

Transitions - Your New Future Is Now

By Peter Barraket

The Australian Treasurer Josh Frydenberg believes that Australia's ageing population is an "economic time bomb" which needs to be 'retrained' to meet the future demands that will be placed on the national workforce. While this may be true, it does not go far enough. The future is already upon us and the 'retraining' required applies to all workers. It is an inescapable truth that we have been experiencing unprecedented and prolonged periods of change for decades now. The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, knew this when he said: "Change is the only constant in life." While emotionally dislocating, the wonderful writer, Wolfgang Von Goethe, reminds us that, "Whoever in middle age, attempts to realise the wishes and hopes of his early youth invariably deceives himself. Each ten years of a (person's) life has its own fortunes, its own hopes, its own desires."

Why is the Australian Treasurer talking about the need for retraining? A 2017 McKinsey report titled, *Jobs lost, jobs gained: What the future of work will mean for jobs, skills, and wages*, claims that 75-375 million people may need to switch occupational categories and learn new skills. And as our Treasurer pointed out, 'aging populations' is one of the top trends driving change in the workplace. McKinsey nominated four others:

- Development and deployment of technology
- Investments in infrastructure and buildings
- Investment in renewable energy, energy efficiency and climate adaptation
- Marketisation of previously unpaid domestic work

People At Their Best has written about these disruptions (see: [Skills for the Future](#)), and claim, "Most organisations are struggling to keep up with the pace of change and this is creating deep skills-gaps that are exacerbated by the fact that rule-based tasks are being automated for efficiency and productivity gains. In fact, it is estimated that within the next two decades more than 50% of all professional roles will have vanished in a process known as the 'hollowing out of work' ...the biggest challenge for employees now and, into the future, is how to stay relevant and of value in the age of automation and outsourcing to cheaper labour markets - businesses have a stake in navigating this dilemma so as to maintain organisational relevance".

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On-top of all this there are societal trends like more people living alone and in smaller family units (Lynda Gratton 2010) and the megatrend of people moving away from material consumption and instead towards meaningful experiences.

All these observable changes are happening right now, demanding that we be more connected, inclusive, networked and collaborative than ever before. Enduring in nature, such social shifts require continual cognitive refocus to navigate and flourish during what Lynda Gratton describes as a period of “major transition”.

With so much talk about changes in the world of work, what I think is missing from the conversation is the personal transition or struggle people go through, either consciously or subconsciously, in such a volatile changing world.

The Difference Between ‘Change’ and ‘Transition’.

Reflecting on my own personal transitions, it becomes apparent that ‘change’ and ‘transition’ are different. William Bridges explores this in his book, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes*. He describes change as a defined and observable event like a new job, new house, new work policy, or new organisational structure. On the other-hand, he considers a transition to be a ‘psychological reorientation’ or ‘self-redefinition’ that people need to go through in order to adapt to a change - this is less observable.

Considering this further, if we utilise a change model like ‘ADKAR’ or ‘Kotters 8 Steps’ as a measure of success when implementing a change program, then we may ‘appear’ to have handled a change flawlessly but still leave the psychological transition unattended. Most change efforts are littered with ambiguity and a lack of buy-in, especially when poor communication and management practices exist. These can have devastating impacts and are some of the top contributors to mental ill-health reported by employees (see [*Mental Ill-Health Has Reached A Tipping Point*](#)). This is where the distinction of ‘transition’ becomes important. When a change occurs, a transition is essentially a death and rebirth process rather than a ‘mechanical modification’ and it happens much slower. During a transition, Bridges asserts that people undergo 3 phases:

1. An ending: the difficult process of letting go of an old situation
2. A neutral zone: suffering through the confusion of feeling caught in-between
3. A new beginning: launching forth again in a new situation

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It is important to note that entering the neutral zone can be a difficult period and Bridges advocates that we openly accept the need for this time, that we give in to it and stop struggling to escape it.

As we rush into 2020 and all the disruptive, dislocating and disorienting changes we will encounter, I wanted to set-out 10 skills that may help us navigate the psychological transitions a little more easily. What is vital is to remain flexible and adapt – as Charles Darwin stressed, it is not the biggest or the strongest or the smartest that flourish but those that are more able to adapt to changes in their environment. It is vital that we embrace fast up-skilling and re-skilling of our cognitive, emotional, social and interpersonal skills – this is the key to disruptive resilience – it is all about having a willingness to change rather than being wedded to: ‘the way I have always done it.’

Here are 10 skills you may apply to help during personal transitions:

1. Adjust your mindset: Identify moments of ‘internal resistance’ - for example ‘over-preparing’
2. Stop ‘getting ready’ to act: Instead of an endless preparation in which nothing substantive happens, practice being mindful of this and then take your first action
3. Build confidence: Understand what will increase your levels of self-efficacy, belief, and confidence. Start visualising the new beginning and yourself in it. Imagine what it will feel like when you have done what you are setting out to do. Visualise yourself as someone who is capable of do the things that are required
4. Resist rushing to the finish line: Transitions take time. Avoid being derailed by other paths where everything looks smooth and exciting. The reality maybe that what you need to do may be dull compared to the goal, however, the process is what will forge the new future that you imagine
5. Let go of past norms: Ask, “What do I need to give closure to, so that I can move forward?”
6. Brush up on critical or analytical thinking skills: These are vital for making informed choices and minimising blind spots
7. Improve business and digital literacy: These help you cross-over into emerging new categories of work. Undertake formal learning, coaching, mentoring or on the job training to bridge any skills gaps. Mr Frydenberg claimed 80% of education happens before Australians turn 21 – this suggests that our skill sets will not fully match current work requirements
8. Manage your own and others’ expectations: This helps build momentum, motivation and buy-in from stakeholders as to the real status of your transition
9. Stay social: Do not withdraw but instead, include others and embrace diversity of opinion
10. Maintain health: Build resilience, composure and control. Health can suffer during periods of transition so do all you can to stay physically fit and manage your stress

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