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HEARTS AND MINDS: HARNESSING LEADERSHIP, CULTURE, AND TALENT TO REALLY GO DIGITAL

LUCY KUENG



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Contents

About the Author	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	ix
<i>‘Time to put as much energy into transforming the organisation as we do into transforming the product’</i>	
1. Leadership	1
<i>Low ego and listening: ‘the expectation of leadership has radically changed’</i>	
2. Culture	15
<i>‘You can’t just talk a culture into the consciousness of your employees’</i>	
3. Gens Y and Z	27
<i>‘These are different generations bred in a different way’</i>	
4. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	35
<i>‘It’s hard, and it needs to get done’</i>	
5. New Talent, New Roles, and New Structures	49
<i>Reshaping the inner organisation to match digital ambitions</i>	
Conclusions	63
<i>Mastering the colliding imperatives of digital transformation, diversity and inclusion, Gens Y and Z, and COVID-19</i>	
Interviewees	69
Bibliography	72

About the Author

Professor Lucy Kueng is Senior Research Associate at the Reuters Institute, University of Oxford and an international expert on mastering digital transformation. She advises leading companies worldwide and keynotes frequently at international conferences. She is Board Member of the NZZ Media Group, and has served on the board of SRG SSR, and of VIZRT, the media tech provider. She has held professorships at the University of Oslo, the Institute of Media and Entertainment New York (IESE), and the University of Jönköping.

Previous books include *Going Digital: A Roadmap for Digital Transformation*; *Innovators in Digital News*; *Strategic Management in the Media* (winner of the AEMJM Media Management Book Award); *Inside the BBC and CNN*; and *When Innovation Fails to Disrupt: the Case of BBC News Online*. She holds a PhD and Habilitation from the University of St Gallen and an MBA from City Business School/Ashridge.

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Introduction

'Time to put as much energy into transforming the organisation as we do into transforming the product'

We have been ignoring it. We've been focused on chasing this year's cool thing ... and not on what (we) need to do at a deeper level. And that means that all management is pointing in the wrong direction.

The *New York Times* has done the industry a disservice. They have made the challenge of moving a business from legacy to digital look easy (put up an early paywall, launch podcasts, hire one army of Pulitzer-prize-worthy millennial journalists, and another of product people, and have the top team spend every Friday afternoon on strategy). But a full digital pivot is an anomaly, and successful examples, while they have important things to teach, are far from simple.

To bastardise Tolstoy, each legacy organisation that has pulled off a digital transformation has done it in its own way. Their success is the product of a unique combination of factors, highly context-dependent, hard to reproduce, and difficult to deconstruct at third hand. Critically, it is as much about internal changes to the fabric of the organisation, to culture, leadership, talent, to micro changes in how people make decisions and interact on a daily basis, as about the high-profile moves.

The goal of this research is to poke below the top-line, well-publicised strategic moves to understand how the 'innards' of organisations are changing or need to change to master the digital pivot. Such outward shifts in strategy, business models, competencies, and top individuals are relatively easy to discern, and widely covered in the business press and at industry conferences. Yet underneath these lies a complex set of supporting

and intertwined changes in how organisations are led, structured, and staffed, and in how people working in them think and act, in how their roles are designed and situated. These changes are subtle and hard to track. They are diffuse and granular, and often not analysed in industry reports. And while in their totality they may be transformational, on the ground, in the moment, for those inside organisations, they can feel messy and piecemeal. The full impact of this stream of iterative changes to the body of the organisation is evident only with hindsight.

COVID-19 has layered a crisis on top of profound structural change driven by exogenous factors: significantly altered consumption habits in a mobile and platform-dominated environment (Newman et al. 2020); competition with news organisations and platform companies for attention, advertising, and subscriptions which has eroded classic revenue streams and undermined business models (Nielsen 2019); and in many countries (including some EU ones) an ongoing erosion of media freedom (Nielsen et al. 2019).

A strategy (amongst other things) lays out an organisation's plan to master the external challenges it faces, and companies in the sector have sophisticated concepts to do this. But developing a strategy is one thing, implementing it is entirely another. Whether a strategy succeeds or fails is driven by the scale of external challenges an organisation faces (over which it has little control); whether it is implemented or not is down to the organisation.

The goal of this work is to provide insights and support to news organisations as they push through from strategy into implementation, as they work through the raft of cascading shifts in culture, leadership, talent, and structure that have to happen if a strategy delivers what it should. I have deliberately kept the writing style straightforward and unacademic, but the work builds on my previous look at how culture drives strategy (2000), innovation in news organisations (Küng 2015), organisational transformation (Küng 2016a), and more broadly at strategic management in the media (Küng 2016b).

Implementation is the toughest transformation challenge

It's juggling – messy. It's transformation – messy. Going digital is messy and people don't want it

The purpose of this book is to analyse these deeper changes, to explore how leadership, culture, structure, and talent are changing or should change to realise full digital transition.

Knowing what to do does not mean that you will be able to do it. The majority of legacy media firms have a strategy (often very similar ones) but for many of those too, the digital transformation process has been very slow. New initiatives are being launched, others have not really been brought to fruition, and now COVID-19 is adding an additional layer of high-priority changes while large numbers of staff are working remotely.

As Henry Mintzberg famously pointed out decades ago, only a fraction of strategies are ever implemented. This is due to the complexity of strategy implementation. It involves shifting from a rational, deeply thought-out plan to the messy realities of human action, organisational inertia, and small 'p' internal politics and personal intractability. The crux of going digital is not simply about finding a viable strategy and business model that will support a sustainable future, but about harnessing hearts and minds inside the organisation so that they individually and independently are energised to pool their talents to achieve it.

The inner organisation holds the key to successful digital transformation, and executing digital strategies requires a cascade of intelligent and interlinked changes to that inner organisation. This book explores what changes are taking place, which approaches are working, and discusses common challenges and specific pain points and how to overcome them.

How this work is structured

The study is designed to be practical and a fast read. Each section is written to function as a standalone summary of developments in that field and the core themes are:

- Leadership
- Culture
- Gens Y and Z
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Talent, new roles, new structures, and the right HR function to guide these

For each, I explore:

- What are the presenting issues? What are the priorities?
- What is working and where are the roadblocks?
- What are the common challenges and how are these being tackled?

I have also included three case studies that explain how specific companies have approached specific challenges: one on how the Swedish public service

television broadcaster SVT worked to develop its mid-level leadership; one on how data helped culture change at the *Guardian*; and one on the 50:50 Project pioneered by the BBC to ensure more diversity in its coverage. Clearly these are not the only examples of significant interventions that worked – there are many that would repay publication. Those that have been included have been chosen because they underline how initiatives focused on a tangible performance outcome need to work with intangible aspects of the organisation – especially culture – and that when they work they bring positive changes to those softer structures as well as hitting their broader goals. (They also demonstrate how much energy must be committed to these changes and the time they can take to work.)

Acceleration and amplification – the impact of COVID-19

The industry is now at a reset moment. Just as COVID-19 has accelerated external structural shifts, so too is it amplifying internal pressures and the need to re-examine existing cultural values, talent priorities, leadership approaches, and structures. This book lays out what those pressures are and how companies can tackle them. COVID-19 is provoking a crisis for many players, but it also presents a unique opportunity to accelerate the internal digital transformations organisations have been implementing for nearly two decades.

The research for this work was carried out pre-COVID-19, writing was done during lockdown, and as this eased a further 30 interviews were carried out to check whether the findings were still relevant. COVID-19 has accelerated the structural shifts the industry must contend with, and amplified the organisational challenges that need to be prioritised, so the book was then substantially refocused during the summer to ensure relevance in a COVID-shaped world.

In all, nearly 100 interviews and four focus groups were held. From these emerged a complex picture of broad but relatively piecemeal shifts. Pattern recognition – picking out the core themes – was not straightforward. The patterns themselves are opaque (necessitating the high number of interviews) and key themes were very tangled up with each other. While most firms now have clarity on mission, strategy, and business model, the picture of how their inner organisation is changing is muddier.

Quotations from interviews feature strongly in this work. All are anonymous – for the majority of interviewees this was critical if they were to speak candidly about organisational issues, particularly challenges and pain points. A list of interviewees and focus group members is provided

in the appendix. The bulk of discussants came from medium-to-large news organisations, legacy and digital-born, and primarily in high-income democracies, but I hope the analysis may also be useful for those working in smaller news operations, and to those operating in poorer economies and authoritarian contexts – their challenges may be aligned to some extent with those I focus on here.

I am enormously grateful to all those who spoke to me for this study. Even pre-COVID-19 workloads were high, especially for those driving digital transition, and a research discussion is seldom high on anyone's 'to do list'. Many people generously made themselves available on more than one occasion and provided thoughtful commentary on emerging conclusions, and I am especially grateful to them.

1

Leadership

Low ego and listening: ‘the expectation of leadership has radically changed’

Digital transformation needs strong leadership, and often different leadership. Leadership is the first chapter in this book because it is where the transformation of the inner organisation has to start.

Right at the top: ‘high thinking, low ego’

If the top leader isn’t driving the transformation, not simply in terms of strategy but also in terms of building a culture, setting norms for how people interact, showing what needs to be prioritised (and what not), then everyone else can down their change tools.

Leaders right at the top have always needed a sophisticated skill set, but those competencies and knowledge were primarily about IQ. And these are still critical to steering a strategic course in a structurally challenged sector. Yet for deep transformation, these are table stakes. Hard skills now need to be overlaid with soft ones. If leaders demand that those in their organisations make fundamental changes, they need to show they understand what they are asking for, and that they too are undertaking a personal change journey:

You have to demonstrate change and you have to change yourself – and that flows through the organisation ... CEOs don’t talk about this - but if you can’t change, how can you expect your organisation to change?

Those at the top of news organisations are frequently also top journalists. Journalists’ role is to know more about things, and those at the top are meant to know the most of all. The pace and scope of change in the industry means that, now, journalists who are top leaders must suddenly be able also

‘not to know’ – to listen to and learn from younger colleagues, as well as to audiences. This cuts across decades of cultural conditioning:

It is difficult for news leaders to admit they don't know. ... they have been hired and promoted all their lives because they know. To suddenly come to a place and be uncertain and not know, to feel incompetent ... ignorant – it's difficult.

‘We trust you to do that’: pushing power down

The old model of an all-powerful leader at the top who makes decisions and can ride across any decision at any point definitely doesn't work anymore. You need a more diffuse leadership where people are empowered throughout the organisation to make those decisions – and they feel backed, even if they're wrong.

The current strategic environment creates very specific challenges for leaders at the top. First, strategy has inevitably become emergent. Tight strategic plans confer security and allow planning, yet the industry's strategic environment is turbulent, and that turbulence is multi-factorial. Prediction and planning are having to yield to a more iterative approach, based on trial and learning:

You don't have the answers. ... You have to be comfortable saying, ‘I know this, I don't know that, and for the things that I don't know, I have to get the people who do and trust them.’

Second, as digital technologies push further into all core activities, it is no longer possible for those at the top to have expertise across all dimensions of the business. They will need to cede a degree of decision-making and agency to those that have the visceral understanding of new specialisms:

Some of the best ones ... are the people who've kept their minds open, who've kept their ears open, who have asked for help, ... that open-mindedness and that flexibility to see one's own weakness and ... gaps and then to fill those gaps is a really good model of leadership.

So, ‘command and control’ gives way to ‘we trust you to do that’:

I have a small group of highly capable managers whose brief is to empower, to train and develop individuals. They operate on the basis of being entrusted, of being the experts. I give them a confidence to succeed, but also space to fail without fear ... the people I got rid of were 'command and do' types, and the people I installed were very much collaborators.

The big collateral benefit here is in succession planning. As they share their power, leaders accelerate the development of the next generation of leaders:

I'm now much more empowering ... I facilitate, help and guide ... it comes back to succession planning. I want the people around me, below me, to develop, and the best way for them to do that is to do it themselves. And if they fall, I'm there to pick up the pieces.

Be a coach not a boss. Ask don't tell

The evolved leader is able to say 'I am brilliant at this. I know that. But I really do still need to understand that. I need you to take me through that again.' Can you be both brilliant and a novice at the same time?

In the jargon of leadership theory, 'command and control' is giving way to 'service' leadership.¹ Leadership at the top is discernibly shifting from a focus on the single individual who does the analysis and decides what happens, to leaders who draw on the expertise of their team and engage the talents in the organisation.

We have a weekly meeting with the extended leadership group and that's also an arena to address whatever ... we don't want a monologue, we want dialogue.

How leaders communicate

Eliminating ambiguity is important. Less clarity means less buy-in:

A strong sense of purpose and strategy, a story with everyone aligned to it

¹ This approach to leadership has been gaining in traction since the turn of the millennium. See e.g. Greenleaf 2002; Sinek 2017; Frei and Morris 2020.

... that makes people clear about what they're doing, what they shouldn't do, ... what they should invest in, what they shouldn't invest in ... it raises discretionary efforts. ... people get a sense of where they're heading.

But top-level messaging also needs nuance. Communication is a balancing act. Leaders need to confer absolute clarity on what the core goals are and why, but also make it clear that these concrete goals may change. They need to train the organisation to be comfortable with ambiguity:

You don't have the answers. You have to be comfortable saying, 'I know this, but not that'.

After a decade of furious digital adaptation, many leaders are now gun-shy of simplistic messages that 'this is the future'. They strive for communication that is clear but subtle, and to build information networks to ensure important signals from inside and outside reach them:

It's less a monolithic, 'this is the new thing – subscriptions or whatever' – that just makes us look foolish when it's not the new thing. ... it's more communication updates – 'this is what we're doing, this is why we're doing it' – less formal, more unstructured.

How honestly should leaders communicate?

Transparency is seductive, but some have found too much openness can backfire:

It sounds good to say, 'we don't have the answer, we're placing strategic bets on these areas'. But that scares a lot of people ... they translate that into 'they don't know what they're doing'.

This is a difficult judgement call. Honesty and transparency create trust, but they can also create fear, which brings with it a whole new set of leadership challenges:

When there is uncertainty about where we're heading, what our strategy is ... it brings the worst out in people because it creates insecurity and people get into a lot of battles ... It requires very, very strong leadership.

So some ideas need time to mature – in this case, leadership communication needs to be more measured:

We don't always broadcast everything to everyone, sometimes we just let new ideas have some privacy for a while.

'Do we have the right people at the top table?'

The difference was unbelievable, just to have a group who pull together, work together, have each other's backs, say it like it is, call each other out.

The layer below the top person is disproportionately critical for transformation. We tend to think of top leadership as a singular entity, probably reflecting discourse in the tech space (which increasingly bleeds into the media space), which is in thrall to the cult of the heroic leader, be it Zuckerberg, Musk, or Bezos.

Yet the highest performing top leaders do not lead alone. She or he works in tandem with a team of leaders. Members of this team are leaders of their own areas, add depth and perspective to joint decisions, and act as a check where needed on ego or ambition. The top leader needs to be right, and the top leadership team needs to be right too:

If the top team is aligned and know what they're doing – that raises overall performance measurably, ... there's a downward delta too. Performance will suffer if it's not functioning well and going in different directions. ... People think 'Oh my God, we've got to change 10,000 people in 10, 20 locations', but you don't. All those people report to a small set of top people who cast a long shadow.

'What can you achieve if members of the leadership team don't really buy in?'

Submarines are under the water and do untold damage, quietly torpedoing everything you are trying to achieve ... They nod along but actually they're undermining you and will shoot down everything you try to achieve. You can bring them into a 'safe learning environment', but that only gets you so

far. If somebody can't shift their mindset, you have to do something.

Many of those teams have been put together historically over years – they certainly were never explicitly curated for the task of transforming a legacy to a digital business in a volatile environment. As leaders realise their top team needs to be top calibre, the challenge of curating the top team becomes pressing. The biggest challenge is area leaders who don't buy in. This matters so much because people at the top who don't buy in give a 'free pass' to those lower down to do likewise.

The uniform recommendation is fast, unilateral action: the longer you wait, the higher the price – strategy implementation is hesitant, big decisions are fudged, transformation is slower:

Get rid of blockers as soon as you can ... It's never going to change with people like that on the team.

The first step is to expose the issue:

The biggest thing is call it out ... that's not how some people work, they like to just 'plant seeds' ... I haven't got time for that shit ... let's have it out now.

And don't waste time with moderate responses:

You can keep it going for years, eking it out, ignoring it or giving it a special, 'well they don't need to integrate, it's fine'. ... it's easier to make exceptions, hive people off and create jobs that aren't real jobs, I'm not interested in that. I have a commercial imperative.

But who needs to be in that top team?

Many spoke of the struggle of getting the top team digital enough. The default move is to add one or two 'digital bodies' – the risk here is that the rest of team then think that they can relax on all things digital:

When something like digital comes at a board, people panic and think 'I don't understand that'. They fear their lack of understanding. It's like suddenly having a huge Chinese customer base that you don't understand. So, you think, 'Right, I'll appoint someone to look after that for me'. But

the real point is to say, 'Whatever it is that's coming at us, let's all try and understand it, think about what that means ... We all need to get our heads around it.

As digital technologies started to transform businesses, new top digital roles emerged. These were bedevilled by a lack of clarity: about purpose, about the skills needed to fill them, and about how they would dovetail with existing roles.

'We've got to digitally transform so we'll get a Chief Digital Officer', but then they're not sure if that's a CIO or CTO ... or if it's a different thing. ... or a Chief Culture Officer – you bring in someone and you think that will solve it, ... and then you find that doesn't actually solve it.

Two problems are at work here. First, there is no textbook answer. The roles you need in your team depend on who you have already have, what they know, what your ambitions are, what new expertise these demand, and often in smaller nations, who is available in the market. A compounding issue is that top teams are, perhaps more than any other part of the organisation, subject to the vagaries of fashion. The default signal to show you are across an emerging issue is to recruit a new individual for that issue in the top team. That may indeed be the correct response, but to ensure it doesn't end up as a political role without real capacity to deliver, there needs to be a clear definition of what this job should achieve, and the person holding it needs sufficient resources and authority to do this. Otherwise ambiguity and turf wars can result:

What are the roles you need on that team? Have you got the right people in the right roles? That should be a fairly quick assessment, and that's the first thing, before you do anything else. Sometimes you might have a C-level role that's poorly scoped, it could be CIO, CTO, CDO ... have a look at that and see if you think it's right.

Two top team roles are proving especially difficult. The first concerns data:

We had a long debate about where data should sit. ... We went through a whole process of trying to hire someone, not at board level but one level below, and we realised that we weren't going to get the calibre or quality of people we needed, so it went up.

The second is a new role, the new kid on the block, the Chief Revenue Officer/Chief Customer Officer. This is often the publisher role reincarnated. This individual connects and drives the totality of revenue streams, not just advertising. Increasingly the prime focus is the subscription engine, and the allied data and tech activities around that. It's a complex and demanding job:

It's gone from a kind of global ambassadorial bag carrier to someone that absolutely owns the conversation about the business, and gatekeeper for what other parts of the business can get ... They need to be credible hybrids. ... super smart but also with a kind of consultancy mindset.

'The leadership challenge in the middle layer is phenomenal'

You can have real leadership at the top saying 'we want change', and you can have lots of young people coming in at the bottom saying, 'we get digital', and there's a stodgy bit on the middle.

There is a different leadership challenge in the middle of organisations. Those heading teams, units or departments need to know how to lead as well as how to do their 'day job'. This is new. Occupants of these roles often rose to them after successfully managing the news agenda, not managing people. Now they need a wider range of skills:

Newsrooms were used to strong leaders who knew it all ... good reporters turned into managers and they didn't care about feedback or communication or goals. ... that has totally changed. ... we need leaders at all levels that can communicate and give feedback. ... we haven't spent enough time with the mid-managers.

Previously leadership ability didn't bring kudos and you could rise to the top without it. Now things are different:

You have to be a business person as well as a journalist, as well as a people manager, as well as a skills changer as well as a mentor ... it's really hard to be a leader now, because you're leading a different ship to the one you boarded when you started out.

Strategic performance management systems like KPIs and OKRs are increasingly common, as are agile and project management processes. This has added a layer of explicit accountability to middle management, who are increasingly tasked with hitting goals, with career progression contingent on this:

One of the big reasons this has been so successful for us is because of structural changes three years ago when we required desks to be wholly accountable for their work and for their staff, so they couldn't hand things off anymore, as with 'I'm only responsible for like this one element'. Now it's 'No, you're responsible for all of it'. ... because of that, people had to start leading and managing their teams better because the buck stopped with them.

How to enhance leadership at the heart of the organisation

Our leadership principles? ... You have to be able handle the business ... you have to lead your employees ... give direction and trust ... and challenge them. Trust and challenge.

The further organisations progress with their transition, the greater the pressure on those in the middle to be good leaders. This is a muscle that must be developed. As with leaders at the top, those in the middle need to move from individual to collective responsibility, from command and control to consensus:

It's very important that they not be controlling. They need to lead based on respect, transparency, to let people experiment.

Mentoring and feedback are both bedrock and starting point. Better feedback is pretty much a universal demand – from leaders in the middle, and from those they are leading, as this focus group dialogue extract shows:

Female: I have never been in a newsroom that actually has a feedback culture.

Male: I have never had an employee saying feedback is excellent.

Female: I have never had an employee saying that there's enough feedback.

And a culture based around feedback and mentoring needs to start at the top:

We suffered as a business with not giving feedback, avoiding the difficult conversations, we all did that ... So, we are really focusing on coaching, mentoring, open dialogue, respectful dialogue. ... we're doing a lot of training on how to coach, how to mentor at different levels. ... I need to know how to have open conversations, difficult conversations.

This type of leadership training is not about digital skill acquisition, but rather about change and performance management. Here is the approach adopted by a large broadcaster:

Our 'Masterclass for Leaders' aims to make them good advisers to their people, who take responsibility for broader outcomes ... It's about competence and self-confidence. If you can build those, combined with a clear goal, you will nail the job of leader. There is a lot about getting people used to constant change, because we can't have these complex processes ... we need do whatever is necessary when we see it and not wait for two years. ... most important is a clear direction and to get the entire organisation on board. We have to address it all the time and we have to talk about it again and again.

Others have created leadership programmes that focus on self-managed learning:

There's recognition that people learn in different ways. We have traditional training where you turn up and somebody trains you ... we have a more self-serve development portal ... we have placements outside, one-to-one mentoring ... so it's like, 'you need to develop in this area, but you can choose how you gain that development'. And we're increasing coaching more and more – building a coaching environment as well as a mentoring environment because peer-to-peer learning is really valuable.

The need to develop leadership skills may be self-evident, but it can be a daunting sell to journalists:

Every newsroom I've worked in has tried to implement manager training. ... people are very hesitant ... 'this isn't what I signed up for, I'm here to

be a journalist, it's about my news judgement'. But that shifts as they see the benefits ... a well-operating team ... knowing peoples' strengths and weaknesses and how they are as individuals ... if you don't know that, it's hard to understand the team you're building and how you can execute with them.

Also stay realistic, not everyone can be brought on board:

We have people who don't particularly want to manage people ... Journalists who don't get out of bed in the morning to lead people, who really just want to tell the news, that's a massive issue.

Key points in this chapter

- Making an organisation truly digital first involves activating a system of interlocking elements – leadership, culture, talent, structure. All are critical, but leadership is first among equals. 'Mediocre' leadership will muddy the focus and dilute results. Progress will happen (the strategic environment means some degree of transformation is inevitable), but it will be slower and deliver less than the resources invested might have done, and the risk of burnout for those pushing the change is high.
- Leadership requirements are stringently different at different levels of the organisation. To start at the top, we are almost entering an era of the anti-leader. Great top leadership is increasingly about listening rather than speaking, being candid about personal knowledge gaps rather than demonstrating a comprehensive expertise, and, critically, about empathy and approachability. These have become as strategically central as strategic ability itself (more so as a result of the coronavirus crisis). We have reached the stage of digital transformation where resources are seriously being clawed away from legacy areas, and digital systems and processes are decisive for a sustainable future. Leaders need to make their own digital transformation journey apparent, and to be accessible enough that key messages from the middle, bottom, and periphery of the organisation can reach them.
- The calibre and cohesion of the top team is disproportionately critical, especially for business model transformation. This team needs to have the right roles, the right people in those roles, and those

top leaders need to be highly aligned. When top team alignment and performance is optimal, transformation is accelerated, and outcomes boosted. Conversely, a sub-par top team – not digital enough, key areas not represented or not listened to, too much infighting – brings very high opportunity costs, slowing transformation and damaging the ability to implant new cultural values.

- Leaders in the middle of the organisation increasingly carry the burden of achieving OKRs and KPIs – and they need support and training to do this. Previously they didn't need to be good leaders of people, now they do. But how to be a good leader needs to be learned. Few are naturally gifted, and management was not what they signed up for when many leaders chose journalism as a career. Investment in skill building here, especially in performance management, project management, feedback and mentoring, will pay huge dividends. Good leadership is learned, not innate.
- Leadership signalling has always been disproportionately important, and this requirement has also been heightened as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Levels of uncertainty and insecurity are high, and people seek clarity. A leader is never not communicating. What he or she does not do is just as important as what they do. Parse and prepare all leadership messages really carefully.

Case: the 'mother bird syndrome' and mid-level leadership at SVT

We were growing very fast in a mature market, but still we saw that the leadership culture and the culture in the newsroom was not supporting fast change. It was not making it easy to implement a digital strategy or other important objectives. Micromanaging made the transition slow, difficult to control and managers exhausted.

Boosting leadership at the heart of the organisation is a catalyst for accelerating progress towards digital transformation goals. Leadership that empowers at all levels and really strong feedback and performance management skills are central, but these need to be anchored in absolute clarity on roles, decision-making scope, and how performance is measured, and this clarity needs to exist on both sides.

Sweden's national public service television broadcaster SVT, like many of its legacy media peers, realised it needed to boost leadership at the core of their organisation. To start the work, personal insights gleaned from 40 interviews with leaders in the heart of the organisation were combined with input from survey data. This analysis uncovered what SVT termed 'the mother bird syndrome', as the change programme manager explains:

A lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities meant too few felt they had a mandate to take decisions. ... people felt that they needed to ask senior people for direction all the time in great detail, and this ended up with the 'mother bird' syndrome – leaders have baby birds asking them for direction all the time that they have to feed with answers.

This also meant no one really knew who was responsible for giving feedback on people's behaviour and performance. ... we had a culture that was weak at honest conversation, a weak feedback culture ... You can't hold people accountable for their behaviour and performance if it's not clear from the beginning what they're supposed to do ... This created an overall culture of disempowerment and it prevented good people from taking responsibility for their actions. Most of all, it meant that our managers, senior but also mid-level managers felt that they were under enormous pressure to have answers to everything and a lot of people were frustrated because they were waiting for answers, instead of making decisions by themselves. So, everyone was discontented with themselves and each other. This was not sustainable It didn't allow change at the speed we needed.

It also uncovered a lack of clarity, the probably inevitable by-product of two decades of furious adaptation to the digital world, and the rapid addition of new roles, and new platforms:

For a long time, people had been frustrated because it wasn't really clear who

decides, who makes the call when we have so many platforms to feed ... we had tried to use the resources in a good way, and this had led to a lot of confusion. ... we created a big digital newsroom and have moved a lot of resources to this newsroom, a lot of new roles have emerged that we didn't have before.

In response, SVT News and Sports launched an extensive leadership development programme. This had three elements: two/three-day training programmes for 190 leaders at all levels (from top leaders and department heads with 300 staff, to junior leaders managing small specialist teams of four); 80+ workshops attended by approximately 450 staff focused on goals, roles, responsibilities, and training in how to give and receive feedback; the establishing of structures that allow scheduled regular feedback/coaching for each individual in the whole organisation, where each leader has a one-to-one with all direct reports every few weeks. The programme is being followed up by '360 Feedback Survey' to monitor the improvement of quality of leadership on every level.

We are working on three seemingly very simple things, but they need to go through the whole organisation – clarity in roles and responsibilities, a feedback culture to support that, and a leadership style that empowers, that coaches, and that uses the capacity of all the brilliant staff that we have been able to recruit. Just these three things. It's not rocket science, it's not something new, it's just something we need to do and ... we are one year in and so many things are opening up, things that we didn't really see from the beginning ... we now realise, wow ... we should have done this a long, long time ago.

Particularly transformational was simply analysing existing roles, responsibilities, and decision-making scope:

We made a template for a discussion between managers and employees, extremely short, extremely simple – 'Who is giving you long-term feedback? What are your main tasks?' – headline format, really short.

The team leading this initiative at SVT is convinced that deep transformation is not possible without granular work at an individual level:

The insight from this is that when you do a transformation in an organisation with 1,000 people, it's not one transformation, it's 1,000 transformations, because different people need to go in different directions and [at a] different pace so that the whole organisation reaches its goal. And, to do that ... You need to manage people. It's not about organisation, it's not about technology, it's not about different, new, shiny things. It's about people, and each individual needs guidance when the whole organisation is supposed to move in a certain direction, and that's why we need to emphasise the feedback and coaching and leadership for everyone.

2

Culture

'You can't just talk a culture into the consciousness of your employees'

The low-level industry hum is the recognition that fundamental change in company culture is a complex but urgent requirement.

If a strategy lays out what needs to be done, then a culture prescribes what will get done. It is the invisible protocol, the unwritten set of operating rules that guide thought, actions, and decisions.² Culture has a tangible impact on outcomes but is in itself intangible, and it operates outside conscious awareness.

If leadership is the most important internal driver for digital transformation, then changing culture is the most significant task facing those leaders. For interviewees, culture was their biggest concern. They worry that, without changing culture, the news industry, like other legacy sectors, is consigned to decline:

We're acting like the music industry and all these other industries that have used the same excuses to avoid making the cultural changes they needed to survive. And look what's happened with each of those, it's not something to emulate.

And they worry, maybe even more, about the sheer difficulty of changing culture:

² Edgar Schein is the 'father' of current conceptions of corporate culture, and especially relevant to this work because his research stresses the almost umbilical link between organisational culture and leadership. For an explanation of how culture is structured and operates see Schein 2016 and for insights into how to work with culture see Schein 2013.

Culture is the air that we breathe. You can't put a set piece in the diary that will change culture. ... You can't see it, you can't touch it, you certainly can't measure it. ... in every management text you care to pick up they'll tell you, if an organisation can't measure something, it isn't important, but ... culture is the one thing that transcends all of the KPIs in the organisation, because without it you won't hit any of your KPIs.

'Everyone needs a slightly different mindset'

The basic challenge is that cultural values developed for one era are being applied to a new one. Some of those values are still valid (say, a commitment to serving the public good), others less so.

So, the culture change challenge is not one of wholesale transformation, but one of curation: of implanting new values, of retiring ones no longer helpful.

In all cases, reframing helps. If new cultural values are framed in terms of old ones, the likelihood of rejection is lower. One of BBC Director General John Birt's smartest moves, when BBC News Online was launched many years ago, was to frame the new and very alien initiative as a means for the BBC to maintain its historic role informing the UK public: he found leverage in old cultural values to sell a new strategy.³

An important initial stage (one that many companies omit) is to map the current culture, at minimum to capture deeper attitudes concerning key changes that are planned:

The goal is to get the mindsets, attitudes, and behaviours so that you can then create a product, i.e. a process of digital transformation, that will meet their needs. ... Interview people to find out how they think about digital transformation ... their underlying fears – maybe that their skills won't be relevant ... If across your interviews, everyone relates it back to their skills, you know what you have to work on.

The ultimate goal is not a one-off shift, but to equip the organisation with the ability to change its culture as needed, in step with its strategy:

There needs to be a constant re-examination ... this idea, 'We're done now,

³ For discussion of the importance of acknowledging historic cultural values, see Frei and Morris 2020.

we're settled and we're fit for purpose', is a great enemy ... there needs to be a sense of 'Okay, three years on, the things that we did, are they still the right things? Some of the values we created five years ago need to change now. ... we talked then about an innovation culture ... that's an overused word and doesn't really mean anything. ... We had these quantum values. ... being innovative and efficient. ... they just aren't relevant anymore.'

'If the CEO hasn't made it a priority and isn't leading by example, it's never going to work'

The leader is the single most powerful influence on an organisation's culture. The starting shot in any culture change programme has to come from the top, and a leader's signalling will be the single most powerful change lever:

To move mental positions, a leader has to address it and ask for it ... implicit is not good enough, you have to be really explicit.

The more potentially uncomfortable the message the leader is sending, the clearer the signalling needs to be. Radical change in the greater organisational good may not be to the greater personal good of some people hearing it. They have an incentive not to hear, so signalling has to be hyper-clear:

Give people nowhere to hide, because when something is new and disruptive, if there's an option to go on working in the old way, even the most intrepid people will tend to do that in times of stress. ... it's taking away the options to behave in other ways ... that can seem extreme but ... most people are going to retreat to what feels safe.

A leader is never 'not' signalling – and non-verbal cultural signalling is often the most powerful type. The 'leader's shadow' (what they don't do) is just as important as what they do – who gets leadership roles and who is passed over, what is incentivised and what not, which comments are picked up in discussions and which glossed over – convey as much, if not more, than official communications from the top.

And if leaders say they believe something, then their behaviour must be convergent with that. Staff are hyper-sensitive if their talk and walk on culture aren't aligned, and if those at the top aren't actively modelling what is needed:

You've got to lay it out ... the behavioural do's and don'ts, then that's got to embed, and that embeds through behaviours, the behaviours of the leaders ... it's not simple, but it kind of is. ... One of the things that was really important was a charter that we, the leadership team, created together ... it sounds a bit tacky, but the words on the board don't matter as much as that everyone signed, the fact that we agreed what the words were together ... I got everyone to sign in front of everyone else. ... it matters because we all wrote it and we all buy into it. ... it's these acts which make a difference.

From parental to peer-to-peer

If the top-line leadership shift is from hard to soft, then the equivalent for working culture is from 'parental' to 'peer-to-peer':

It's massive. It used to be the leader of your unit says 'x', then everyone just does it or they don't ... The workforce of today, that's just not how they operate.

This shift from the hierarchical to collaborative reflects in part the increasing influence of tech specialists in newsrooms. Collaboration and open-ended problem solving is a basic modus operandi for this group, and as business, editorial, and tech worlds mesh, work processes from the technology sector grow in influence:

The culture before was ... 'There are these sort of rather distasteful commercial people who do their thing over here' and 'We're editorial and we're the most important people in the business' ... when you have new leadership, a crisis, and out of that a willingness to experiment it becomes 'So, let's put people together, let's think about possible solutions in a completely different way ... We know we need to do something, we don't know what it is, so let's experiment, test and learn.'

Culture change levers

A leader cannot force people to think or feel differently, nor can they implant new values by decree. Rather they need to pull a number of change levers, partly because the more levers pulled, the greater the collective pressure to change mindset, and partly because individuals respond to different kinds of prompts.

The first lever is the leadership modelling described earlier in this section. A leader's actions, priorities, pronouncements, need to not simply be consistent with new cultural values, but to 'play out' the cultural values they are seeking to instil and promote. They need to change first and most visibly.

The second lever is to link the culture change to opportunities presented in the plethora of other initiatives happening inside the organisation. New systems, new appointments, new project teams, changes to working arrangements – all offer opportunities to demonstrate real commitment to new values. These need to be used.

The introduction of data into newsrooms is one of the most potent of these culture change levers (and at the same time, culture is one of the most substantial obstacles to introducing data⁴):

We had gone digital a long time ago and we had a very powerful data analytics platform ... as a result there was a culture in the organisation around data and data literacy ... we genuinely had cultural change because of this unleashing of data and transparency, we changed the way an organisation thinks.

Data systems are a powerful lever, but can also summon up some of the most powerful cultural kickbacks:

If you say, 'Rather than using editor's instinct, I want you to use data' they are frightened, frankly ... they feel like their whole contribution for the previous 30 years, or 3 years – you get young dinosaurs as well as old ones – is no longer valued, and no longer required.

Internal task forces are also a culture change lever, one that can be as effective as new data systems (they work particularly well for finding measures to address structural inequality and getting buy-in to these). Task forces not only find solutions that work with the culture, but task force members' own assumptions shift, and they then carry that learning back to their 'home' teams:

You end up with 40 people who think in a different way and have a slightly different mindset, then they can go out and be ambassadors elsewhere.

Concentrating on 'early adopters' is also a critical lever in the early stages

⁴ For detailed discussion of the introduction of metrics into newsrooms see Christin 2020.

of culture change:

We were after our 10% all the time. They would kick-start the process, the 10% of people who are already engaged and who will drag other people along.

These culture change apostles model the change that needs to happen:

You need good people on the lower rungs who are living examples of the culture that the organisation wants ... give them the safe space to do that ... make sure they are encouraged and supported.

Opinions differed on what to do with ‘obstructionists’:

You’ve got your 5% early adopters. You don’t have to worry about them, they’re already there. Then you’ve got the group close to them you need to tip over. Then you’ve got the mass. And then you’ve got the 5% who will never change. Just don’t worry about them. They will be taken care of by the rest of the organisation.

Others find ‘blockers’ valuable because they flag up where tensions lie:

Those cynics are often held up as disastrous for strategic change projects ... But I want them. They’ll find the cultural objections. They’ll see process problems that I am not seeing. And if I convince them, I’ve won.

The risk with this kind of internal segmentation is that cultural and permanent subcultures can result:

You can end up with a bunch of radicals, who run the future. And you have someone like me in the middle trying to bring the old and new worlds together, those two worlds together ... and a painful front develops where you’ve got different cultures.

And the last lever is simply persistency. One interviewee described culture as a piece of elastic that snaps back the minute you stop pulling it. Cultural values run deep and will regress to old norms given any opportunity.

We raised the mud from the ocean floor, but we need to keep going or the sediment will float back down.

Key points in this chapter

- The culture change challenge is not about revolution, but evolution. Culture is not immutable, but it is extraordinarily difficult to shift. Changing it is a ground game requiring long-term, grassroots work. It's often more about nuanced curation – instilling new values and retiring counterproductive ones, and where possible reframing the new in context of the old – than implanting a whole set of new values.
- Ideally this should start by uncovering existing shared unconscious beliefs, and how they play out against current priorities. Many companies skip this stage and jump straight into change plans – but the better existing values are understood, the more focused change work can be, the more existing values can be used to lever change, and the better the outcomes.
- Culture change is achieved not by big standalone initiatives, but by pulling change levers that other elements offer in a coordinated way.
- Just about every initiative carries the potential to be a culture change lever and should be designed with that in mind. Large-scale changes like reorganisations and key personnel changes as well as granular ones in day-to-day business, like meeting choreography or communication instruments, all offer the potential to communicate new values (and if they don't do this, commitment to those new values may be questioned).
- The first and most important lever to change culture is leadership signalling. If the person right at the top is not visibly pushing for a change in culture, then those lower down will have only limited success.
- Other powerful levers include the introduction of data systems into newsrooms, internal task forces, and a focus on the early adopters, seeking to make these 'change apostles'.
- Culture change is also a long game. Progress may only be evident only in retrospect. Be persistent.

Case: how data helped culture change at the Guardian

The *Guardian* has been on a many-year journey to introduce data insights into newsroom decision-making. This pioneering work is well known in the sector, but the cultural dimensions perhaps less so. These are the focus in this case, and are explained here by its chief architect.

The first key point is that the beginnings were modest and had nothing to do with data. The starting point was one person's goal of improving the readership of articles when they moved from print to digital:

My job was to take what we did in print and put it online. ... I did that for ten years, and huge numbers of pieces now in the archive have headlines which have ensured that they've never been seen since ... every single one of them is buried. And I buried them. So, when this job came up as SEO editorial executive, I wanted to do that job, because it struck me that I'd spent ten years as part of a machine that was hiding journalism, not exposing it.

It was clear that a good print headline often didn't work on digital, but this message proved surprisingly difficult to land:

I thought that I could go in with examples into the newsroom with people I've worked with for ten years and just say, 'this is dumb, right? It's obviously dumb. Let's stop doing that'. And then what happened was, nobody did it. Even with examples. People were avoiding even listening to me ... I would go to their desk, and they just wouldn't acknowledge me. ... Nobody wants to change. ... and let's be clear. I wasn't really qualified for this job. I didn't know anything about SEO. ... they had every reason not to listen to me, and 200 years of habit that suggested you carry on doing exactly what you always have.

Cultural values were blocking change – and data emerged as a solution:

You're battling the idea that a really good headline is something that is not deliberately obtuse, but maybe kind of poetic, alluding to something as opposed to telling somebody what it is ... in fact, it was considered quite vulgar to explain what the article was ... and you could argue that that's true in a print environment – 'put some effort in, don't just write a label on it, make it sing'. But in digital the job is so different. ... the context is removed, which means that all you're doing with that is harming journalism. But even with that argument, I couldn't get much traction. And that's what led me to the data. I spent a few months feeling self-pity, and then I realised, 'these people don't have a reason to do this' ... at that point, I turned to data.

The first data tool was a morning email, which was initially distributed to just four top people, out of a concern that that data insights might skew journalists away

from serious subjects:

It was a narrative. 'This worked yesterday. This didn't' ... written for people like me who didn't understand these numbers ... that did start to make some inroads. ... I showed that I wasn't just attempting to get people to write a load of crap based on trends, I could show that certain pieces of journalism that everybody cared about were doing well ... and I could start gently writing about pieces that hadn't done so well. And suggest that maybe if the headline had been different, then ...

The next step was to introduce data insights in a very limited way into the morning meeting:

If there was something that we felt we hadn't got across we would talk about it in the morning meeting, ... but I would be very careful about how I said that ... give a general top line, say whether it's good or bad, and then pull out a couple of examples.

There was a growing realisation at the top at this point that there needed to be a focus on growing traffic, but also discomfort around doing this in an organisation committed to serious journalism. Using data insights to guide journalistic decisions needed to be approached very gradually. The next step was to set up a system to review headlines before they went digital:

I still couldn't walk up to the sub-editor and say, 'you're writing the wrong headline'. I couldn't prove it to them ... so I asked every single sub to send me every single headline via chat and I quickly looked at it. ... at the beginning 50% of the time I said, 'That's great. Just carry on.' But when I did intervene, I made it a conversation. I didn't have much capital, so I kind of had to, but the more I did that, the more I realised it was a good thing to educate people, and show them that I wasn't just squeezing at traffic mindlessly ... But even with all of that, there were still sub-editors who would simply refuse.

This wasn't scalable and wasn't entirely cutting through. It became clear some kind of tool was needed and a hack day with developers was set up:

By the end of that day, we had what was then called the SEO dashboard. And what was crucial about that was it was in real time from the start. ... That's a fundamental point of our tooling. ... if you don't have that data coming straight back into the newsroom, as quickly as possible, then it's very likely you won't succeed.

As with the newsletter, access was limited at the start. But as its value became clear, acceptance spread, as did usage, and it gradually became more sophisticated:

Initially, that was only on my laptop. ... but the more I showed it to people, the more I got editors saying, 'Oh, that looks really useful. Can it also do this? Can it tell me where the readers are coming from? Could it help me understand not just one story, but everything I'm publishing about Iran?' Then you're in a virtuous cycle, right? ... once you've got that momentum going, unless you're doing something really bad, you should go somewhere special with it.

Critical was framing all the data work in terms of serving the core journalistic purpose:

The key reason why Ophan has changed culture consistently from since that point eight years ago, is it was built on the common good for our journalism. It absolutely chimed with what we were trying to do, and still are trying to do in terms of a general mission, which is open journalism. If your argument is 'we stay outside of a paywall, because we believe the journalism we create is a positive,' then it only makes sense then to amplify your positive journalism as far as you possibly can. If that involves changing words and headlines, then the trade-off is obvious.

The next step was to add attention time, a change that again was framed in terms of shared cultural values:

Our argument was we want to grow our audience responsibly, so seeing how long people spent with something was a really good way of ensuring that, because even if you're not intentionally trying to create clickbait ... you can sometimes do that ... Having attention time alongside the page views means that every single time we look at a piece we are looking at whether that reach was meaningful and engaging readers.

The *Guardian's* audience tool, Ophan, is now widely accepted and has been used as the basis of similar tools at many other news organisations. It continues to develop, and culture change goals continue to influence that development path:

We have a screen that shows you the bottom ranked items, not the top ... Incredibly powerful, absolutely the thing that's driven most of the run-off change. ... data tools traditionally show you the top, the best of what's going on. ... we built in views which showed the bottom. Now, again, we didn't just build that in and unleash it, say, 'Hey, there's loads of crap going on here.' It was built hand in hand with the cultural piece, which was 'surely, when we are this resource-strapped, we don't want to be spending any of that resource on stuff we don't care enough about to promote.' And it's also about proving a fundamental fact, which was whilst the internet is infinite, and we can publish as many stories as we want, we can't promote as many stories as we want.

'Cultural nudges' were also built into the newsroom CMS:

We added a field ... 'the article should be this long' ... The action we wanted was, 'just think about how long it should be.' ... we did that not by telling them to do that but by putting in a small field, adding a tiny bit of friction. ... The other essential bit was if sub-editors received an article where the commissioning length was significantly lower than the filed length, they were empowered to hand it back, rather than have to cut thousands of words from article.

Data systems also lay bare the scale of investment in content that is 'unloved' by audiences. The *Guardian* (like many newsrooms with well-established data practices) realised that it had a problem with overproduction:

We were doing a really good job across of understanding why we wanted to optimise content and how we could get big pieces out to a wide audience. ... But the longer I looked at Ophan, the clearer it became that there was a load of stuff that was doing really poorly ... about a third of what we published represented only about 2% of our total audience.

The next stage was a separate project, running off the back of Ophan, to address this issue. Again, cultural considerations governed the approach:

We have reduced our output and got people to think more carefully ... but we haven't set up any systems or stated expectations ... That's important, because every single strategic change project usually starts with, 'you are doing it wrong, or you fucked up.' Nobody had fucked up. We had provided no structure, absolutely none.

The 'golden nudge' was a metric of 5,000 page views:

What mainly spread was that artificial base of 5,000 page views. If your piece gets less than that, the question then is, did we care? ... If an editor cared enough to commission it properly, what went wrong in the promotion? Why couldn't we communicate that this was important to us? And if we did care about it, and did promote it, and it was still marginal, let's think about what we do next time. To be clear, we are not saying page views are the single most important thing, we show the retention time as well ... but it has now become the starting point for most desks. ... every single morning the action is, open this, look at those there, in the red.

At base, the *Guardian's* strategy for data in the newsroom centred on creating tools that allowed the newsroom to understand the impact of their actions, and of the combined activity of the newsroom. Once these became clear, things started to self-correct:

Most people did not understand we were overproducing because you're atomised and you have loads of desks. Most people had never looked at these numbers. I never looked at these numbers. I had never really thought about whether we were publishing too much in a meaningful way. So, for me now, every single time I'm trying to do something big, the crucial bit is 'do we have numbers that show us what we look like?'

Data projects are about far more than the data. Data interventions can deliver cultural change and strategic change, provided there is clarity around what they need to deliver from the start:

The main thing is the specificity of the aim ... start with something specific that you're trying to change. If you're able to change it using the data, then that leads you into very interesting places, and probably ensures that things go well. ... I think that's why loads of people who have tried to copy us sometimes fail, because they think what they're doing is about data. ... They think that it's just important to have data in the newsroom ... If your aim isn't, 'we need to improve this thing. And the data will help us do that,' then you're on a hiding to nothing.

3

Gens Y and Z

'These are different generations bred in a different way'

The hierarchy of newspapers will kill newspapers. The idea that only people at the top can make decisions. (Gen Y)

A lot of people coming into this industry won't accept a sort of hierarchical top-down – 'you'll just eat the porridge we throw down to you'. (Gen Z)

A cleft is developing between the bottom and the top of media organisations - different levels of the organisation now have different lived realities, assumptions, and goals. Gen Ys, and to a limited extent Gen Zs, are already having a big impact and this will grow, triggering a rethink of many established priorities, practices, and assumptions.

Millennials (Gen Y) and Gen Z are not the same, but there are strong commonalities between the two groups (a deep engagement with social and political issues, for example), and their impact is more or less netting out in the same place. Those changes, and how to respond to them, are the subject of this chapter.

A generation typically spans 15 years. Technically, Gens Ys (or Millennials) were born between 1981 and 1996. Older members of this group are approaching their forties. Many are in middle management and some in senior leadership roles, especially in digital areas. Gen Z-ers were born between 1997 and 2012, so there are far fewer in organisations, and those there are, are right at the beginning of their careers, so entrant or emerging talent.

These are clearly not cast-iron categories, values from one demographic cohort bleed into adjacent ones (and there are subcategories too – 'Xennials', who were born between 1977 and 1985 are said to be a blend of Gen

X-ers, who were born between 1965 and 1980, and Millennials). Context influences attitudes too – attitudes seem to change once individuals have significant leadership responsibilities.

The characteristics of any demographic group are influenced in part by the technologies they use – what you grow up with, and how fast it develops, affects how you experience the world and the attitudes that emerge from that. In this respect Gen Zs are radically different to any generation before. Social media have always been part of their lives: they are engaged in an ongoing process of collecting and evaluating a huge volume of information and influences. They are differently informed, as the cliché goes: ‘news events follow them around on their phones’ as they get the majority of their news from social media. This characteristic alone makes their insights invaluable for media organisations.

The impact of both groups on leadership, culture, talent, and structure is clearly discernible, but emergent rather than clearly contoured. Here are the characteristics that stand out.

Highly value-driven, strong self-actualisation needs

They are really interested in the purpose of what they're doing and how and why ... it's a complex set of characteristics but it's really different from my generation and above. (Gen X)

These individuals have strong personal values: their personal behaviour is anchored in their personal ethics. There are topics that matter (often race, politics, mental health, identity, climate) and these are front and centre. These topics are also central to the news agenda, meaning that for Gens Y and Z, how such topics are handled inside news organisations is important. The personal shades into the professional: companies are expected to be thoughtful in how such subjects are handled, and to take a stand if necessary. If personal and company goals come into conflict, personal goals may be decisive:

Their loyalty is towards themselves and their values. I know this is obvious, but when you see it in your own company it's like 'wow, this is not just some fancy article, it's our employees'. (Xennial)

A commitment to personal growth is equally strong: there is a strong desire to acquire knowledge, to maximise creative and intellectual potential, to contribute. This is tied into a need for career progression:

You want to feel you're growing, that you're doing something which has an impact, and to see opportunities above you. (Gen Y)

Tensions in this group surface particularly around professional advancement. There is no clear path to the top for an increasing number of the newer roles inside news organisations, particularly the hybrid digital roles. The rungs in the ladder by which a journalist rises from trainee to editor-in-chief have been in place for decades. The existing path to the top can only guarantee to deliver a specific set of individuals to the top: 'pure' journalists. There are no equivalents for those working in, say, data journalism, editorial development, or newsroom product.

Strong personal values, a desire for fast progression, and high self-actualisation needs, coupled with diminishing advancement opportunities in a contracting sector, makes this group highly mobile: they move on much faster than their predecessors did.

They're blunt: 'I'm going to stay for one or two years.' And then they want to get the most out of those 24 months ... 'I want to learn, develop myself, maximise the speed of experience. I want to have a good time, ... I want to meet interesting people, I want to work in fun projects. I don't want to be dragged into internal politics because that's not really relevant for me.'
(Gen Y)

'We haven't bought homes already'

The drive for advancement reflects economic realities too. Millennials have only known the media as a challenged sector. Many have been let go more times already than their bosses, or their bosses' bosses, will be in their entire careers.

They've been in a lot of places where they've either been laid off or they've seen layoffs, they've seen how brutal this industry is; a lot of them have only worked on the digital side, so they've worked always in a time where there might be a few thousand layoffs a year in other companies – that has to seep in to that sense of uncertainty that hangs over them. (Gen Y)

In the media world they know, compensation is low, job security is low, and so, by extension, are the chances of owning a home:

For the most part, they graduated into the Great Financial Crisis ... they've got much bigger debts than we had ... they're in a house-share in their early 30s, and they're thinking, 'Is this it? How do I get a bigger piece?'
(Gen Y)

The difference in the financial situation between younger managers in the middle and older managers at the top is now significant. This can exacerbate tension when top decision-makers don't share the same understanding of how the organisation needs to change:

It is not fair that those stewarding companies now are not the ones who will have to live with the consequences of the decisions they are making.
(Gen Y)

Biggest pain point – feedback

They want promotion, feedback, development, training, new job titles, they just really, really want and need a sense of progression in their career.
(Gen Y)

Growth, development, and career progression are priorities. Managers control access to these, and feedback discussions are the obvious moment when opportunities around these can emerge. The issue of feedback is therefore highly charged:

There is a big shift ... people want feedback and that has become so much a part of business life ... all my very senior bosses have always kind of gone, 'Just get on and do the job. You'll know if you're doing a good job because I won't fire you.' (Xennial)

The problem is not that managers don't want to give feedback, but rather that giving meaningful feedback well requires skill, and managers are also troubled that, even if performance is great, they have limited scope to reward this:

I was hugely impressed and humbled by the number who came into my office and asked for promotions and pay rises. I respected it, because I hadn't seen that much ... particularly from young women asking for what

they wanted in a very clear way ... but at the same time, it's really hard to manage because there's only so much of it you can fulfil. (Gen Y)

A Gen Z-er observed to me, 'Why wouldn't a manager want to give feedback?' Why indeed? The answer may well be that they lack time, training in feedback and performance management, and most critically, scope to change anything meaningfully for the individual concerned. Feedback can be genuinely draining:

If anyone else comes and cries to me today, I'm just not going to be able to cope. ... Crying at work used to be such a big deal ... 'You only cry in the loos. Go to the fucking loo and cry.' (Xennial)

One recommended solution is to use the conversation as an opportunity to sync individual and organisational goals:

I'm not pretending I don't feel the burden when you're in the middle of everything else and someone's like, 'Can I get personal feedback?' ... but I try to use that as a moment to reinforce what we're trying to accomplish and use those conversations as a moment to reinforce goals and reflect for myself. (Gen Y)

There are real intergenerational tensions, but there are also solutions – and these don't really look much different to the formula for good leadership in any organisation with high levels of intellectual capital and intrinsic motivation. Below I discuss approaches that can work.

Leadership: facilitate don't dictate, be more transparent, and show trust

I was trusted. There was open dialogue. Even if they don't understand, there is the trust. (Gen Z)

Wholly harnessing these individuals' talent isn't going to happen with top-down traditional management. Interviewees were clear about the leadership approach that will motivate them the most:

If I was a leader? ... Well, you'd want to motivate your team, and you'd want to all aim for the same thing, but you just don't want to isolate people

into thinking that you're always right, you're always in charge. It's okay to say, 'Actually, I don't know what that story's about. Tell me more. Tell me why it's significant.' Just find out more. (Gen Z)

Trust is first among equals for retaining millennial talent:

I got different job offers ... the one I chose was the only one that would let me do my own stories ... just having that trust, knowing that your managers trust that you know what you're doing ... it makes you want to stay longer ... you don't have to prove yourself all the time. (Gen Y)

Build career paths; create opportunities to lead

You don't get a pay rise without promotion, but there are no established paths for promotion. New roles are valued in the context of old roles, and those value judgements are based on old-world values. (Gen Y)

The path to leadership is genuinely opaque for many in newer roles. They may lead highly strategic but temporary structures (project teams or pods), and their roles may stand outside existing definitions of leadership functions. As newsrooms contract and mid-level leadership roles evaporate, companies need to consciously scan for opportunities to provide leadership experience – chairing meetings, giving junior staff the opportunity to step up for a couple of weeks when their bosses go on vacation.

If you can't ensure speed to leadership, you can create speed to impact. Create pathways to connect the bottom of the organisation with the top – via shadow boards, reverse mentoring schemes, regular lunch meetings. The goal should be that they can raise concerns, but also bring their ideas to those at the top.

Upgrade feedback

Feedback is inextricably linked to personal growth, and to business growth also. The KPIs and OKRs that are washing through newsrooms now are contingent on individual feedback and performance management. And a desire for feedback is built into the fibre of Gens Y and Z; they want to know what trajectory they are on, and to be mentored and coached well.

We are world champions in chatting. Journalists can chat all the time ...

we talk to each other and we are really nice ... but chatting is not the same as real feedback that has a measurable outcome, that will move you, the employee from one point to another. You can't do that with chatting. (Gen Y)

The problem is that few of us are naturally gifted at either giving or receiving feedback. We all need schooling, in delivering and accepting it, in listening, in managing the ego and fear that can surface. It's no surprise therefore that feedback is taken really seriously in Silicon Valley and the wider tech industry.⁵ This is something the media need to copy. If the industry invests in one thing right now, schooling in the art of feedback – giving and receiving – and performance management would probably top the list. When formal courses aren't feasible, low-tech approaches can work too:

We said, 'Who wants to be a mentor and who wants to be mentored?' and then just literally paired people up. It took an afternoon. We said 'over the next six months it's the mentees' responsibility to seek out their mentor once a month'. We told them the no-go areas – it's not about asking for a pay rise ... it's sharing your experience for their benefit, being there to have a conversation. And we did a couple of sessions training with the mentors on, 'if you get these kind of questions this is how to manage it'. (Gen Y)

Let new talent hit the ground running

They are great champions of change, huge believers ... I have a great group of men and women who I can throw at any problem and who can execute. They're the people who get these things rolling, and they are missionaries in the sense that they get other people excited and on board with these projects. (Gen Y)

Many now work on the assumption that new talent will stay for three years at most, so it's critical that they can contribute quickly. Onboarding needs to equip them with the knowledge and connections to allow them to be involved in real projects as fast as possible and building a feedback loop needs to begin here too. Check in with new hires a month in, ask if this is the job they were sold, what their first month has been like, and if they have the resources they need. Thereafter accelerate training and move them on to interesting projects fast.

⁵ See e.g. Kantrowitz 2020 and Scott 2019.

Key points in this chapter

- Demographics are destiny. In five years' time, the contents of this chapter will be unnecessary. Already now, many of the leaders I interviewed are Millennials, and quite a few of those at C-level. But because Gen Y and Z are disproportionately distributed in the newer strategically critical areas of product, data, audience, and 'advanced' digital journalism, for now the message in this chapter is important. Unleashing and integrating the full talent of Gens Y and Z is a clear and present challenge.
- Gens Y and Z represent the capabilities and characteristics essential to digital transition: lifelong digital connectivity, a preference for collaboration, a growth mindset, and deep commitment. They hold the key to finding a sustainable future for news media but need to be allowed to turn it. The challenge is making space for their expertise and increasing their operational influence, especially at senior levels. It is much easier to set up a new company around these principles than migrate an existing one on to them.
- These cohorts do tick differently than Gen X-ers, Boomers, and in some cases Xennials. They have strong personal values, want their work to be in sync with these, are looking for growth and progression – and are mobile. They will move on, especially if routes to progression are not there.
- At a tactical level, the biggest issues to address are the need to create career paths that lead to the top, especially in new hybrid areas, to build feedback capacity (at minimum to distinguish between performance review, mentoring, and salary discussion sessions), and to take on board that, especially for younger members of the organisation, financial concerns and insecurities are real.

4

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

'It's hard, and it needs to get done'

Diversity work is hard and has a low success rate. It doesn't undermine an organisation's commitment to this work to acknowledge that and to acknowledge that in some areas of diversity there may be competing arguments that don't easily sit with each other. The reasons that diversity work has struggled are not because people haven't tried. We need systems to assess our progress and a constant willingness to admit one approach isn't working and to seek another.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are issues that rose sharply to prominence during this research. Like the growing impact of Gens Y and Z, they are dominant themes in the workplace and in the public discourse. As a change imperative, they stand alone, but changes made in response to them are deeply entwined with responses to digitalisation: they run in parallel but co-mingle.

These are burning issues for organisations right now. They merit an independent book, and I am sure there will be many. But from the perspective of the space available in this study, my aims in this chapter are, first, to flag up 'What is happening?', to explore how these issues are presenting; second, to share how organisations are responding to them and how these responses dovetail into responses to digitalisation; and third, to flag up challenges around these responses.

Organisations' DEI agenda shifted markedly during the research. In late 2019, when it started, this was shaped by #MeToo, the gender pay gap, and reports of systemic gender bias in Silicon Valley. Gender was a priority. A growing awareness of lack of socio-economic diversity and class

diversity was a subtle undercurrent throughout, a corollary of the shift to subscriptions and the incursion of granular audience data in newsrooms, which led newsrooms to realise they needed to reflect the audiences they served and wanted to serve, and the extent to which they didn't do that at present.

By the close of 2019 there seemed to be a consensus across interviews conducted that the industry was pretty much 'across D & I': the problem was 'known', real commitment was there, and instruments were in place. This is no longer the case. The past few months, with the death of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter protests, and the multiple inequalities flagged up during the COVID-19 era, have splintered complacency and brought a new urgency around improving representation of race and ethnicity to the fore. Many feel their bar on DEI had been set too low, initiatives were not far-reaching enough, and progress was too slow. There are concerns too, as the impact of the pandemic becomes clear – job cuts, working women taking on a larger share of home-schooling and childcare – that progress may be undone. The challenge is not only moving forward fast but locking down achievements so far.

Where work starts

Diversity work is about changing mindsets, removing labels (or more accurately changing the associations that those labels carry), and then changing how organisations take decisions and run themselves. Indeed, the fundamental issue is changing who is taking the decision – if you diversify decision-making, you diversify the organisation.

Goal setting is the universal starting point. Most companies had explicit goals, but a newsroom in Oslo may be struggling to move a very different diversity needle to one in Alabama or one in Edinburgh: companies' diversity goals are in themselves diverse.

Goals to increase gender diversity are pretty universal, often accelerated in recent years by national targets for female representation on boards and requirements to report on gender pay differentials. These twin demands led to the issues of gender representation and pay parity often becoming intertwined. They also flagged up many structural constraints inside organisations that undermine progress on these issues:

Invariably the Head of Social is a woman, often the Head of Audiences too, a lot of the Social Media Editors are women ... these roles are not respected in newsrooms ... They're often central to breaking a news story,

and suggesting how that story, should be promoted online ... but they're often poorly paid ... It's unusual to see more than one man on these teams.

The underlying challenge is that employees cannot be reassigned at will. Scope for change is limited. Staff, especially at senior levels, are locked into position and protected by legislation. And in a contracting industry, churn and recruitment are low:

Our social team is a great source of talent for the rest of editorial. ... these are entry-level jobs, ... mostly not held by white men. ... The trouble is that that means we have a lot of low-paid women, ... So, actually, what we need is more badly paid men ... or more entry-level men.

This central dilemma is seldom addressed head-on and publicly:

There is a difficult fact in the middle of diversity work, which is that, given organisations are unlikely to expand, for workforces to diversify, some people will need to leave – and they may not all volunteer to do so. Taking that on successfully is both complex and necessary and an organisation needs to think carefully about how it's going to talk about that to its staff.

'We need more voices, and those voices need to reflect the audience'

It's ... appreciating the issues that actually matter to people, and they're not always the issues that matter to a newsroom full of affluent, well-educated people.

The shift to subscription models created a strong business rationale for DEI imperatives. The data architecture surrounding these systems flooded newsrooms with individual-level data on who is consuming their stories (the work of audience teams was pivotal here – they revealed to newsrooms who audiences are, where their attention was focused). The link between subscriber growth, diversity of coverage, and diversity in newsrooms became apparent. To grow subscriber numbers (a more pressing goal since the decline in classic advertising revenues has accelerated), newsrooms need to attract different readers in different segments and by extension this means different people in the newsroom: if everyone looks the same, thinks

the same, and has similar backgrounds, they are likely to produce the same kind of content for the same type of audiences.

You start to get a picture of what your audience looks like ... There is no barrier between the reader and the news organisation. ... all of that has created an environment where we start to care about the audience, where we're starting to think 'wow, we're missing out on this full chunk of other people that we need to be addressing' ... or 'wow, we have been ignoring these people and ... what can we do about it?'

Playing into this came a motivation closer to journalists' hearts – better representation makes journalism better and more popular; worse representation makes it worse:

How are you supposed to write about LGBTQ+ communities, trans communities, if nobody in the newsroom even has a friend in those communities? How do we write about Shamima Begum when nobody even has a friend who might wear a headscarf for religious reasons?

So, what is working?

Diversity is you're invited to the dance. But do you feel comfortable enough to dance? You get them in the door, but are they having a great time? Have they got their shoes off? ... Diversity's getting everyone in the room. Inclusion is 'I'm having a fucking blast.'

Getting under-represented groups into 'the room where it happens' is better than not, but is not in itself transformational. There are key distinctions between 'diversity', 'inclusion', and 'equity':

Diversity is making sure that the room represents whatever it needs to represent ... you look around and say, 'wow, there's is a good diversity of people in this place'. ... Inclusion, that's 'Is everybody in the room being heard? Is everybody in the room being seen? Does everyone in the room have a place?' Equity is, 'Okay, we're all in a room, we have a voice but who's leading? Who has the power? Who are in those positions that can move the needle? Who are the people who have the resources?'

These are systemic problems with a complex cultural component, and that cultural dimension is inevitably slowing change: actions are shaped by unconscious values, and unconscious values are not easy to access and alter. So, the challenge all organisations face is moving from plan to action to results. As with culture change initiatives, to have impact, DEI measures need to be ingrained in all aspects of life inside the organisation:

It's a gigantic idea ... it's how you run your company at the very highest level and at the lowest levels ... It's constantly asking, 'How is this piece of work getting done?', 'How are we doing something?' That's the work of inclusion.

Chief Diversity Officers are increasingly to be found (in larger organisations at least). As with other new roles in the top team, they need to have a real seat at the table, a real budget, and to be closely integrated into the core team, as well as having strong links (and credibility) with content producers. Their mandate is to define the challenge around DEI, design the response, and then oversee and support how diversity, inclusion, and equity processes are owned and run. They face backwards – correcting structural inequities and unearthing structural blockages – but also forward, putting policies in place to cover all DEI needs:

Trans policies are really, really important, and although you might not have an employee in your organisation who would make use of that policy ... everybody's looking to recruit new talent and it's better to have those policies in place now, rather than wait until an employee does come out as trans and then having to handle it all after the event.

Cynically, there is an 'insurance' element at work here. Newsrooms are deeply enmeshed in the news agenda around DEI issues. Their internal debate not only shapes internal culture but can spill into the public domain. Newsrooms can become the news event, as recent events at the *Wall Street Journal*⁶ and *New York Times*⁷ show. Hastily pulling together a response after the fact seldom works well:

Never underestimate the impact of external pressure, be it from the

⁶ <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/07/wall-street-journal-staff-erupts-over-race-and-opinion>

⁷ <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/06/this-puts-black-people-in-danger-new-york-times-staffers-band-together-to-protest-tom-cottons-anti-protest-editorial/>

millennial workforce, from people on Twitter or Facebook or people just reaching out directly and pressuring organisations, holding them accountable in a way that they just are not used to.

The centrality of data

I've seen the rush 'Oh my God, diversity, it's so important, let's hire, hire, hire'. And the joke is 'Okay, it's great now, but in two or three years, they're going to realise that they can't go anywhere and then they're going to opt out.'

For any DEI initiatives to yield real results, they need to be data-led. Here it is worth noting that one recent survey of leaders in digital news found that about a third of respondents work for publishers who do not currently collect data about the diversity of their staff, let alone the senior leadership (see Cherubini et al. 2020). Data collection and analysis are key to checking whether companies are delivering on their stated goals. At a deeper level, data, quantitative and qualitative, uncover hidden constraints. Done well, data collection and analysis can flag up not simply inequalities in the numbers but subtler inequalities in everyday life, say, how much energy members of minority groups have to spend navigating issues others simply do not face. Data, and thoughtful probing of that data, point out where action needs to be taken, and provides hard justification for that action.

Take a really hard look at the numbers ... who are in the leadership band, what does that band look like, what people are doing this? ... let's look back five years, of all the people we've hired each year, let's look at those. ... let's look at the demographics of who's left us.

This is about pushing analysis past the bald numbers into understanding the lived experience of diverse groups inside the organisation:

Don't just do more hiring and promoting ... because those hires have got to be able to live and breathe and stay.

Base-level data come from regular surveys (some companies link these to comparative data from organisations worldwide):

We run an inclusion-specific survey every year ... How many people feel

unsafe in their teams? How many don't feel like they belong? How many feel like an outsider? ... If people are leaving your organisation because they don't feel they belong there, that's a failure of inclusion.

But sensitivity is needed – not everyone wants to be counted:

We want to be able to count who in newsrooms are transgender, who is gay, but that's such a very personal thing ... you want them to be counted but you also don't want people to feel obligated to out themselves in a way that they don't want to be outed.

And not everyone falls into neat linear categories:

For some people sexuality is fluid, right? ... Maybe how you answer the question now is different than how you answer in five years. And that's such a personal thing that do you want to bring that into the office in a way that's recorded? And for some, that's part of their identity and they're comfortable doing that, and for others it's tough.

A really well-executed exit interview can lay bare cultural realities inside an organisation more directly than any other intervention.⁸ Such interviews have been part of the standard HR toolkit for decades, but seldom deliver the kick to self-reflect they can, when done in an expert way, when insights are probed, absorbed, and acted on. Those that do take them seriously collect exit data in different ways, to increase the odds of capturing the subtler learnings:

We not only have an exit interview but collect data in writing ... knowing if people are leaving the organisation due to a lack of inclusion or of feeling safe or of feeling welcome is important.

Hiring – deconstructing roles and challenging assumptions

Much activity is focused on the hiring process, redressing imbalances, and removing stereotypes. Companies are now looking for candidates in different places and posting job openings in different places in order to diversify talent at point of entry. This applies also to educational institutions:

⁸ For a deeper exploration of this point see Carla Murphy's investigation (2020) on why journalists of colour in the US leave news publishers and seek work elsewhere.

Use geographic spread as a proxy for socio-economic diversity ... the chances are you went to Syracuse or Buffalo or wherever because you couldn't afford to go to a big city, which says something about your background.

Roles are being deconstructed and reverse engineered. Asking 'What problem does this person need to solve? What outcomes do we need? What skills do they need?' broadens the range of individuals who come into consideration. Educational credentials may even be disregarded:

We have removed the collection of any education data ... we have to be really smart on the skill set we need and the experience we need ... and then very open to filling that position with all sorts of people.

Internal networks and mentoring

I'm a huge advocate for LGBT networks ... knowing others within the organisation and being able to connect with them and understand more about their experiences and do that kind of mentoring ... it gives a collective voice and a seat at the table in much wider discussions.

Communities of shared identity or employee affinity groups are seen as one of the most effective tools to address inequalities, especially when they are plugged into senior leadership. These create a forum where groups can build the muscle to articulate and normalise discussion on key issues. They also provide support, development opportunities, and role modelling. They bring benefits to those outside the communities also.

Our women's network ... it's really important that men go and shut the fuck up and listen ... they bring in speakers and they talk, it's a community, they mentor each other ... that's really important ... but it's really important that they involve men so that men can listen and understand ... There's a lot of unconscious male bias. People like me who ... are not necessarily aware of things because I'm a man and I need somebody to tell me.

Mentoring, informal and formal, is also widespread – coaching individuals from under-represented groups, suggesting them for new roles or promotions, or calling out discriminatory behaviour on their behalf.

I joined ... through the journalism trainee scheme, so from the get-go I've had that support ... people pushing you up and telling you to pitch those ideas and just be persevering, and people fighting your corner.

There are structured approaches too. A key point is that both sides benefit: mentees get a champion, ongoing encouragement, and tactical advice, while mentors gain understanding of issues that members of minority groups face.

The Diversity Project ... is for junior talented people here who are immigrants and they mentor our directors. We ... also have another mentor programme which is for leaders in the company who are mentoring young immigrants in school and college.

Setting new norms for 'business as usual'

Who's in the room? Who's at the table? Who's making the decisions? So, let's change the room, the environment of the ... morning meeting. Let's change who's at the table and who's just sitting on the periphery ... should somebody else be leading the meeting?

Exclusion arises from subtle and entrenched habits and behaviours. The deeper companies' diversity work goes, the more the focus shifts to this micro level of how people engage with each other. Meeting choreography is a common starting point: setting out how to interrupt, preventing particularly strong voices from dominating, coaching in advance those who may feel intimidated to ensure they have the tactics to participate, and changing seating arrangements (no fixed seats, maybe no seats at all, moving stronger voices to the fringes of the room).

And this work has to be driven from the top, by clear signalling by senior leadership. As one interviewee put it, leaders need to create 'permission structures' for new ways of interacting:

When a senior leader talks or sends out comms to the whole organisation that references something about diversity and inclusion, then that is telling the entire workforce that these things matter, they are important and need to be discussed properly. And everybody wants to impress the boss, so everybody, everybody's going to go that extra mile to make sure that they are championing those values as well.

What could possibly go wrong?

In the rush to acknowledge the problem and be seen to respond to it, there is a risk of simplistic responses. Not quite ‘diversity washing’ but perhaps not far off:

You see that across the diversity piece, and across the mental health piece ... we come up with a ‘thing’, put the wolf from the door by doing ‘something’ about it, but it’s not fundamental change.

Those who have worked in the field for a longer period have seen many initiatives, and many that fail:

I’ve been on countless diversity committees ... a lot of work and it seldom goes anywhere, seldom results in anything that is truly institutional. ... the missing link is a real commitment from the organisation to acknowledge the severity of the problem ... news organisations don’t want to grapple with how bad the issue is. ... it’s too ugly ... so they go straight to the solutions without dissecting the problem.

And even when they do work, the most well-intentioned policies can bring unintended consequences, often borne by the intended ‘beneficiaries’ of those very policies. These shed light on why DEI initiatives have such a chronically low success rate,⁹ and why cynicism is rife.

At the most basic level, many initiatives place the onus for change in the wrong place. ‘Leaning in’ is not a solution:

A lot of the burden has always been on the people of colour, the very victims of the systemic racism, institutional racism, unconscious bias, to fix it. The solution is ‘let’s put them through training, let’s go for professional development’. These are good things but make the assumption that they’re not good enough – ‘let’s make them whole so that they are good’.

Equally fundamental, being one of a handful of ‘different’ people is uncomfortable and undermines contribution:

Some people, their parents worked in the industry, they know somebody inside

⁹ See e.g. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/gender-equality/focusing-on-what-works-for-workplace-diversity> and <https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-diversity-programs-fail>.

the organisation, they went to a certain school ... they've been told, 'You're the best. You can do everything.' But not everybody is privileged enough to have been brought up that way ... some don't have the self-confidence to go into a newsroom and pitch to an editor they've never spoken to before.

This can be compounded by unreasonably high expectations – sometimes self-imposed:

We hired all these black journalists ... they arrived into a completely white newsroom ... one amazing young woman from a really disadvantaged background, brilliant journalist ... in her mind, she had the responsibility of reporting for the entire black community of Britain. She ... was so weighed down by the pressure of that.

And the challenge is not simply getting different people through the door, but what you do with those people once they are inside the organisation. 'Diversity hires' can get 'ghettoed' on diversity beats.

We employ marginalised people to cover marginalised people. We employ young women with a particular cultural background ... to cover issues affecting their friends, their families, their communities ... they should cover Brexit.

High-profile diversity hires at leadership level face a unique dynamic:

They might have been six months or a year away from being ready but we rushed them in because it looked the right thing to do ... then you can set that person up for failure ... and the men that were bitter about it come in with their, 'I told you it wasn't going to work' and then it puts the women off from doing it, and it puts the men off from realising they've got to think about this.

Key points in this chapter

For many of us this is has always been a big issue ... when you're a person of colour this is not an issue that's now in vogue and then goes away. It's one that you always live with and you're always thinking about and you're always grappling with and having to manage.

- As with so much in this book, work on diversity and inclusion has to start at the top. Leaders need to signal an urgent and real commitment to improving performance on these dimensions, otherwise true momentum is impossible. They also need to signal that, even if commitment is real and measures gain traction, this is a long, complex, and difficult piece of work.
- Making companies more diverse and inclusive is really about fundamental culture change, and as with culture change, it requires a coordinated programme of different measures that penetrate deeply into everyday work, and critically into the hidden assumptions that underlie decision-making. Levers include tracking and analysing progress intensively with data, searching for new hires in different places, releasing preferred educational requirements, and defining roles by skills needed rather than specific pathways, establishing internal communities of shared identity to provide support and mentoring, and setting new norms for how staff engage with each other on a day-to-day basis.
- Generational shifts should accelerate progress. At least in the US, Generation Z is the most ethnically and racially diverse generation ever (with 48% coming from communities of colour).¹⁰ This alone should ensure that policies to increase diversity, inclusion, and equity become cemented in the mainstream of organisational activity. Audience data will reinforce this: younger audiences are much less tolerant of a lack of diversity. If you don't see yourself reflected in that content, you are far less likely to want to consume that content.
- The painful irony for the media industry now is that, while commitment to real change is higher than it probably has ever been, the impact of COVID-19 means that the industry is probably financially more compromised than it ever has been in terms of its ability to resource and push through that change.

¹⁰ <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2018/11/15/early-benchmarks-show-post-millennials-on-track-to-be-most-diverse-best-educated-generation-yet/>

Case: the BBC's 50:50 project

This initiative¹¹ is significant, not simply because it is a rare example of a DEI intervention that was successful, and which has met the test of replication in other organisations, but also because of the influence on wider attitudes in the community of increased diversity of who appears in media programming, particularly in the role of the expert.

50:50 was launched in 2018 by a white male on-air journalist (with no specialist diversity background) with the target of achieving 50:50 gender representation every month across BBC output. And it has been successful: the BBC's own impact reporting in 2020 found that, of the programmes involved (sign up is voluntary) in the 50:50 Project for at least two years, '78% reached 50% women contributors, indicating that cultural change is taking hold, and that it is sustainable.'¹² This is a complex project and many factors led to its success, but a few of these (described here by the founder of the project) relate tightly to the issues discussed in this chapter.

First, data are perhaps the most powerful basis for argumentation and change:

Having data available and being collected systematically has removed the kind of, 'well I think we're doing quite well', or 'I think we're not doing quite well' ... that's provided the foundation for discussions that we didn't have before.

Second, those data need to be immediate:

The potency of data to drive cultural change decreases with every minute that passes from the time that something was created ... the data is at its most potent in the immediate aftermath of creating something. ... so the whole thing is geared around measures you produce and share immediately after you produce.

Third, those taking decisions need to be doing the measuring:

I'd seen lots of diversity monitoring, but I couldn't see it making that much difference. ... so, the big idea was, get the people making it to do the measuring ... you make the people who are making content look the numbers in the eye at the moment that they're producing content. ... it forces engagement.

Fourth, this will 'land' if it's seen as coming from 'one of us':

¹¹ For the full discussion of this project see <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/05/the-bbcs-5050-project-shows-equal-gender-representation-in-news-coverage-is-achievable-even-in-traditionally-male-areas>; and <https://hbr.org/2019/06/tackling-the-underrepresentation-of-women-in-media>

¹² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/5050/impact2020>

Newsrooms, and content production environments, are deeply cynical places, rightly so ... if you're going to ask them to do something new, on top of their busy day, you need to make sure you're seriously credible. Now, if you come from them, you are instantly more credible. So quite often, diversity champions, or leaders within big corporates, can come from outside of the content production environment ... and I'm not being disparaging about the work they do ... they do very important work at a corporate level. But, if you want to persuade a group of cynical, sometimes even grumpy journalists or content producers that they should take on something new, it's quite disarming if you're standing in front of them going, 'I do the same thing as you.' You can immediately have a different conversation.

Fifth, harness peer group dynamics:

Rather than use management edicts to drive sign-up, we targeted individual teams within departments ... I targeted the team that I thought would make the biggest success of it, not the team that was the most high profile. ... I was convinced that if you had a success story within a department of one team, and you made a fuss of them, and you made a fuss of them with their boss, and you just generally celebrated their success ... the other teams in the department might well look at that and think, well maybe we could do this too. And it's just worked again, and again, and again, and again. And once you have that peer group dynamic up and running, it helps recruitment. It helps the performance, because different teams within sections want to outdo each other.

5

New Talent, New Roles, and New Structures

Reshaping the inner organisation to match digital ambitions

This brings together the themes of talent – hiring, keeping, and letting go, new roles and the challenges they can pose, how structures are changing, and what is happening in that least-loved of departments, HR. It's a portmanteau chapter. The 'red thread' is the spread of digital technology into core activities, and the knock-on effects this is having, the challenge of meshing content-centric and business-centric areas.

Talent – hire for mindset as much as for expertise

What talent do organisations need to drive forward their transformation? What are the implications of this for hiring, holding on, and letting go?

When we were writing the strategy, we spent a lot of time working out our unique strengths and the things that defined us ... There was a revelatory moment when we realised that talent is a key part of it. ... we're a talent business ... the talent in newsroom is a huge differentiator for us.

A new hire is the go-to move for building new areas or addressing lacklustre performance. Often there's the hope, too, that the new staff member will also help shift the culture. This is probably placing an unrealistic burden on that individual. Plus, even before COVID-19, many companies had limited scope for hiring:

We have six places open on our graduate training scheme ... we had 2,000 CVs ... That's it. That's our recruitment. ... the money's too tight; we haven't got people leaving enough to open up new positions.

Approaches to hiring are changing, driven in part by the focus on increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion which often requires hiring processes to be rethought (this is discussed in the chapter on diversity and inclusion), and partly because new roles are emerging which require new profiles to be written:

The first question is, 'What organisational problem are we trying to solve by hiring this person?' Then we really drill down into what experience and skills we actually need. We try to be really smart about who we bring into the organisation ... It's on us to test for the things we're looking for.

Mindset is increasingly decisive. Four attributes are particularly highly sought. First, proactivity:

It's a certain personality ... They're entrepreneurial, they're creative, they're forward thinking, they're problem solvers, you don't survive in this industry very long if you're not a problem solver.

Second, a 'growth mindset':

We certainly get people from established journalism schools, but we are increasingly asking, 'What is your capacity for growth? What's the energy that you're going to bring to this?' That's huge.

Third, being able to find the signal in the noise:

An ability to handle ambiguity ... to synthesise information and tell a story when there's so much market feedback coming at you, and you're learning a lot on a daily basis about what's working or not working ... being able to articulate that to yourself and others.

And fourth, leadership potential:

As an industry we have been extremely focused on 'how digital is this person?' But every applicant says, 'I'm very digital'. I search hard for people that are good with people, who will be good leaders. ... that skill has been in the shadows.

There's an interesting shift taking place on digital. After a decade of prioritising 'digital', newsrooms are now seeking diversity in those digital skills:

There is a tendency to erroneously and misguidedly define talent in terms of digital ... newsrooms are being filled with clones ... and they just rub each other up the wrong way and compete with one another furiously.

Holding on and letting go

Getting hold of talent is one thing, holding on to it another. Companies who are expending a lot of energy hiring talent for key roles can find they then need to work equally hard to keep them:

In the past they didn't have to come up with ways to attract or retain talent, because people had been lining up in the streets to get reporter jobs. Now digital-savvy people with skills in data analytics, audience development, social media ... they know they have opportunities elsewhere. ... that makes them put up with less.

One response is to assess flight risks in advance:

If I'm doing my job, I should have had some idea, right? A lot of turnover you can predict and prepare for, provided you have some idea what your people want. ... you need really strong managers and leaders checking in and asking those questions to try to understand, not only 'Is this person about to leave?', but also, 'Is this person in the right role?' If you ask every individual 'What is that you want?', 'What is it you want to learn?', 'How do you want to grow?', and an individual is not getting any of that, well that is incredibly illuminating.

This loops back to the need to upgrade mid-level leadership. Managers need to be capable of holding such discussions:

We mandate that our managers and our leaders meet with their people frequently ... we make sure that they are asking questions that try to get to what is the engagement level of this individual. What do they want out of their career? Is it so diametrically opposed to what they're doing right now that we can anticipate this person isn't going to be here long term?

The opposite challenge is staff members who can't deliver what the company needs. As resources get tighter, the opportunity cost of talent mismatches grows. Proactivity is recommended:

Good leaders will sit down with them and say this is what we're going to have to do, this is why we're doing it, and we need to talk about it. Rather than performance managing them out or doing a soft soap on them. The CEOs that are prepared to do the dirty work themselves and to do it with integrity, that's making the difference.

The pain of the platypus

New roles – in design, in engineering, in mixed media, and in data analytics – bring some of the biggest talent challenges. These individuals are hybrids – combining classic journalistic skills with data science, coding, developing, etc., and need to be closely integrated into work processes. Individuals in this subgroup have a variety of names – platypi, blended journalists, non-binary journalists. They have high market value, highly transferable skills, and often high levels of frustration, partly because of the volume of subtle legacy obstacles to them achieving what they should, and partly because their roles are not understood:

They bring in new elements and boundaries get blurred ... that causes confusion... energy is drained by testing boundaries ... we really had to put effort into clarifying roles to prevent confusion and burnout.

These tensions often surface in the issue of where they should sit in the newsroom. The options are to embed them in teams or put them in a central specialist unit. Embedding is often the preferred first option, in the hope that their digital skills and mindset will 'bleed out'. This is often, one editor dryly put it, 'a work in progress', and also not a great experience for the platypus:

With embedding you can feel like you don't have a home anywhere, you're isolated because your boss is somewhere else, but your workload is with a specific team. ... people don't feel that managed ... they're never sure what the strategy is or what direction they're headed in.

Centralisation can give a better work-life for the platypus:

Having a core group that really understands your work, that you can commiserate with, that you build knowledge with, is really important. ... If you associate too much with the place you're embedded, even if you do have a home team, you don't feel like part of either world.

But this limits knowledge transfer:

There's a lot of frustration around partnering with them because no one knows what their strategy is, what their work is. They have a lot of frustration because they can't operate signals on stories ... things get added to story pages as opposed to collaborations.

The output of these individuals is often central to growth strategies – and their frustration was one of the biggest pain points to emerge during research.

Every organisation I have worked in has had that ... visual specialists, data specialists, audio specialists, video specialists ... they always exist slightly outside of the regular functioning of the newsroom ... they don't want to be a service desk ... but people don't know how to collaborate with them, don't know why they should value them.

The solution depends on the openness of the newsroom to these new skills.

You have to get it right according to how much protection this team needs ... if there's a digital mindset then you don't need a protected environment, because everyone agrees that the digital product is first ... The less this is the case, the more people don't accept those journalists, the more dangerous their situation is. ... As soon as it's established you can disseminate the team.

'Lots of organisations have got a product role, but absolutely no clue what that means'

We've lost an entire generation of UX, product and tech leaders. Everyone quits. ... everyone went to beautiful, interesting companies. ... we need to really look into why we're losing all this talent, because it's harder for us to recruit. I have product management positions vacant for months and months and months ... and that is a dangerous sign, when a company with such a beautiful, engaging mission like ours doesn't manage to get the best talent.

Similar structural tensions are surfacing around the product function. Product used to be a relatively static thing – the article, the paper, the

channel, the programme. Now it's a fluid entity that flexes in step with business model and tech to ensure that digital content finds its audience, performs for that audience, and that companies can monetise it. In their rush to create product functions, the media are importing a function standard for Silicon Valley, but the contexts are different.

In Silicon Valley, product is the heart, the product is the business. ... in media companies, people don't believe the product is the business. ... it's design or maybe it's a bit of digital and a bit of editorial. ... they're keen to hire product people because they've seen in that in Silicon Valley this is a key role ... then they don't know what to do with them when they get them because product people don't fit in a media environment.

Part of the problem is that, even in a very short space of time, the product function has 'migrated' inside organisations, often starting in tech, moving from there into marketing and often coming to rest close to editorial. Product pings between these areas because it needs to be able to influence all three. But the more it succeeds in this, the more it disrupts power dynamics.

Every product role I've seen has either enormously succeeded or enormously failed – there's been very little middle ground. Either product thinking has completely transformed an organisation because suddenly you have people saying, 'let's think about the customer experience', and even editorial people say, 'Hold on, that won't make a great customer journey through my story.' ... Or you have a situation where the product person is too challenging for all the installed members of staff.

To avoid being disruptive, those heading the product function need a deep understanding of the culture of journalism. But because they need to establish a strong digital product function fast, companies can turn to Silicon Valley hires, who are then expecting a different type of organisation:

It's very easy to hire people who believe that they're running a pure product company ... but that can set up a confrontational dynamic where these people feel 'Okay, you say you want to be a tech company, so this is how you should do things because that's I how I learned it at Facebook and Google ... We should be in charge of all the decision-making on all of this.'

Structure – big bang reorganisations avoided where possible

The mantra ‘structure follows strategy’ is holding true for news organisations. As strategy and business models evolve, organisational design is being rethought. Companies realise that they won’t reach their strategic goals if they leave the existing structure in place, with COVID-19 acting as an additional accelerant, because it has amplified the need for cost savings and a faster digital shift.

The moves underway tend towards the iterative and the exploratory. This is partly because many companies have already undergone major digital reorganisations – converging legacy and online businesses or merging multiple newsrooms – and these experiences have made them circumspect about more wide-scale change:

We decided not to do a big bang this time. Instead of saying, ‘okay, we’re doing a big re-org, here are your new roles’, a really difficult process with all these union negotiations. We’re starting with one team. If that works, we will do another.

Internal change of this order of magnitude is complex and can feel unending. Simply bringing the project to conclusion can become an end in itself.

Just pushing the change ... the moving around the building, keeping on telling people that ‘We’re changing: this is the vision, here are new values ... here’s the new this, here’s the new that’ ... It was all too much. So, we stopped, stabilised ... This year little pockets of the company are transitioning and transforming, but they’re small. You add that all up, the whole thing is moving forward, but we are no longer ‘the whole business is going through massive change’. We’ve done that.

Rather than seeking perfection, some now seek to ‘satisfice’ – find a structure that solves most of the problems for now:

I can’t get this done in a one hit – restructure and say, ‘that’s me set for the next three years’. I can do most of it but I’m going to make a bit of a fudge there and revisit it later ... this bit is going to have to go underneath there even though it doesn’t really fit, but I’m going to have to do that for a while.

Staff need acclimatising to a world of permanent structural evolution:

We've tried to do away with the expectation of structure, so people aren't like 'Oh my God, the structure has turned upside down again.'

'A thousand little pinpoints rather than one big bang'

There's not been a moment since I came here where we weren't fundamentally rethinking at least one department. ... Every single day something in the organisation changes.

This exploratory approach is the by-product of shifts elsewhere: from advertising to subscription financing, which requires close interaction between journalism, product, and data; and from static legacy formats to ever-growing options for digital content, there is a new urgency to hit business goals in terms of audience growth and engagement. At the base of nearly all changes in structure is a need to increase cross-disciplinary collaboration:

That's what news organisations are struggling most profoundly with ... you have to collaborate, it's no longer possible to do journalism here and sell advertising over here and they never really need to talk to each other ... The only way that you can succeed if you're going to take a new strategic direction or persuade your readers to give you money, is that you basically have to do that together, it has to be editorial with commercial and it has to be enabled by technology.

The most frequent incarnation of these softer structures is the multi-disciplinary task force, which now seems to be as popular in the media as it is in Silicon Valley. These are a low-friction workaround to silo-thinking and to speed up new initiatives. They also build a cadre of leaders who can work cross-functionally, and they 'seed' new cultural values:

What began to yield results was a small cross-functional team who could make things happen, a data-led kind of test and learn framework.

HR, and why it is so unloved

We spend as much time, energy and money on building the best company as we spend on building the best product. ... we design the organisation, processes and systems really thoughtfully ... right people, in the right roles, with the right resources, ... that's what's guiding your company into the future. All of those are people questions.

Digital transformation is a people transformation and a business transformation. All the issues in this chapter – talent, recruitment, retention, letting go, role design, organisation design – should theoretically be planned, driven by the people function. Yet, rather than HR being responsible for building the right social architecture for a digital transformation, it is often a low-status function that lacks power and resources. There's an almost reflexive lack of respect for the activity which some feel is undermining the industry's transformation.

We have to find a way of repositioning HR to be something less shitty sounding ... something that helps the expertise of HR to pervade through the business for positive reasons.

Lack of journalistic credibility is seen as one problem:

The problem for HR is that journalists see people who don't have editorial experience and feel they're never going to understand ... and I think HRs are scared of journalists. ... editorial language is new to them ... journalism is very opaque.

Also, HR can be perceived as 'working for the other side':

The belief, particularly among younger and minority folks, is that 'HR works for the company, and not for the employee'. So they are distrusted at both ends – the more traditional/older folks see them as 'not journalists', while the younger/more outsider group have had to recreate the things HR aspires to provide (career guidance and progression, creating a good employee experience, making sure I'm fairly paid, etc.) in other support groups and whisper networks.

For others, the roots lie in broader prejudices:

Think about the demographics ... editorial is white, male, middle class, maybe older and HRs tend to be female and younger. So, you also have a power difference.

There is a vicious circle at work here. If the people function is structurally underpowered, its work will necessarily be limited to the administrative, reinforcing prejudices that HR is about irritating bureaucracy. HR won't have the resources to bring about the deeper structural shifts in culture, leadership, and inclusion that should be part of its mandate, so will never be seen as strategic.

The risk of getting sucked into virtue signalling initiatives can also further divert HR energy from the deeper structural issues.

You can't face into the systemic stuff that's gone on for ages with soft touch HR ... these pappy policies that are great for headlines ... that are meant to make everybody feel good ... when you really probe them, they fall apart ... they look nice on paper but don't really do anything.

Enter the 'Super HR': moving the people function up to a strategic level

Do you have the right 500 people, structured in the right way, doing the right things, hour by hour, for the product that you're trying to create? How much have you thought about all that and how it interconnects?

There are media organisations doing this differently. They tend to be closer to the tech sector, or have CEOs who have moved into the media from companies where HR is seen as a strategic partner to the rest of the organisation:

I created the role of chief people officer ... to focus us massively on our people agenda. So, creating a new culture, everything from pay and reward, to a massive investment on diversity and inclusion ... I will not make any decision without the CFO, the COO and the chief people officer agreeing it, endorsing it, being there with me, absolutely 100%.

Top HR roles are being ‘supercharged’ as a result:

Super HRs are a different set ... Normal HRs just kind of agree with the CEO and ‘say we’ll do something to soften the blow’. Super HRs are a completely different calibre ... the seniority dynamic is different ... they are really locked in with the CEO and partnered in ... not just a department you have to have that reports into the Board. Very different ... They’re individuals that challenge the CEO ... rather than taking a directive and just delivering it.

Critical here is moving the HR function out of ‘dotted line’ reporting status. These individuals are explicitly part of the core decision-making group:

‘What really matters for our people? What does the optimal employee experience look like?’ You’re never going to get those answers if you’ve got one person doing everything from hiring to firing to just managing the really, really bad stuff.

There are two basic underlying tenets to this approach. First, treat ‘internal customers’ as seriously as you do external ones; put as much care into the ‘employee journey’ as you do the ‘customer journey’:

We apply the same thoughtfulness, planning and strategy ... to the entire employee lifecycle: how we attract talent, develop our people, incentivise, reward, empower and retain our people, how we offboard our people and send alumni out into the world.

Second, infuse all people decisions with data insights. Let HR processes be as data informed as editorial ones are:

One of the beautiful things about data is when you have enough of it ... you can see, ‘Are there pockets of the organisation that are being underserved?’ ... ‘Does the engineering department look different from the rest of the organisation?’ ‘Are we seeing uncomfortable patterns of turnover?’

Key points in this chapter

- Digital transformation is a people transformation as much as business transformation. The importance of getting culture, talent, leadership right, of reaching diversity and inclusion targets, is stressed universally, yet HR, which should provide the strategic architecture for these activities, is often low status and underpowered.
- A growing group of organisations have seen the connection between a strong people function and digital success and have elevated their HR function to act as a strategic partner to the rest of the organisation. There are two central building blocks to elevating HR: put as much energy into the ‘employee journey’ as into the ‘customer journey’, and infuse all people-related activities with insights from data.
- When recruiting new talent, a growth mindset, proactivity, good people skills are increasingly sought. Digital skill requirements are becoming more nuanced.
- Talent challenges are concentrated in the new hybrid areas where tech, journalism, and business combine. These individuals are the hardest to find and the hardest to keep. They hold roles that are entirely new for newsrooms – data journalists, interactive graphics artists, product managers, and so on. Their work is contingent on high levels of collaboration, and many newsrooms have failed to really incorporate these individuals into core editorial processes.
- Challenges with hybrid roles surface particularly in decisions around where these new roles should sit. Options lie on a spectrum that has ‘embedded’ on desks at one end and ‘centralised’ at the other. The culture of the organisation will determine which option works best, and any solution is likely to be temporary. The majority of organisations swing between solutions with some regularity.
- Organisation design is changing dramatically, but these shifts are different to the ‘big bang’ reorganisations of previous internet eras. They are smaller scale, an evolution rather than a major reorganisation, and part of a broader decentralisation of power and decision-making that is linked to shifts in culture and in leadership style. ‘Softer’ structures – semi-permanent, cross-disciplinary constellations of staff and skills created around a specific purpose (pods, verticals, and teams) – are increasingly becoming the norm for new initiatives. The top-level drivers are the need to

reallocate structurally resources from traditional to digital areas, to institutionalise collaboration between tech, business, and editorial, to infuse digital skills and thinking throughout the organisation, and to find efficiencies and synergies.

Conclusions

Mastering the colliding imperatives of digital transformation, diversity and inclusion, Gens Y and Z, and COVID-19

Implementation is the most important challenge for the media. Full stop.

Going digital – acquiring digital expertise, putting digital products at the heart of the business, and building a viable business model around these – is a challenge the industry has been facing for two decades and was the original focus of this research. The principal finding is that successful digitalisation involves achieving change in aspects of the organisation that, on the face of it, do not appear related to technology.

Digital transformation is taking place in the context of three other interconnected forces: adaptation to the mindset, needs, and aspirations of Gens Y and Z; the hugely increased importance of improving diversity and inclusivity; and finally, COVID-19, which has accelerated the decline of the legacy revenues that were financing digital transitions, amplified the need to go digital, fractured individuals' experience of organisations, and created what feels like a permanently high threshold level of stress and uncertainty.

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis has widened the gap between the leaders and laggards. The stronger players have got stronger – but the key point here is that they laid the foundations for their prowess now over the past two decades, through dogged internal transformation initiatives: instilling new cultural values, upgrading leadership, creating new roles, reinventing structures, and resolving the dilemmas that arise when old organisations are retrofitted for a digital, platform-driven future. For these organisations, the coronavirus crisis so far has been harvest time.

Organisations now need to respond to four forces simultaneously – digitalisation, the need to substantially increase diversity and inclusion, the different realities and requirements of Gens Y and Z, and the challenges of COVID-19. However, just as the coronavirus crisis has accelerated structural

shifts, so too has it amplified the internal change imperative that the pre-COVID-19 stage of this research made clear. The responses identified in the first round of research – how to pull on the levers of leadership, culture, and talent – still hold good and can address all four change drivers.

Digital transformation imperative has not gone away

We use the term ‘transformation’ far too glibly. True transformation – which means the complete change of an entity so that it is better afterwards – is rare. Only a handful of companies emerge from any serious technological disruption with a market position equivalent to the one they had entering it, let alone a stronger one. Those that do have put as much emphasis on transforming their inner organisation as they have on transforming their product. They take culture, leadership, and talent as seriously as they do ARPU and EBIT.

Growth outside needs growth inside. Going digital is as much about people and culture as it is about business models and strategy. We all know this, but changing the social architecture is grindingly harder than making some brave strategic bets. The latter won’t work unless the former happens too.

There’s a fundamental distinction between the content of a strategy (the plan itself) and the process of strategy (how you implement that plan). Transformation energy is often frontloaded in developing the strategy. Implementation is under-indexed, because at this stage the transition plans ‘drop’ from a strategic to an operational level, but also because implementation involves subcutaneous, often repetitive, change work in the soft tissue of the organisation. This is slow, diffuse, and progress is hard to measure.

The central message of this book is simply that, for digital strategies to deliver what they must, we need to take the organisation as seriously as we do the journalism and the business model. This may not look central to building a great newsroom or winning a Pulitzer Prize, but it is.

‘Process is destiny’, as Arthur G. Sulzberger, Publisher of the *New York Times*, put it to one interviewee for this book. We need to be as smart, intentional, and committed in how we transform our inner organisations as we are about the journalism those organisations produce. This means looking hard at how we lead, the cultures we build, how we unleash the talents we employ, who they are, and how we treat them.

And because the ‘how’ matters as much as the ‘what’, here are some overarching priorities for the process of harnessing hearts and minds.

Make it theirs: ‘people don’t destroy something they’ve helped create’

At the earliest point, get them involved ... the whole newsroom ... so they know there’s a real budget and that we’re going to do this. Ask ‘if we’re going to tackle this, what do we need? Who wants to be involved on these teams to come up with ideas? And then we’ll come back together and see how these pieces fit.’

People are the glaringly underused asset in news organisations. High IQ, enormous commitment, powerful skills of persuasion – these traits are focused on a very narrow field. This is a workforce trained to identify the salient facts in ambiguous data, analyse complex issues, and communicate in a way that resonates, and they really care that their organisation, their industry, survives. If there was ever a sector where the staff have the potential to find smart solutions to its challenges, this is it:

You need the best brains on it. ... that’s why there’s a knee jerk reaction to get the consultancies in. People are anxious they don’t have the brain that can sort out that level of complexity, but sometimes you don’t need an intellectual answer. It’s about the working answer and the pragmatic answer.

Two repeat comments stand out from this entire research process. The first goes along the lines of ‘I could do this because I am a journalist – they saw me as one of them.’ The second is ‘once we got an internal team on this issue, including some senior people, attitudes shifted, and we found solutions that got traction.’

The basic learning from this is make better use of the assets you have. The right insider will always have more credibility and impact than an outsider (but may well need to work in tandem with specialists from outside). Low-tech as they seem, task forces are probably the most effective way to tackle important projects (provided they are carefully staffed). Buy-in will be greater, as will the fit with culture and, in extension of both, the likelihood of successful implementation. Plus, in this way, management muscle is developed, and the next generation of leaders created.

Join things up: align all organisational elements around the same goals and treat all change initiatives as part of a unified transformation process

Where we've struggled is putting too much emphasis on one thing to solve the problems, where in fact it's when we've looked at all of them together it's been successful.

Jeff Bezos's 'Amazon flywheel' is widely admired. This is classic systems thinking, where success comes not from a single defining move or competence, but from a number of interlocking elements, all pushing towards the same end, which add up to a self-reinforcing system that gets better and stronger as each individual component improves. And each turn of the flywheel builds upon work done earlier, compounding the effort and resources invested. Effort is needed to set this up, but once the flywheel is spinning it continues to gain momentum and spin faster.

The media have increasingly recognised the symbiotic relationship between technical, creative, and business areas – we see that in the growth of the product function, the arrival of audience teams in the newsroom, and in the new Chief Revenue Officers on boards.

This combining of disparate elements needs to go further by meshing together the plethora of change initiatives running in the organisation. This means organisationally and structurally linking initiatives (e.g. via regular meetings of all project leads together). These need to be seen holistically, as part of a single system focused on the same set of goals. A major hack on culture change and getting diversity and inclusion initiatives to deliver is to ensure that all other initiatives running reinforce explicitly your objectives for wider cultural changes and greater diversity and inclusion. People will be looking for consistency, and if there are contradictions, commitment will be undermined.

If you invest in anything 'soft', invest in leadership

High-calibre leadership is the starting point for all dimensions of transition discussed here. If any investments are made in the soft tissue of the organisation, this is probably the place to focus.

The investments differ by level. At the top, one of the strongest points to emerge from this work is that, if that top team has the right roles, the right people in those roles, and those individuals are truly aligned around

the same goals, then the rewards are disproportionate - in terms of speed of transition, calibre of strategy, and transformation in the social architecture. These individuals do not have to agree – but they have to be able to find consensus ('disagree and commit' as Bezos would put it).

In terms of who should be in that top team, powerful expertise in data and product is essential, but their presence cannot absolve others from understanding digital. And if new roles are created around diversity, or 'supercharged HR', then those individuals need a real budget and responsibility, and to be part of key decision-making (too often these roles can be untethered, with dotted line reporting structures).

Top leaders also need to invest time and reflection in communication, especially now when people's experience of organisations is fragmented and stress means the bandwidth for taking messages on board can be limited. Assuming there is a culture change agenda around faster digital transition, achieving greater diversity, hearing more voices and including them, then set out clearly the principles you operate by – how people treat each other internally, how you view your audience or readers – and make this commitment active, so people believe in it and connect to it. And be transparent in communications. Plan your message. Avoid abrupt announcements on big issues: these will add to stress.

The leadership challenge in the middle was significant before COVID-19 but is even more so now. Pre-coronavirus, this research showed that individual feedback is a hot button issue, where there are major disconnects. For Gens Y and Z, feedback discussions are central to their current performance, future opportunities, and motivation. For their team leaders, feedback is the means to ensure output is right, and also that they can deliver on the OKRs and KPIs that they are increasingly tasked to reach.

With remote working, apart from the occasional town-hall, a video interaction with a team leader may be the only way an individual interacts with their organisation. Within teams, experiences have been mixed – some have flourished, but some have not. Leaders need to be highly empathetic and extremely sensitive to where people stand and be very careful with their one-to-ones. At minimum, clarify objectives at the outset (is this pastoral, about performance, or even a compensation discussion?).

Create serious career paths for digital talent, especially in hybrid roles

Some of the most strategically critical millennial talent is located in the new hybrid areas of the organisation where tech, editorial, and business knock up

against each other. These are tremendously complex roles that can require several different bases of expertise (journalism plus data science, product development plus journalism, for example), but often they are entirely unaccommodated by the organisation's existing career paths. Because they don't fit into long established progression routes, there is frequently no progression. These are often the individuals that understand the emerging digital trajectory for the industry, and what the organisation needs to do to master it, and who have an understanding of how different elements of the organisation sync together. Plus, their skills in project management mean they can also get big projects done. It is therefore really important that these roles are clearly defined, given a clear development path, and that their status and compensation in the hierarchy reflects their significance.

Some of the greatest management thinkers had profound doubts about the ability of large established firms to transform themselves. At the dawn of the era of internet disruption, Clayton Christensen suggested that the only option for legacy leaders was to set up a new organisation to seize the new digital opportunity and consign the old one to eventual decline. Peter Drucker famously stated that large organisations can never be versatile – they are effective through their mass not their agility. The media industry cannot afford these opinions to be borne out, and there are legacy organisations that are proving them wrong, which have established a secure footing in the digital world and are set for a viable future.

The big opportunity in the crisis that is COVID-19 is that it has shown that fundamental and fast change is possible – many organisations pushed through more change in weeks than they would normally have managed in the same number of years. That needs to continue, and the analysis in this book, I hope, provides insights on how to do this.

Interviewees

I am extremely grateful to all these interviewees on this list who found time to talk to me for this research. They are listed below with the position they held at the time of the most recent interview.

Particular thanks go to Ros Atkins, Polly Curtis, Espen Egil Hansen, Blathnaid Healy, Christina Johannesson, Claire Kennedy, Robin Kwong, Chris Moran, Torry Pedersen, Nick Petrie, and Mark Stencel, with whom I had many conversations and email exchanges. Their willingness to delve deeply into some of the more complex issues is hugely appreciated.

Martin	Ahlquist	Svenska Dagbladet, Editorial Manager Digital Subscriptions and Deputy Publisher
Mark	Alford	Sky Sports News, Director
Ros	Atkins	BBC News, Presenter Outside Source, Founder 50:50 Equality Project
Sanjeevan	Bala	ITV, Group Chief Data and AI Officer
Theo	Balcombe	New York Times, Executive Producer, The Daily and News
Nancy	Barnes	NPR, SVP News
Jane	Barrett	Reuters News Agency, Global Editor, Media News Strategy
Anna	Bateson	Guardian News and Media, Chief Customer Officer
Julia	Bezier	Bloomberg Media, Chief Product Officer
Alexandra	Borchardt	Hamburg Media School, Head, Digital Journalism Fellowship
Brian	Boyer	News Product Consultant
Alice	Breeden	Heidrick Consulting, Partner
LaSharah	Bunting	Knight Foundation, Director of Journalism
Fiona	Campbell	BBC3, Controller
Joanna	Carr	BBC, Head of Current Affairs
Suchandrika	Chakarabarti	Writer, broadcaster
Ben	Chapman	Amazon Audible, Head of Podcasts
Jean Ellen	Cowgill	Bloomberg Digital, GM Quicktake and Global Head of Strategy and Business Development
John	Crowley	First Draft, Editor
Polly	Curtis	Press Association, Managing Director

Scheherazade	Daneshkhu	Financial Times, Director of Editorial Talent
Inger	Djupskås	NRK, Organisational Development Manager
Ken	Doctor	Newsonomics, President
Stephen	Dunbar-Johnson	New York Times, President, International
Espen	Egil Hansen	Schibsted, Director, New Media Concepts
Charlotte	Eimer	BBC News, Head of Change
Joyce	Etutu	BBC World Service, Business Reporter/Producer
Anne	Foster	BBC, Head of Workforce Diversity and Inclusion
Michael	Frohlich	The Ogilvy Group, CEO
Vibeke	Fürst Haugen	NRK, Programme Director, National Content Division
Jeremy	Gilbert	Washington Post, Director of Strategic Initiatives
Simon	Gooch	Swedish Radio, Head of Insights and Industry Relations
Alison	Gow	Reach plc, Publisher at Laudable, Editor-in-Chief, Digital
Cory	Haik	Vice, Chief Digital Officer
Blathnaid	Healy	CNN, Senior Director EMEA, CNN Digital International
Jørgen	Heid	NRK, Head of Strategy
John	Holmes	Sky Sports, Senior Home Page Editor
Michelle	Holmes	Alabama Media Group, Vice President of Content
Nick	Hugh	Daily Telegraph, CEO
Jeff	Jarvis	CUNY Tow-Knight Center, Director
Christina	Johannesson	SVT, Project Manager Future Competencies
Nichola	Johnson	Guardian, Director of Project Management
Lyndsey	Jones	Financial Times, Executive Editor and Section Chief
Martin	Jönsson	Dagens Nyheter, Head of Editorial Development
Siv	Juvik Tveitness	Schibsted Media Group, EVP News Media
Sue	Kamal	Thomson Reuters, Global Head of Organization Development & Head of HR
Robbie	Kellman Baxter	Peninsula Strategies, Strategy Consultant
Claire	Kennedy	Axios, Vice President, People Operations
Ulrike	Koeppen	Bayerischen Rundfunk, Team Lead BR Data
Anna	Körnung	Mitt I, Editor-in-Chief
Robin	Kwong	Wall Street Journal, Newsroom Innovation Chief
Anne	Lagercrantz	SVT, Head of News Division
Johan	Lindén	SVT, Project Manager Future of News
Mark	Little	Kinzen, CEO and Co-Founder
Gary	Liu	South China Morning Post, CEO
Katie	Lloyd	BBC News, Development Director
Alex	Marshall	Sky News, Assistant Editor, Premium Video
Stephane	Mayoux	Psychotherapist
Douglas	McCabe	Enders Analysis, CEO
James	Mitchinson	Yorkshire Post, Editor

Chris	Moran	Guardian News and Media, Head of Editorial Innovation
Jo	Morrell	Telegraph Media Group, Managing Editor
Andrew	Morse	CNN, EVP
Ruth	Mortimer	Advertising Week, Managing Director, Global Education and Development
Raju	Narisetti	McKinsey, Publisher
Caspar	Opitz	Dagens Nyheter, Managing Editor and Deputy Publisher
Torry	Pedersen	Schibsted Media Group, Head of Editorial
Robin	Pembroke	BBC, Director Content Production Workflows
Kim	Perry	New York Times, Senior Editor, Digital Transition
Nick	Petrie	The Times, Deputy Head of Digital
Tom	Platt	Thomson Reuters, Digital Editor, Video and Pictures
Paul	Plumeri	Google, Brand Marketing Lead, Google News Initiative
Michael	Pooler	Financial Times, Industry Reporter
Katrin	Raade	NRK, Strategic Advisor
Jack	Ranson	BBC, Broadcast Journalist
Maria	Rimpi	Svenska Dagbladet, Redaktionschef
Niddal	Salah-Eldin	DPA, Deputy Editor-in-Chief
Kathleen	Saxton	The Lighthouse Company, Founder and CEO
Borrea	Schau Larsen	Schibsted, Director of Product Management, Editorial Solutions
Vivien	Schiller	The Aspen Foundation, Executive Director
Dhruvi	Shah	BBC, Journalist,
Helje	Solberg	NRK, News Director
Dag	Sorsdal	Aller Media, Group CEO
Tom	Standage	The Economist, Deputy Editor, Head of Digital Strategy
Mark	Stencel	Duke University, Co-Director, Duke Reporters' Lab
Tina	Stiegler	Schibsted, Head of Next Media
Matthew	Taylor	CNN, VP Human Resources
Emma	Thomasson	Reuters, Senior Correspondent
Inga	Thordar	CNN, Executive Editor, CNN Digital International
Chris	Turpin	NPR, VP Editorial Innovation and Special Projects
James	Tye	Dennis Publishing, CEO
Gerbert	Van Loenen	DPG Media, Directeur Campus
Katie	Vanneck-Smith	Tortoise Media, Co-Founder
Carolyn	Wakulchi	Uber, Head of People Development, Product
Sally	Warren	Psychotherapist
Joanna	Webster	Reuters, Deputy Global Editor, Visuals
Ase	Westrom	NRK, Administrativ Redaktør NRK News
Hannah	Yang	New York Times, Head of Subscription Growth
Anita	Zielina	CUNY, Director Strategic Initiatives Newmark J-School

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Lucy is a brilliant thought leader, and understands the synergies and complexities of digital transformation, and specifically what's at the heart of it all.

ANDREW MORSE, EVP AND CHIEF DIGITAL OFFICER, CNN WORLDWIDE

Once again, Lucy Kueng gives us deep insight into the most important drivers for the ongoing digital transformation in the newsrooms. The importance of leadership, culture and talent cannot be overestimated, and she combines her own research and practical experience in a brilliant way. It's a must-read for anyone working in the media industry.

SIV JUVIK TVEITNES, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, NEWS MEDIA, SCHIBSTED

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JAMES MITCHINSON, EDITOR, THE YORKSHIRE POST

Professor Lucy Kueng is Senior Research Associate at the Reuters Institute, University of Oxford and an international expert on mastering digital transformation. She advises leading companies worldwide and keynotes frequently at international conferences. She is Board Member of the NZZ Media Group, and has served on the board of SRG SSR, and of VIZRT, the media tech provider. She has held professorships at the University of Oslo, the Institute of Media and Entertainment New York (IESE), and the University of Jönköping. Previous books include *Going Digital: A Roadmap for Digital Transformation*; *Innovators in Digital News*; *Strategic Management in the Media* (winner of the AEMJM Media Management Book Award); *Inside the BBC and CNN*; and *When Innovation Fails to Disrupt: the Case of BBC News Online*. She holds a PhD and Habilitation from the University of St Gallen and an MBA from City Business School/Ashridge.

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