Chapter 2
From Doing Digital to Being Digital:
Exploring Workplace Adoption of Technology in the Age of Digital Disruption

Donna Murdoch
Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City, NY, USA

Rachel Fichter
Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

In this article, it is explored how digital transformation is reshaping existing conceptions of technology adoption in the workplace and, as part of this, why the adoption of enterprise technology often lags behind consumer technology. The effect of business intractability towards technological advancement is examined. Also, the inability to quickly disseminate new information about technological changes puts additional stress on adoption by employees. This article then continues into suggestions to improve adoption of technology based on changes in the workplace in attitude and culture, promoting digital literacy and the establishment of new programs to facilitate them.

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of much recent dialogue about digital transformation in the workplace is the assumption that inconsistencies in technology adoption across organizations can be attributed to asymmetries in the technical knowledge of employees (Corbett, 2007). These asymmetries are often attributed to differences in the generations and manifestations of their immersion in digital culture. While we do not disagree with this proposition, we argue that digital transformation in organizations is change for everyone, regardless of technical prowess. Learning how to use workplace technology in the age of digital transformation is

less about the development of the knowledge and skills required to perform specific technology-enabled tasks and increasingly more about reshaping the learner's mindset to navigate the uncharted waters of technological and digital culture successfully. Indeed, it is our perspective that individuals with a continuous learning mindset are proactively able to identify and utilize relevant learning to adapt to and grow or evolve with their work. This view is in line with Friedman (2017), who commented that "when the pace of change gets this fast, the only way to retain a lifelong working capacity is to engage in lifelong learning" (Loc. 506). To do this, learning and work must also be fully integrated so that individual employees can readily locate necessary knowledge and gain requisite skills to achieve performance goals.

Several factors are involved in developing a digital mindset. On an instrumental level (e.g., Mezirow, 1975), to facilitate the adoption of new technologies, organizations should be mindful of the current state of consumer technology and be prepared to emulate its design, interface, and seamless interactions. Because digital natives (i.e., those who grew up in the digital world) and digital immigrants (i.e., those who learned to use digital tools at some point during their adult lives) have, to a large degree, embraced consumer technology, it will be easier for them to adopt workplace technology if it is similar to what they use in their personal lives. But that is not enough. Organizations must also identify and address cultural barriers to digital transformation. Leaders should ask themselves and other organizational members what is inhibiting learning and adoption. In our experience, this is often due to insecurity around the broader change at hand, which results in actions that, while well-intentioned, actually hinder the desired outcomes.

As scholars and practitioners of adult learning and leadership in the corporate world, our goal is to invigorate a broader discussion about the impact of technological and digital transformation on resistance to and engagement in workplace learning. To accomplish this, we question the relevance of current—and what we consider to be instrumental—models of technology adoption in this age of continuous transformation. Broader theories that promote communicative learning are preferable, such as Argyris and Schön's (1974) theory of action and Pietersen's (2002, 2004) model of strategic learning.

We begin with an overview of the current business environment, which is being dramatically transformed by technological advancements. We discuss impediments to learning in the digital workplace, noting how discrepancies between consumer and enterprise technology contribute to learning resistance. Next, we review models of technology adoption and outline their limitations with respect to technological and digital transformation. For the purposes of this paper, we define digital transformation as "the use of technology to radically improve performance or reach of enterprises" (Westerman, Bonnet, & McAfee, 2014, p. 153). We argue that existing approaches reinforce an artificial separation between the organization and the individual, which can lead to frustration and resistance. We then move to a discussion of the theory of action (Argyris & Schön, 1974), a social constructivist view of how individuals interact on an ongoing basis to shape and evolve individual and organizational knowledge. Unlike models of technology adoption, we posit that Argyris's theory-in-use model offers a robust framework for understanding resistance to and engagement in the adoption of a digital mindset (what we refer to as being digital). We also look to Pietersen's (2002, 2004) model of strategic learning for additional insights into the challenges of learning and change, which have historically often been (mis)treated as one-time events that simply get "you stuck in a new place" (p. 2).

Next, using our practitioner lens, we apply our understanding of these theories to a hypothetical case of technology change. It is here that we see the emergence of a paradox of learning to be digital: As technological change becomes increasingly pervasive in the workplace, the adoption of a digital mindset is more critical than ever. However, anxiety around technology translates into individual and organizational defensive routines that contribute to learning resistance and prevent the being digital mindset from taking

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