



**B. Business Impact**

Challenges for Tomorrow's Management

**Freedom & vulnerability: How people develop new skills in an unexpected work environment**

ESCP Impact Paper No. 2020-16-EN

Chiara Succi  
ESCP Business School

## **Freedom & vulnerability: How people develop new skills in an unexpected work environment**

Chiara Succi  
ESCP Business School

### **Abstract**

This impact paper aims to reflect on the flexibility and temporary character of the work environment brought on by the Covid-19 health emergency. In particular, the focus is on the set of soft skills developed by people to face the many challenges on a personal, social and methodological level. Finally, conditions to sustain and perpetuate these efforts are described, such as work flexibility, agile teams and a learning culture.

Keywords: soft skills, people development, flexible working, covid19

## **Freedom & vulnerability: How people develop new skills in an unexpected work environment**

During the health emergency brought on by Covid-19, we can observe unexpected practices and behaviours within organizations. The multiple obstacles people are facing to get their job done from home (e.g. physical distance, technological equipment, attention span, support to the community and family members, etc.) are forcing them to reinvent work activities significantly. In-depth reflection is needed to outline the managerial implications and key drivers of this phenomenon.

**Management will not be the same because people have discovered freedom and autonomy.** Before the pandemic, scholars would complain about the obsolete management models of our organizations, unable to adopt innovative approaches such as agile or lean management, holacracy, polycratic or exponential organization, to name but a few. It seemed that managers felt threatened by autonomous, self-managed teams that could undermine their status, power and control (Denning, 2015). They were being asked to stop thinking of themselves as “*master designers of hardwired organizational structures, processes, rules, and procedures*” and to become “*the everyday orchestrators of a flexible and dynamic behavioural system, to unleash employees’ autonomy and initiative*” (Morieux, 2018, p.1). The disruptive advent of Coronavirus forced teams to get re-organized very quickly and managers empowered workforces to take decisions, with courage and responsibility. In most cases, a situation of confinement and isolation, which might have led to demotivation, dispersion of energy and disorganization of work, has developed a higher level of self-efficacy among employees and cooperation to achieve organizational goals. Multinational companies, for example, have delegated to local management to take decisions for their countries in complete autonomy. Responses in most of the cases have exceeded expectations in terms of speed in taking action and the constructive attitude in proposing solutions.

**The vulnerability, fragility and precarity being felt by human beings emphasize the importance of the present moment.** People are concerned about their health and feel exposed, as they have probably never felt before in modern society. Complete uncertainty about future scenarios places new emphasis on living the present situation and making sense of it (Rahola, 2020). Every crisis forces us to come back to the basic questions and need of a meaning. The sense of urgency driven by the economic crisis and financial pressure of companies are pushing people to react pragmatically and exploit concrete opportunities. Basic assumptions are being challenged and managers are motivated to try new approaches and find new solutions to problems. Particularly, small start-ups and young companies have been impacted by the suspension of business activities, showing their intrinsic weaknesses. The difficult financial situation has obliged young entrepreneurs, where possible, to change direction immediately and think of new businesses to meet the needs of the contingent situation (e.g. production of medical devices, supply of personal protective equipment, online delivery services, etc.).

### **Challenging context and acceleration of skills development**

Van Elser and McCauley (2004) indicate that a challenge is the most effective development tool. Managers must be put in circumstances where their existing skills and perspectives

are inadequate. If managers are never forced out of their comfort zone, they will continue to employ strategies that have served them well in the past. Only by placing individuals in situations where past behaviour may lead to failure are they likely to try new approaches.

Despite huge human and financial losses, this crisis represents an opportunity to observe how people react to disruptive events and which capabilities are put in place. In fact, many skills have been developed by employees and managers in just a few weeks, while companies have been struggling to develop them in formal settings for years.

In particular, we would like to focus here on the set of soft skills which are being stimulated to act in this flexible and vulnerable work environment.

In 2019, a study was conducted to identify the most important soft skills required by the job market (Succi & Canovi, 2019) and how employers were measuring and developing them (Succi & Wieandt, 2019). A taxonomy and working definition of soft skills can be taken from Haselberger (2012, p.67): *“Soft skills represent a dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills. Soft skills help people to adapt and behave positively so that they can deal effectively with the challenges of their professional and everyday life”*.

#### *a) Personal Skills*

Every individual is observing him/herself in a totally different environment and we are recording new behaviours and practices to deal with the complexity of the situation. **Self-awareness** and **self-management** skills (such as emotional self-control, adaptability, achievement orientation, positive outlook; Goleman, 2006) are crucial to re-organize activities and manage the pressure coming from personal and professional needs.

Apart from personality traits, **resilience** or **stress management** are necessary to react to unexpected events, like the sudden stopping of usual activities and the obligation to switch ways of working. People are showing a **commitment to work** to strive toward organizational goals, despite the uncertainty of the situation and the pessimistic outlook of the business framework. Two protagonists in this emergency are **creativity** - the process leading to the generation of products that are new, original, useful, and effective - and **divergent thinking** - a mind process that leads to an increased number of ideas instead of searching for “the right one” (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). They are stimulated impressively by the need to bring innovative ideas and develop alternative solutions. Moreover, an unusual setting helps to see things from an outside perspective, which allows us to handle uncertainty well and excel at reconciling conflicting information (Khazan, 2020).

Obviously, everybody has developed **learning skills** to acquire and implement new knowledge to respond to the emerging demands concerning remote working, scientific reports, medical devices, online grocery shopping, home schooling and possible unusual domestic activities. Finally, a reflection on **life-work balance skills** is required, considering the overlapping of personal and professional spheres that is occurring these days. It is common to see people attending a videoconference while cooking or playing with the kids. Careful **time management** can solve the frequent conflicts between the new life and job in lockdown (even if the objective is sometimes not feasible).

## *b) Social Skills*

**Communication** and **teamwork** are two essential sets of skills for managers and this situation has clarified important aspects of this. For example, **empathy**, the ability to sense others' feelings and take an active interest in their concerns (Goleman, 2006), which is one of the most difficult soft skills to develop, has become of crucial importance. Common feelings and emotions shared by people located in different places have actually created strong bonds, erasing physical distance. It is frequent, at the moment, to start a conversation with authentic questions regarding health conditions and personal situations, before moving to a business conversation. This is also reflected in the type of communication channels utilized by users. For example, an increase has been recorded in use of instant messaging and a reduction in formal messages exchanged by email.

**Cultural Intelligence** is also stimulated in a context in which travels are suspended and sensitive issues can be addressed only in a mediated environment. **Contact network skills** are becoming the essential trait of a leader, who should be able to connect different professionals around the globe and motivate them to contribute effectively.

## *c) Methodological skills*

Conditions are moving very fast and **adaptability to change**, defined as the ability to redirect the course of action to meet goals in a new situation, is a requisite. **Analysis skills**, considering the amount of data available, and **decision making skills** are also triggered by the volatility and complexity of the business environment.

Finally, **customer orientation**, **striving for excellence** and **results orientation** are the skills which will distinguish the managers who will evolve, from those, who will simply count their losses. There are examples of companies which have moved employees from operations to customer service to strengthen the relationships with their clients; companies which are contacting customers to listen to their needs and developing solutions almost for free, to keep the position in the market.

## **Conditions to sustain development**

These exceptional individual efforts cannot last for a long time. After an initial positive and constructive reaction, anxiety and fatigue might overwhelm people's ability to achieve objectives. Stress tends to impair the ability to learn new skills (Zajonc, 1965).

Organizations need to build on the accomplishments of their managers and need to create the right environment to support their performance. In particular, three conditions seem essential to perpetuate this positive trend.

- **Work flexibility.** *Remote working, smart working or teleworking*, to mention only some definitions of flexible working, have finally become a reality in our society. Legal constraints and technological tools have been managed successfully to accelerate the possibility of working from different locations. It is important now to strengthen the process and secure the progress that has been made. The future employee experience should include the appropriate mix of presence at the office and smart working.

- **Agile teams.** Self-organized virtual teams are now the main unit of organizations. Leaders should support their momentum and find ways to connect and engage people as much as possible. Empowerment and reduced constraints will be essential, even afterward, to maintain efficiency and ensure performance of teams working at distance.
- **Learning Culture.** Providing continuity to the organizational culture is probably the main challenge of organizations. Sharing values and decision-making processes are essential to be aligned toward organizational goals and are the priority of senior management during the crisis. The learning culture, where people can propose ideas, experiment alternative solutions and make mistakes, as experienced during the pandemic, should be kept and enhanced to build sustainable businesses for the future.

## References

Denning, S. (2015). Why Do Managers Hate Agile?, Forbes, 26th of January.

Goleman, (2006). Emotional Intelligence, Bantam Books, New York.

Khazan, O. (2020). The Perks of Being a Weirdo. How not fitting in can lead to creative thinking, The Atlantic, April.

Morieux, Y. (2018). Bringing Managers Back to Work, Internal Report, Boston Consulting Group.

Rahola, P. (2020). Extrema vulnerabilidad, La Vanguardia, 15th of March.

Runco, M. A., & Jaeger, G. J. (2012). The standard definition of creativity, Creativity Research Journal, 24(1), 92-96.

Succi, C. & Canovi, M. (2019). Soft Skills to Enhance Graduate Employability: Comparing Students and Employers' Perceptions, Studies in Higher Education, DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2019.1585420.

Succi, C. & Wieandt, M. (2019). Walk the Talk: Soft Skills' Assessment of Graduates, European Journal of Management and Business Economics, 28(2), 114-125.

Van Elson, E. & McCauley, C.D. (2004). Introduction: Our View of Leadership Development, in Van Elson, E. & McCauley, C.D., eds., The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Zajonc, R. (1965). Social Facilitation, Science, 149, 269-274.