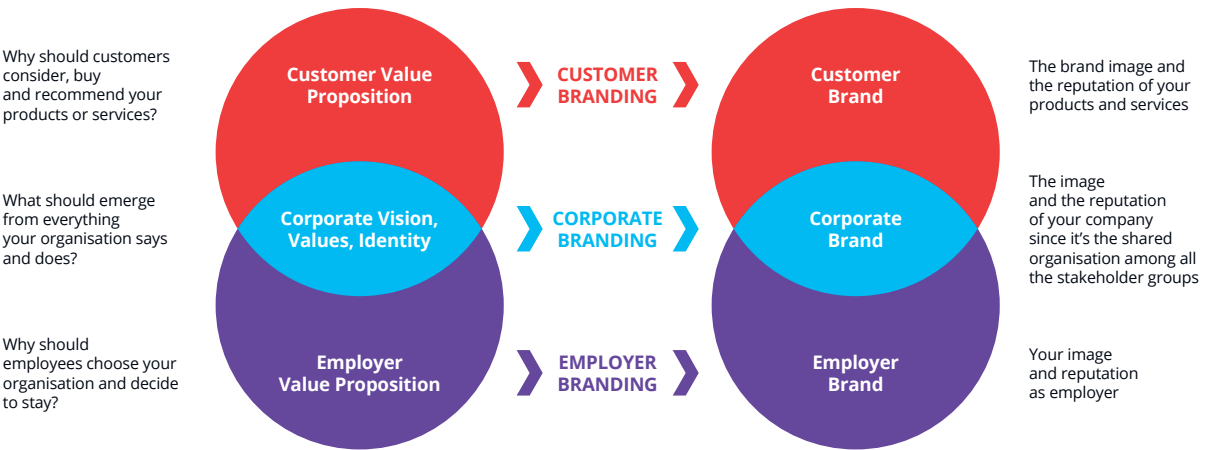
This is one of the many instances where we are seeing a strong hybridisation between the various levels of corporate communication: employer branding, i.e. the perception of an organisation as an employer has an increasingly important influence on the identity of the external brand communication. This is happening while internal communication has to reflect the messages and values conveyed effectively to customers, and employees, now in the forefront of brand communication and protecting brand reputation.

It is no coincidence that reputation is now considered omni-driven or influenced by various factors that have to do with the image communicated to external consumers

**Figure 1**  
The range of strategic initiatives aimed at attracting and recruiting young talent.  
Source: OpenKnowledge







**Figura 2**  
The relationship between Corporate, Customer and Employer Brand.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

but also with the way in which the company is perceived by all other stakeholders, also internal ones, such as current and potential employees. We thus discover that two worlds, which up to now have seemed distant, are connected and influenced by each other and the alignment between them is the basis of a healthy relationship with all stakeholders, which should be carefully cultivated. Simple? Not at all, because to work effectively on reputation, an effort needs to be made to combine several functions and competences, and to act on several fronts at once, in a systemic way. In addition to communication and marketing activities, for example, an important game is being played within companies, where employees are the main stakeholders to consider.

*It is essential for companies to build and maintain a good reputation, now more than ever, having lost "proximity" to people, and finding themselves communicating in an overcrowded environment and struggling against a communication overload and information that is rarely heard.*

The companies that will manage to get out of the economic crisis are not only those with large economic resources but also, and above all, those that have a strong identity and reputation. From this point of view, reputation is often an asset that is ignored but which is critical to generating business.

**A liquid transition between customer and employee**

Hybridisation, on closer inspection, goes beyond the aspects related to communication: the differences between the roles of employee and customer no longer appear so clear-cut. On the one hand, the customer experience begins at the moment in which employees interact with customers, or provide information and services, and it goes without saying that organisations cannot meet the expectations of their external stakeholders if they are unable to manage better their most valuable resource: their people.

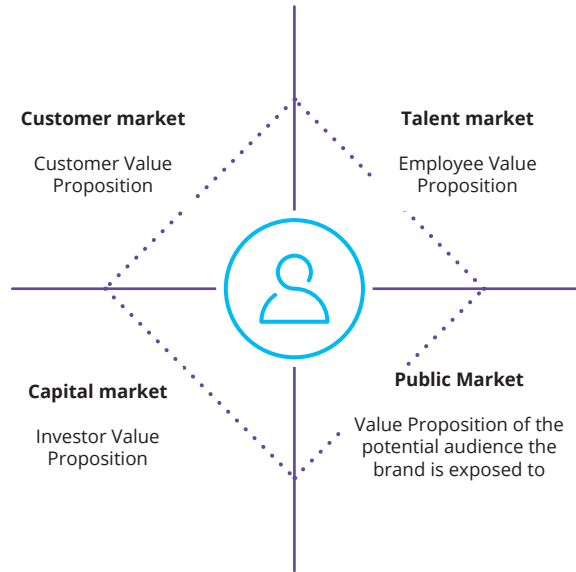
On the other hand, the people with whom the organisation interacts are no longer "just" employees. They can engage with the company in different roles and be active in multiple markets. Those who work for us are often also consumers. And consumers, likewise, are potential talent. Let's start by thinking of them as people (and taking care of them). In this perspective, every interaction with the brand can and must be thought of and communicated as part of a single experience, whether I'm a candidate, an employee, a consumer, an investor or, more generally, a member of the public.

*There's no point in talking in a separate way about CX, EX or any kind of experience that stakeholders and shareholders have when they come into contact with the organisation. The company must be recognisable in each of its manifestations, as one brand, with one voice.*

HR and Marketing are facing very similar challenges, related to the design of experiences, but starting from different perspectives, approaches and languages. Learning to use a single lens, the vision of both sides will be enriched, improved and made whole.

**Employees as Ambassadors**

If companies are learning to create relevant experiences for their own employees, the possibility that employees may themselves actively participate in communication activities, both internally and via external channels, must be considered. Encouraging employees to share the organisation's activities on their own personal social media channels can help the perception of a company as more transparent and humane, building a valuable



**Figure 3**  
Principle of consistency between the different expressions of the Value Proposition.  
Source: OpenKnowledge

bridge between employee engagement and customer relations. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report 2021, people's trust in the media is at an all-time low, to the point that the trust placed in the content posted by employees is significantly higher than that which comes directly from Brands. This means that people, in particular potential buyers, trust more actual people who know and experience the company, rather than of a formalised entity that is not perceived as having any substance. Not only that: thanks to the amplifying power of social media, the potential public of employees, understood as the number of followers and contacts, very often far exceeds that of the organisation's institutional channels, inverting the balance of power. Thus employees, as *ambassadors*, by involving their own network can amplify brand messages and lead to a growth in web traffic and sales.



# The value of emotions in the workplace

## Recruit, develop and retain creative talent in contexts of uncertainty

In everyday life, individuals are constantly experiencing emotions of a different nature and intensity, which are regulated in a wide variety of ways and through different strategies (Gross, 1998; Goleman, 1998; John and Gross 2004; Haver et al, 2013). Emotions are an integral part of not only the personal sphere, but also of the working life of individuals. Even if people often tend to ignore them or exclude them from their workplace, feeling emotions in this context is unavoidable, for example when you experience conflicts, tensions, satisfaction or professional challenges.

These emotions, whether they are positive or negative, intensify in contexts of uncertainty or in moments of difficulty for organisational life, where employees are psychologically more vulnerable and can reach real emotional peaks.

Living and operating in a world and marketplace characterised by ambiguity, complexity, competitiveness and constant changes, it is therefore not uncommon for individuals to often find themselves in destabilising situations, which have a strong impact not only on the way they live and forge bonds, but also on the way they work and relate to the organisation, sometimes constituting real emotional trauma.

Corporate mergers and acquisitions (M&A) are examples of organisational changes with a strong impact which, even if carried out with respect for the corporate cultures involved, can create imbalance and considerable uncertainty in the lives of employees (Cartwright & Cooper, 1996). A very popular type of acquisition in the last twenty years has been that of design studios and agencies by large corporations, including companies from the consulting and professional services. These M&As have constituted a true global phenomenon, which began in the early 2000s, and reached its peak first in the United States and then in Europe around the middle of the last decade and involved hundreds of organisations and thousands of workers around the world. (Maeda, 2017, 2018).

The companies involved understood that in order to become modern and up-to-date organisations, they needed to balance their existing expertise with skills and attitudes typical of those with a design background such as creativity, originality, aptitude for experimentation, the ability to capture interconnections hidden among things and to solve problems in an unconventional manner: skills that they often did not have among their own resources. Thanks to these M&As, over the years, consulting firms have begun to have a more diverse workforce composed of mixed teams. While they could count on this heterogeneity to generate innovation, on the other hand, these differences have sometimes generated important challenges of collaboration between different groups of professionals involved. One need think only of the differences between designers, creatives and consultants in terms of training, working methodologies, approaches to work, values and culture. This diversity has happened to manifest itself, in the

short term, in conflicting visions of resolving projects and problems, but in the long-term, might translate into real cultural clashes, with a strong psychological impact and profound emotional repercussions for employees, especially those who were absorbed into the new organisational unit.

The phenomenon and its impact on individuals and companies has been explored through an empirical research study of a qualitative nature (for more details: Valera, Paolino, Angst, 2021) which between 2018 and 2020 involved 5 design studios acquired by large multinational companies in the consultancy sector and more than 80 professionals from these businesses including Italy and the United States. Among the companies under observation which participated in the research there was also OpenKnowledge.

The company represents a very valuable case study since it has been part of the consulting firm Bip since 2015 and in turn has a mixed workforce, consisting of consultants, designers and creative workers.

Direct observations and workplace interviews showed that after an M&A of this type, involving a radical and destabilising change, designers and creative people were subjected to emotional peaks that were more or less intense and of a different nature. This occurred especially when they found themselves working with different professionals (such as consultants) to achieve a common goal (for example, the delivery of a project). Working in an environment of uncertainty and in teams where there are conflicting visions led to these professionals putting in place, for reasons that may vary from person to person, different survival strategies and, consequently, experiencing a real challenge to their identity.

Other recent research has shown that an emotional component is intrinsically present in the daily activities of these professionals, for example by illustrating how emotions are a fundamental component of their process of knowledge generation and exchange (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2018). In consultancy, designers participate in a fluid process of struggle for identity, of self-interrogation and consolidation of their own profession, since their creative professionalism, with its own values, ethos and methodologies (Elsbach et al., 2013; Fayard, Stigliani & Bechky, 2017) is brought within the confines of reasoning and strictly corporate work modes.

In this context, one's working self is shaped (and for some professionals even endangered) by the organisation according to the values and behaviour of the consultant, a professional who, unlike the latter, is strongly oriented towards the execution and achievement of objectives within a short timeframe and predetermined budget constraints.

The intertwining of emotions and professional identity has already been the focus of several studies with different theoretical perspectives, methodological positions and in different organisational contexts (see for example: Cascón-Pereira & Hallier, 2012; Huber & Brown, 2017; Ahuja et al., 2019; O'Brien & Linehan, 2019). The recent research in which OpenKnowledge was involved (Valera, Paolino, Angst, 2021) wanted to make it clear, in particular, what were the emotional strategies that professionals employ when subjected to a shock, and what the consequences were in terms of recognition with their work and with the company they belong to.

**Figure 1**  
Empirical research on M&A of design firms by consulting firms.  
Source: Valera, Paolino, Angst (2021)



The results of the research were classified into a model (Figure 2) where we find two continuums: that of the emotional strategies and that of identity strategies. At the intersection of these guidelines there are several profiles that can be descriptive of the different types of worker and how they identify with their own professionalism as an individual and as a member of a company. The worker who has been classified as the surrendering employee, is one who renounces expressing their emotions, whether positive or negative, and making their true professional self visible, by suppressing it in everyday work situations. The lack of struggle and emotional expression leads the worker to progressively give up their own professional identity, to feel other than themselves, a worker who is diminished compared to their potential, and consequently progressively detached from the organisational unit. In the middle are those workers who do not give up on expressing their emotions with different intensities and for various reasons: some as leverage for self-defence, others to fight for their profession, others still to affirm it in the workplace. This strategy and the resulting process can cause different identity reactions. For example, some workers - complementing employees - have a hybrid professional profile and make the effort to integrate their different work identities (their identities inside and

outside the company). Others - struggling employees - put more reliance on the organisation as a source of identification and this leads them to experience greater internal conflict, failing to find a balance between how they perceive themselves and how they are employed by the company. We cannot consider workers who express their emotions and fight to defend their professional identity are completely disenchanted with the organisation, but it is important to keep track of the emotional state of these employees, because they could search for what really motivates them outside the company.

Finally, we find the most engaged workers: they are those who have been termed idealizing employees, i.e. workers who know the positive aspects of their own profession and their role in the company. These workers are aware of the contribution they can make to the organisation with their work, so they accept and embrace their emotional states, even the negative ones, and they use them to assert their own professional identity with their colleagues and in the working environment. The cases described above are the most common found in years of empirical research and in different organisational contexts, but they should not be understood as

clear-cut profiles that are stable over time: the emotions experienced in the workplace and the emotional strategies implemented can vary in terms of intensity and type depending on the context, motivations or the phase in their career professionals find themselves in.

This model wants to challenge the idea that negative or positive emotions determine identification results with one's profession and one's company, respectively, as negative or as positive.

*Even negative emotions, if recognised and regulated in a certain way, can be used as a positive lever by the employee and the company.*

For example, there are employees who do not give up expressing emotions such as frustration and anger, but, rather, they do it to assert their professional self and make people understand the real value they can bring within the company. On the other hand, for some people the renunciation of their own identity leads to a position of professional and personal balance and satisfaction.

What this study has brought to light is that it is not a bad thing to feel strong emotions: emotions in the workplace, whatever their nature, should not be ignored or hidden but welcomed, acknowledged, analysed and managed carefully. Emotions and the way they are governed, especially when they reach their highest peaks in terms of intensity (as in a time of crisis) must have a propulsive and non-destructive strength, both for employees and for companies themselves. Employees, for example, can use emotions as signals to gain important information about themselves: to see if they are going through the right career path, if they are fully realised in their place of work, or what really matters in their sphere of values. On the other hand, leaders, human resources, or corporate strategy, as we have seen, can use emotions to predict employee engagement, their identification with the company, and their willingness or unwillingness to stay and contribute to the organisational cause.

Empirical studies (e.g. Barsade et.al, 2003, Barsade, O'Neil, 2014) state that putting emotions at the heart of your corporate culture affects not only employee satisfaction, but also the way in which workers cooperate, take decisions, execute tasks, and thus affect financial performance. So, a leader who ignores the emotions of their employees, ignores a vital part of what makes the organisation work and what makes it unique (and more profitable). Conversely, an empathetic leader, open to li-

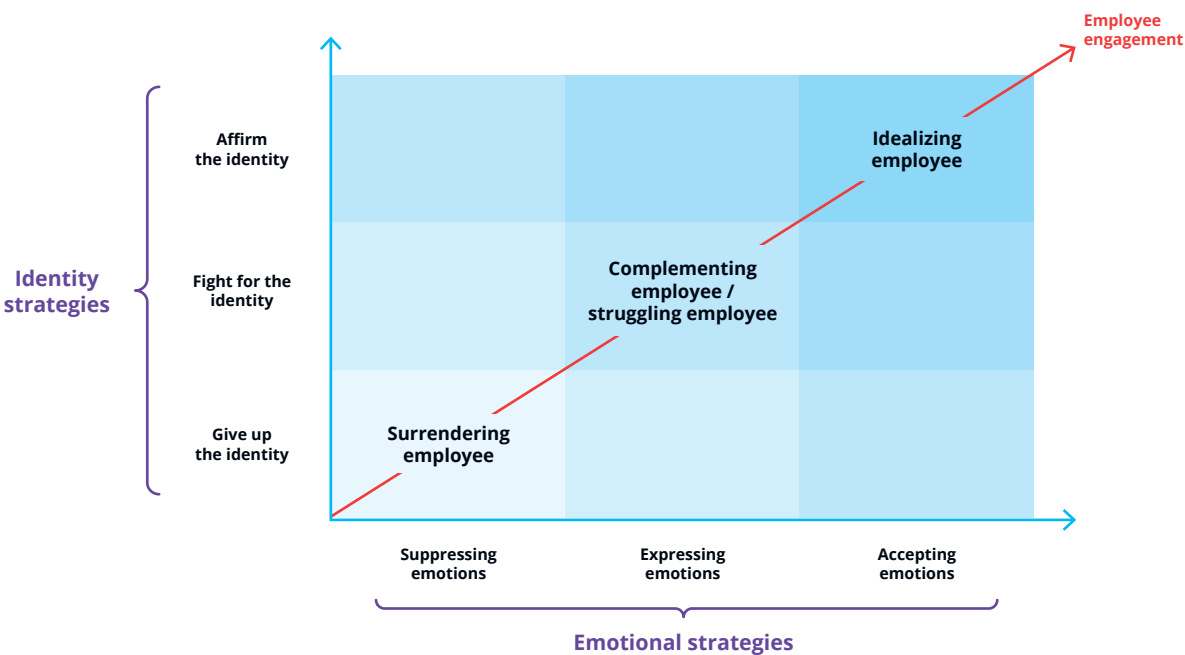
stening, who recognises emotions as a real company asset, will contribute to creating a more high-performance, resilient work environment with greater organisational wellbeing and thus avoid turnover of valuable staff. In organisational contexts such as that of OpenKnowledge, which have made a diversified workforce their key strength (and, in general, in all organisations where competing identities are at stake, especially following decisive organisational changes such as an M&A) it is even more important to create an environment where caring for people, openness and engagement are cornerstones of corporate culture, with a view to motivation and retention of those resources capable of bringing creativity, innovation, originality and openness.

These considerations have been made through the lens of the acquisitions of design studios and creative agencies by consulting firms, but they can be extended to any traumatic event through which an employee can reflect on his or her profession and possibly re-evaluate it. A recent example is the Covid-19 pandemic.

*Companies, now more than ever, cannot be caught unprepared and to keep up with the future must learn to consider their own employees as people in their entirety, including the emotional sphere: how they think, how they act and how they feel.*

In an age characterised by a lack of physical proximity and human contact, human-centricity is vital: for companies, recognising and accepting employees' emotions and putting them at the centre of their business strategy is even more important to maintaining contact with their own people and stimulating their inclusion, engagement and sense of belonging.

**Figure 2**  
The relationship between emotional strategies and identity strategies and their impact on employee engagement.  
Source: Valera, Paolino, Angst (2021)



The results presented in this article were extracted from a broader and ongoing research project, carried out in collaboration with researchers at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan and the University of Notre Dame - Mendoza College of Business - in Indiana (USA). OpenKnowledge is one of the companies that took part in the study as an observed company.

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OpenKnowledge is a consulting company founded in 2008 from the union of multidisciplinary competences and from the intuition that a reflection on the development of organisations was necessary, in the light of the then-emerging social collaboration paradigm. Since its foundation, OpenKnowledge has distinguished itself as an authoritative interlocutor on *Collaboration* issues and *Digital Transformation* issues, thus contributing to the dissemination of innovative approaches and a new organisational culture.

With this objective, the Social Business Forum was conceived and launched: an annual event with an international scope, which hosted, in each edition, over 1000 participants and countless speakers from all over the world, who exchanged ideas on a wide range of frontier topics, from the Social Business Manifesto to the Platfirm Age, from Organisational Wellness to Experience Obsession. The thought leadership of OpenKnowledge has expressed itself over the years through the contributions of its people, in copious publishing: there are numerous books, articles and blog posts by enthusiastic Oknowers from all generations, experts in different disciplines.

In 2015 OpenKnowledge became part of the Bip Group, starting a path of integration and growth, which has led to it becoming a Centre of Excellence with over 100 professionals. The combination of our multidisciplinary skills enables transformation projects to be undertaken with a systemic vision and end-to-end development, from the strategic design phases to those of execution and roll-out, accompanying customers as real change partners.

To meet today's challenges, OpenKnowledge supports organisations by guiding their path to growth with a Human-Centric approach. To support all its projects, OpenKnowledge combines the cross-cutting competencies of its 5 practice areas: Culture Design; People Engagement & Caring; Future of Work; Learning, Education & Development; Experience, Communication & Creativity Lab. The practice areas interact continuously, bringing to the company's various projects resources which are specific and differentiated, but always open to collaboration.

CULTURE DESIGN

The practice of Culture Design was born from the union of multiple competencies, from change management to Service Design and behavioural sciences. It has the ambitious goal of helping organisations to translate their business objectives into a new culture and transform them into behaviours and experiences. By leveraging culture as a strategic strength, it creates the conditions to allow people to embrace change and act on it.

PEOPLE ENGAGEMENT & CARING

Through a creative and holistic approach, the practice of People Engagement & Caring designs communication initiatives and strategies, develops methodologies and tools to create engaging moments (events, team-building meetings, etc.) and listening activities (focus groups, co-design workshops, etc.) addressed to specific target audiences (managers, work teams, etc.). This is all in order to allow employees to understand and internalise the company's values, increase motivation and a sense of belonging, and become protagonists in the narration of the organisation's values and objectives.

FUTURE OF WORK

The Future of Work practice, through innovative methodologies of design and adoption, and the use of both quantitative and qualitative analysis, offers all the necessary expertise to accompany organisations as they move towards the adoption of new methods of work. Particular emphasis is placed on the study of technology-enabled collaboration in increasingly complex and hybrid contexts, in data-driven logics.

LEARNING, EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT

The Learning, Education & Development practice focuses on rethinking educational and training methods from a systemic perspective, starting with business needs with respect to the new models of learning. We face upskilling and reskilling challenges with a perspective that combines strategic, technical, organisational and execution-related competences, applying the innovation enabled by new digital tools and hybrid work methods in a concrete way.

EXPERIENCE, COMMUNICATION & CREATIVITY LAB

The Experience, Communication & Creativity LAB practice expresses strong interdisciplinarity dealing with Creativity, Communication, Content Production and Service/Product Design. It helps to make transformation processes concrete by realising innovative and fluid experiences which impact both employee and customer, and creating multi-channel narratives capable of making the complexity of the changes simple and comprehensible.

OK Activation Areas

CULTURE & BEHAVIOR

Culture Design  
Change Management  
Behavioral Transformation

PLACES

Employee Caring  
Wellbeing  
Space Design

NEW WAYS OF WORKING

Employee Experience  
Collaboration & Communities  
Organizational Network Analysis

SOFT SKILLS

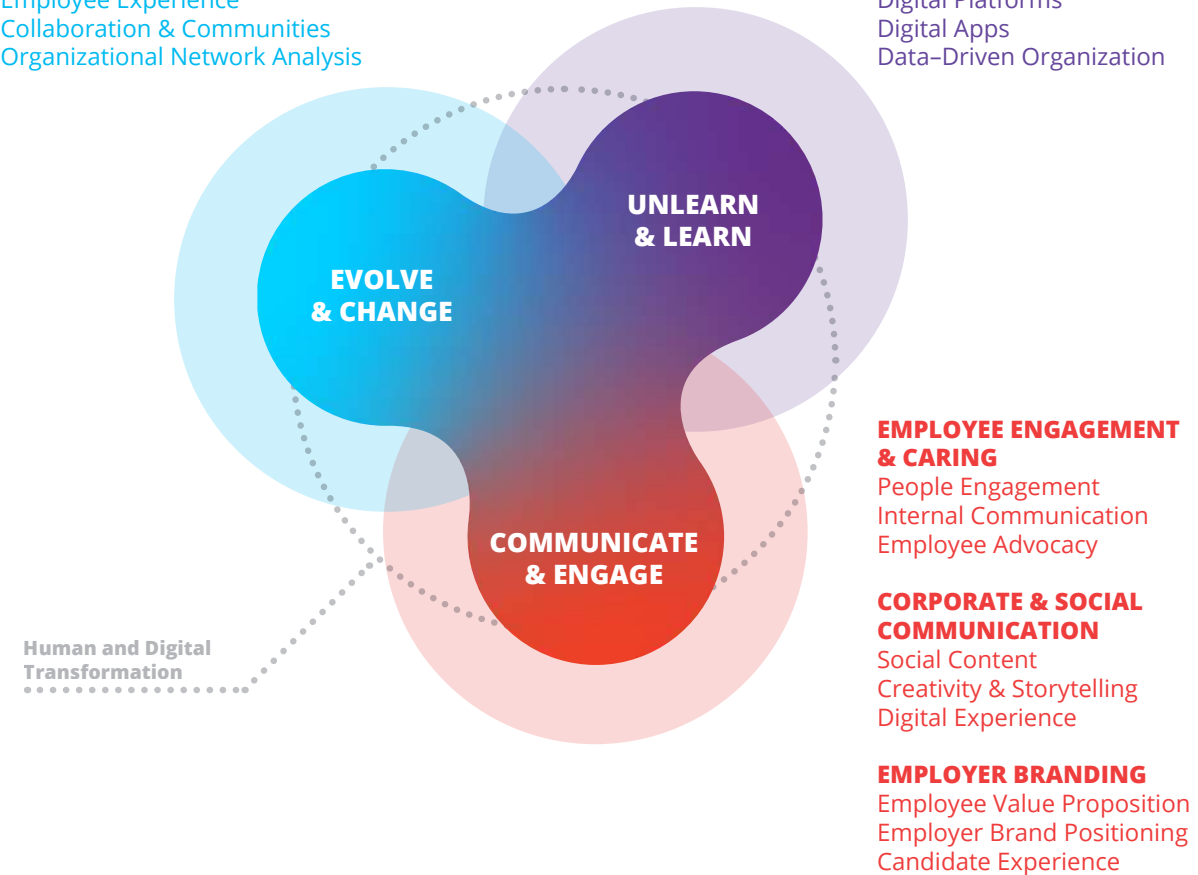
Empowerment  
Digital Mindset

HARD SKILLS

Upskilling & Reskilling  
Digital Readiness  
Digital Learning

ADOPTION OF NEW TOOLS & PLATFORMS

Digital Platforms  
Digital Apps  
Data-Driven Organization



#GreatReshuffle #GreatResignation #GentleLeadership #InclusiveDesign

#HybridWork #Gamification #GenZ #FeedForward #Authenticity

#DigitalWorkplace #Nudging #Consistency #SustainableDevelopmentGoals



Organisations can restart if they are able  
to implement a strategy of courage.  
And if they can rid themselves  
of useless things to find their soul,  
by focusing on the essence of things.

*Rosario Sica*

