

THE SKILLS NEEDED FOR THE DIGITAL ECONOMY: WHAT DO EXECUTIVES NEED?



Lise Hammergren e Kari Soll

The COVID-19-pandemic has brought on a multitude of challenges, for governments and business alike. We have all experienced the need for aptitude in crisis management and the importance of compassion in, for some, dramatic and depressing circumstances.

The pandemic has also given us a crash course in the virtual running of businesses and, indeed, virtual leadership. Zoom and Microsoft Teams have become household names.

Beyond the mastery of ever-evolving technological tools, what skills should executives have in the digital economy? And what particular challenges in the online world should managers keep in mind?



What could be called the “classical” leadership theories based on studies at Ohio State and Michigan universities in the 50s and 60s divided leadership styles do into task orientation (“initiating structure” and “production orientation”) versus relational orientation (“consideration” and “employee orientation”). Several studies show that the relational approach can produce better desired results than task orientation, and the literature on the importance of high-quality connections and collaboration is vast.

The transition to working digitally from home has provided clear benefits for many. Not having to waste time on long commutes, nor deal with the constant disturbances in the open office are often mentioned as very welcome changes. But how does remote, online work affects collaboration and relationships?

The term Zoom burnout most likely does not need any explanation. We have all felt the draining effect of spending 8 hours straight in front of our computers. Research has been made on the cognitive overload experienced when we no longer can rely on our routines, years of experience from in-person meetings and the extended band width physical closeness provides.

But most online meetings probably lack something that – at least to some extent – can be amended by the thoughtful executive.

An article by Jessica R. Methot, Allison S. Gabriel, Patrick Downes and Emily Rosado-Solomon in the Harvard Business Review March 25 2021 stresses the importance of small talk in the office. No everyone loves small talk, their research indicates – some find it “inauthentic and a waste of time”. However, we should not underestimate the power of office chit chat. The titbits we learn about our colleagues in these informal conversations brings us closer to them, builds trust and improves collaboration. Setting time aside e.g. at the beginning of every meeting for chit chat – explaining that this is something you intentionally do, and the reason behind – is a highly recommended executive practice in the online workspace. Introducing informal online “coffee break” meetings or encourage using Slack or Work Chat for social exchanges are other recommended tactics. Making these practices routines also help.

The loss of the structure and predictability office life gives us may seem a relief, but routines also provide a sense of belonging and safety that carry us through the workday and eases the cognitive load.



Moving online can challenge collaboration and creativity. Along with the introduction of Zoom and Microsoft Team, many businesses have experimented using tools such as Miro and Mural for co-creation and innovation. The survival of many design companies and architectural firms has depended on it. Mastering these tools will be key for anyone whose company depend on creativity to succeed. In 2021, that would mean most of us.

Yet, even for the most mundane tasks, losing the opportunity to bounce small challenges across the desk to the nearest colleague – as these small challenges occur – is hard to replace virtually. As a manager, you should be aware of this downside of the online office, and experiment with online meeting formats, scope, and cadence. Likewise, your virtual team may have lost an important source for learning and mastery: modeling, i.e. learning from experience the mastery of others. Short on-line training modules can substitute some of your companies training needs, but other alternatives should be explored, such as listening in on each other's sales conversations.

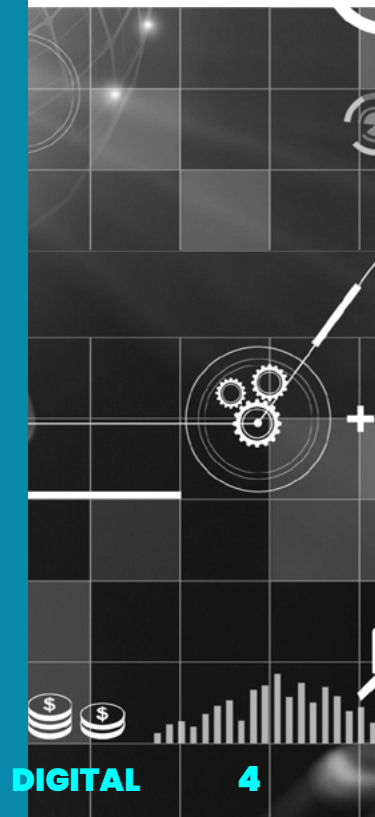
In the article "Is there leadership in a fluid world? Exploring the ongoing direction in organizing", Lucia Crevani describes how issues are defined and direction created in a continuous conversational flow, with constant interruptions by the meeting participants. The situations she describes take place face to face in two different Swedish companies. These kinds of meetings are very familiar to the Norwegian authors of this chapter, as low power distance (flat hierarchical organizational structure) and collective culture (as opposed to individualistic) seem to characterize Scandinavian companies.

We do however believe that most executives even outside the "Scandi" sphere will recognize how important discussions tend to have a "ping pong" quality about them. Meaning and direction is created in meetings as we speak, listen, but also interrupt frequently. This immediacy is easily lost in Zoom or Teams meetings when you need to raise your hand and wait your turn to speak. When your time arrives, the point is often lost.

How can this loss of immediacy and opportunity for building on each other's thoughts and ideas be amended? One option can be to have more meetings with fewer participants, allowing for more spontaneous conversations. The downside is a calendar packed with meetings. As the pandemic has upended our normal, daily routines, setting time aside for uninterrupted periods of time for work that needs focus and reflection – or just for plain relaxation – becomes equally important.

The blurring of the line between work and leisure has become prominent during the pandemic. The aforementioned Zoom burnout is often accompanied by an emotion named “languishing” by the organizational psychologist Adam Grant in the New York Times in April 2021. This state of mind – not depression, but not flourishing¹ either – is most likely experienced now by many in your company. As an executive, this should worry you, as the emotion will be accompanied by lack of energy and motivation. In the online office, we are deprived of a critical source for self efficacy and agency: Immediate feedback and responsiveness from peers, managers, customers, and clients. Your actions as an executive can make a big difference. You can encourage your team to stay in touch informally, and you can do “virtual” job crafting, designing the work of employees to ensure that they get as close to your customers as possible – making sure they can hear and feel the role their work means in the beneficiaries' lives. Understanding and enabling the sources of pro-social motivation can make all the difference in a virtual office life drained of energy.

As an executive, we expect you have felt the challenge of building strong relationships in large corporations. When most of us work remotely, this challenge grows, sometimes exponentially. “Management by walking around” is no longer an option. The need to be seen is a fundamental psychological need, and to be seen creates a sense of belonging and thereby intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, noticing or sensing issues that should be addressed, that you would normally pick up on from the atmosphere in a meeting room or the hallway, becomes much harder in a virtual environment.

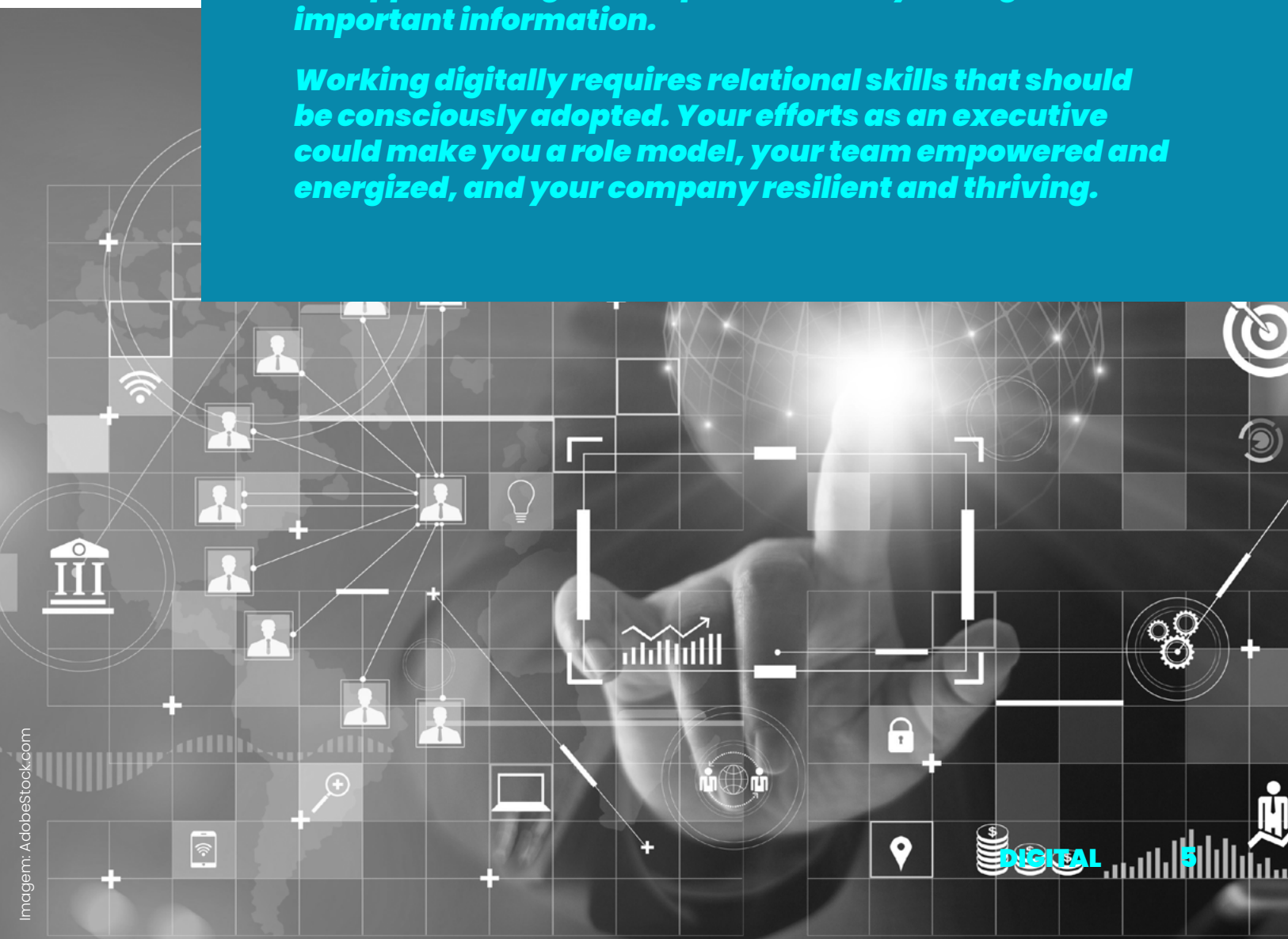


When it is no longer possible to “see” your team members and other employees simply by having lunch in the company cafeteria, you would be well advised to find other solutions. Just picking up the phone for an informal chat can help. For your larger audience, frequent postings – preferably with video – on your company’s virtual forums or arranging virtual town hall meetings can also generate a sense of presence.

As Jane E. Dutton and Monica C. Worline explain in their book “Awakening Compassion at Work, the Quiet Power that Elevates People and Organizations”, the need to care is a fundamental human drive.

Caring is a relational skill that should not be overlooked by executives in 2021. But to fully unleash the power that lies in compassion, you first need to be able to notice the needs of your colleagues. When this noticing needs to happen through a computer screen, you might miss important information.

Working digitally requires relational skills that should be consciously adopted. Your efforts as an executive could make you a role model, your team empowered and energized, and your company resilient and thriving.





Lise Hammergren

Lise Hammergren is Executive Vice President for BI Executive at BI Norwegian Business School. Before joining BI, she held leadership positions in Orkla and Lever Europe (FMCG), and Schibsted (media).

She has board experience from, i. a., Kavli Holding, Weifa, Adresseavisen and Orkla Finance. Lise Hammergren is currently Vice Chair of UNICON Consortium for University based Executive Education and a trustee of the Kavli Trust.

She holds an MSc in business and economics from the Norwegian School of Economics (NHH). Of particular interest to her are customer experience and change management – and technology's role in both.



Kari Soll

Kari Sollien is president of The Federation of Norwegian Professional Associations (Akademikerne). Akademikerne is the primary Norwegian organization dedicated to improving salary and working conditions for professionals with a higher education.

NOTES E REFERENCES

- 1 The concept of human flourishing comes from positive psychology, a line of psi-ecology that makes use of the potential and positive characteristics that all human being has and is able to nurture. Within these positive characteristics that cultivate the state of well-being, highlight five elements that, together, they provide well-being, mental health and flourish: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, purpose and achievements.