DIGITAL WORKPLACES

BY EUAN SEMPLE
AND ELIZABETH ROBINSON

Euan Semple is an author, speaker and business strategist. He spent several years as Director of Knowledge Management at the BBC and now works as a consultant for leading global companies on technology and social computing. Elizabeth Robinson interviewed Euan Semple about his work and digital workplaces.

You were recently in Australia and spoke on a panel about Leadership in the Digital Organisation. In your view, what is a digital workplace?

To be perfectly honest I think the phrase digital is becoming overused. It has become so broad in its meaning as to mean almost nothing. It is also, very often, used as a means of distancing people from the challenges they face. Slapping the word digital on things tends to make them somebody else's problem, something to do with technology "and I don't do technology".

How is a digital workplace different from a traditional workplace?

Having got my problems with the word digital off my chest, I am afraid the other issue I have with "digital workplace" is that one of the main benefits of new technologies is the ability they give me to work anywhere. My workplace can be an office, in an aeroplane, or in the nearest Starbucks. The big point is it gives me control over when and where I work.

How can a digital workplace foster collaboration and break down silos within an organisation?

Given that the control of when and where I work is increasingly in my own hands this means that I am less dependent on the more familiar structures of work–buildings, meetings, hierarchies and silos. I am more able to move freely and connect with the people, resources, and places I need to be at my most effective. Being effective involves reaching out to the right people wherever they work and finding better ways to work with them. I don't even need to be in the same place at the same time to do this.

What does leadership look like in a digital workplace?

Although many of the characteristics of leading people will never change, there are some differences brought about by these new ways of working. For many, the biggest challenge, is presenteeism, the feeling that you have to be in the office and seen by your boss to be there. Many managers still don't believe that their staff are working if they can't see them doing so. We're going to have to get better at measuring people by output rather than by behaviours. It doesn't really matter where I am working if I deliver what is expected of me to a standard that is acceptable.

What are the mindsets and skillsets needed to work in a digital workplace?

In the context of the increased flexibility we also need to learn to accept greater responsibility. If my boss is going to give me more freedom I can hardly blame them when I am unable to deliver. I need to take increased responsibility for my own productivity and effectiveness.

What role can Learning and Development professionals play in a digital workplace?

I think Learning and Development professionals could have a significant role to play in changing the behaviours and attitudes I have mentioned above. Helping people to explore their attitudes to work, to understand the opportunities in greater flexibility, and to learn the basic skills of time management, focus, and adapting to new technologies will be key.

Many start-ups begin as collaborative, digital workplaces. As they grow, some struggle to maintain their organisational culture. Is the digital workplace scalable and how can an organisation grow while maintaining that culture?

I agree that many organisations find it difficult to maintain new ways of working as they grow. I am also very aware, given that most of my clients are large organisations, of the challenges they face in adopting these new technologies and ways of working. It takes a concerted effort to surface what works and what doesn't, share that learning widely, and build it into practices and policies.

The nature of work is changing dramatically – side-gigging, outsourcing/off-shoring and the rise of the robots. What do individuals need to do to ensure they have gainful employment in the years to come?

I am not a great fan of personal branding as a terminology but I do think in a networked gig economy everyone will need to get better at selling themselves. Most of us feel uncomfortable even at using this language.

But making sure that people know what you can do, when you are available, and what advantages working with you would bring is important. There are ways of doing this without being overly pushy salesmen like. In fact this is one of the benefits of social networks. If you authentically enthuse about things that you can do, at the right time, in the right place, and in the right tone, people are much more likely to trust you and be willing to engage with you when they need someone with your range of skills.

How can traditional, hierarchical, process-driven organisations change to be more agile?

Increasingly I believe that we will have to learn ways of grouping ourselves differently moving away from large hierarchical bureaucratic institutions and much more towards networks of smaller groups. This may mean continually limiting ourselves to certain group sizes and splitting groups off as they get bigger. Not all large organisations will manage this. Not all of them will survive.

Your book *Organisations Don't Tweet, People Do* provides practical advice to managers about how to engage with social tools to assist them in their work. These managers likely have a smartphone in their pocket and engage with social tools on a personal basis, but what is stopping them from engaging with social tools for business?

There is a bit in the book where I describe watching a senior manager trying to get involved with social media because they feel forced to do so as a bit like watching your dad dancing at a disco. You are proud of them for having a go but you also wish they would sit down. Most managers feel this discomfort. It's about not knowing what is expected of them, not having had time to watch how others behave online, struggling to move away from the clichéd and impersonal language that has become the norm in business. Saying what you think, in plain language, in a live networked environment is surprisingly challenging for most people. However, these are skills that can be learned and are the focus for much of my work.

You have been called an "organisational anarchist". How did you earn that moniker?

It was actually somebody on our internal network at the BBC who called me that. He did so because of the way I was encouraging staff to flout convention in our use of our internal network. I was encouraging people to connect with each other, take responsibility, and change the working world around them. This is clearly disruptive. The trick is to do so in a benign and productive way rather than destructively.

I know you have consulted for a wide range of clients. What type of work do you enjoy and are you working on any more books?

The type of work I enjoy most is helping individuals to adapt to these new ways of working. Seeing someone's eyes light up when they understand what is possible and how freeing and empowering it can be is my best reward. If I get enough people to respond like that in the organisations I work for, then the organisations themselves will begin to change. One person at a time.

Writing a new book is at the top my procrastination list! Its working title is *Changing The World One Conversation At A Time*. It will be about the increasing power that we have to bring about change in the world around us.

Far from the feeling of disempowerment and numbness that seems to be prevailing nowadays we can each start to take the small, repeated, steps that it takes to change the world. I often use the analogy of an avalanche. It always takes the last falling snowflake to start the avalanche. If this last snowflake doesn't fall then the avalanche doesn't start!

Euan Semple (@euan) is an author, speaker and business strategist. He spent several years as Director of Knowledge Management at the BBC and now works as a consultant on technology and social computing for leading global companies. He blogs at euansemple.com and can be contacted via Twitter or LinkedIn.

Elizabeth Robinson was the Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Institute of Training and Development (AITD) from 2012-2017. She can be contacted via LinkedIn.