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People, Technology, and Processes: A further reflection in pandemic times

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced organizations to change the way they work. More specifically, to cope with the emergency situation, people within organizations have been required to confront an array of changes and related issues, such as “setting up” their offices inside their homes or getting used to technologies that were available but never really used. In the cases of physical isolation (e.g., quarantine), technology became the only access to the external world, either professional or personal. More than ever, technology has progressively become part of our lives.

The subject of how technology and human lives interact is not new, whether humans are considered as individuals or organized collectives (groups, teams, companies, communities). In analytical scholarly terms, technology, people, and processes have traditionally been investigated as “boxes and arrows,” with boxes representing the elements and arrows signaling the causality of potential dominance of one upon the other(s). In fact, the understanding of companies, and other social entities, as “socio-technical systems” dates to the 1960s. In the 1990s, technology seemed to take advantage of the human dynamics, by incusing a form of “imperative” upon them, shaping and reshaping business process (e.g., technology-supported business reengineering). Later, the emphasis on humans as owners and carriers of knowledge and the rediscovery of their decision-making capacity opened the door to the possible prevalence of individual agents upon the tools, with technology considered (just) a “socio-material” construction, that is, the idea of technology making sense only to the very extent that it can be used by individuals and that it assumes different meanings according to the users (e.g., emails, social network platforms, mobile phones). However, other interpretations are possible. Rather than having technology dominate the organization, or organizational settings crafting the actual use (and sense) of technology, we may accept an osmotic relation between the two which dynamically generates organizational processes. This osmosis does not always happen spontaneously; it might instead be governed by the organizational leaders. The craft of the organizational processes is going to differ dramatically based on whether leaders adopt a “top-down” or “bottom-up” approach in decision making.

According to Terri Griffith (Chair in Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Simon Fraser University, Canada), the Covid-19 pandemic has offered a prime demonstration that work (meant as the collection of the executed organizational processes) emerges from the bottom of the organization. She refers to her framework “Thinking in 5T” (Target, Tools, Techniques, Talent, Times) to illustrate this notion. Her argument revolves around the fact that the pandemic has globally forced people to shift “to a work-from-home setting in a transition that took days, not months or years as it would have in normal times.” Such a transition was not really a shift to “smart” working though. As Griffith remarks: “those transitions were not perfect, we were not in quiet settings necessarily: we were sharing our offices with our family, our pets, everything else that was going along, schooling,

children [...].” To be “smart,” work must be crafted in consideration of the concerns highlighted by Griffith: “Unfortunately [...] we just took what we were doing at the office and tried to replicate it at home [...]. The reason we do these things is because we’re human, and humans don’t necessarily like change; so we anchor and we satisfice [...] we settle for what we tried at the very beginning and we just assume that’s the way we have to keep going, or we make some small adjustments but we call that ‘good enough’ and just continue.” The Covid-19 situation forced us to improvise work that was originally designed in a top-down traditional way (i.e., task design, task allocation, task execution, task-related performance measurement). According to Terri Griffith, what Covid-19 can teach us is that once we define the Target and perfect the Tools and Techniques, our individual Talent can help us define what we can offer at our best and in what Time (capitals are used for marking the 5T framework). Again, in her words: *“the big idea here is that we all have to craft our own work, we have to negotiate and renegotiate as we learn more about these different techniques.”*

In more general terms, the experience of forced remote working can help organizations to brainstorm further and reflect on the recent experience, to embrace a bottom-up approach in designing jobs, selectively deciding which processes and activities can be supported by technologies and which ones are better performed in person.

Marco Morelli (Luiss Alumnus, adjunct professor) also expressed his point of view about this reflection. In his words, at the beginning of the pandemic, *“the picture was very blurred, and each of us, within our respective organization, had to think on how to respond to something which was pretty much out of the radar, and, to some extent, it was useful to try to break down fences, walls within the [...] static, traditional organizational framework.”* In his analysis, Morelli underlines that three elements characterized the combination of technology, people, and processes during a pandemic: 1) internal communication, especially in large organizations with thousands of employees that all of a sudden were forced to work in a totally different manner, using totally different tools; 2) engagement of the client base, potentially, millions of clients who, in turn, were used to interacting with the firm in a totally different way; and 3) a brand-new way of marketing and selling products or services. These three phenomena have been—and, to a greater extent, will be—handled in three main domains: Time, Tools, and People.

Covid-19 has forced top managers to engage with audiences of thousands, instead of the usual first-line reports, at the same time using the same means to convey messages that were standard and unique. In other words, the necessity to technically reach people and be understood by them, despite their individual personalities and characteristics. The exposure to forced technology-based interactions seems to have allowed for the emergence of the human side of organizations. The necessity to reach People and activate their behaviors unveiled the dominance of this component upon the others. In Morelli’s words, during the Covid-19 pandemic, *“[thanks to technology] we were working from home or from different places, using different instruments. I do believe that the human side of the coin will come back pretty soon in a pretty hefty way.”*

In summary, it seems that Covid-19 has helped us shed light on the combination “People, Technology, and Processes.” What emerges is not a linear and ordered structure of boxes and

arrows but rather an osmotic and kaleidoscopic combination of elements.

This contribution offers a further reflection on the subject of the #Luiss.MasterClasses – People, Technology, Processes in the Pandemic Era (June 16, 2020, available [here](#) ^[1]).

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[1] here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46_ZMHaWlu0

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