

Digital Workplace Impact

with Paul Miller



Episode 67

A Manifesto for the
Decade of Courage

Transcript



“When you’re talking about a living organization, empowered frontline and leaders with a presence, it’s important that we also talk about how do we give employees more voice and agency to drive this whole transformation, and decide how the future organization could be made more human at the same time helping organizations win in the marketplace.”

– Manisha Singh, Schneider Electric

In a lot of organizations, quite a lot of people have already been working away from the office and have already been working remote from other folks, and yet actually they’ve been really poorly served up to this point. So it’s really interesting, it’s only when us white-collar workers are suddenly disrupted that maybe we gain greater empathy for some of the frontline and field workers – the blue-collar workers.

– James Robertson, Specialist in Digital Workplaces and Employee Experience

As a response to COVID-19, DWG set out a powerful manifesto that seeks to look beyond the pandemic and explore how you can adapt your organization to suit global trends. It outlines 12 guiding principles for essential workplace transformation.

In this episode, James Robertson and Manisha Singh share their reactions to the manifesto and reflect on how its action points will apply to workplaces.

Together they discuss how the digital workplace has become the essential workplace, exchange recent experiences from around the world, and agree how giving employees “voice and agency” is the way forward.

Paul

So today’s episode is all around The Decade of Courage Manifesto, which is something I and my colleagues in DWG wrote a few months into COVID. It has 12 action points for essential workplace transformation, and you can download it off the DWG website and it’s also in the show notes. And today I have two guests: James Robertson, a specialist in digital workplace intranets, based in Australia, and Manisha Singh, who’s one of the senior digital leaders at Schneider Electric, based in the US – mainly because they both commented very favourably on the manifesto when I released it and I was really chuffed about that and thought it would be great to have a conversation with them: James from the expert consultant angle and Manisha from the practitioner side.

I think what came through to me was that there is a strong and precious future for human beings in human-centred organizations and so long as organizations want to interact with customers and

people that they deal with, they're going to have to have a strong experience and human experience inside organizations.

I think there's been this humanizing, empathetic, connecting, engaging effect from COVID. In fact, Manisha does say that the engagement stats in work are probably higher in 2020 than they have been for years because people have engaged with work in a way that they probably haven't had to before – you know, it's been a difficult year to kind of cruise through hasn't it, when you think about it? And this idea of purpose-driven organizations, I think we can kind of feel – I certainly do in talking to many organizations – they've found that their mission and vision statements this year have turned out to not just be words on a page but actually a lot more part of the DNA of the organization than they were expecting.

So, now for the episode. I'm delighted to be joined today by two guests with, I think, really distinctive and interesting perspectives on the topic of the day, which is this Decade of Courage Manifesto. I'm joined by James Robertson. James is one of the earliest starters in the field of the digital world of work. For almost 24 years he's run Step Two, a very well-known Australia-based consultancy that focuses entirely on intranets and the digital workplace. He's written three books on intranets and is now leading the global movement around digital employee experience – and James is joining us from Sydney today, which is great.

And my other guest is Manisha Singh and, just for everybody's context, Manisha, could you describe your role and what you're responsible for at Schneider Electric?

Manisha

At Schneider Electric I'm leading the digital HR transformation where my responsibility includes thinking about the employee experience of the future and how we can bring various complements of tools technology together to ensure, you know, what that employee experience of the future could be. We are also using the power of data, so I also lead the people analytics part of the equation and, as you know, digital is a continuously evolving field and that's why in your manifesto carbon action, there isn't a stated way in which we could go on the journey; we

all have to explore and have the courage to test, experiment and keep moving. Another part of my role is to look at the AI robotics and how we can bring it in purposively rather than allowing it to just come – one initiative at a time. So that's my role at Schneider.

Paul

Good, and great to have you here.

So, a question to start us off – and the background to this is that, when COVID was arriving in our lives, I started reflecting on what this meant for work and I think it's still (no pun intended), a work in progress – but what started off as a blog post became a kind of playbook, and eventually a manifesto. I set a policy around what was happening to the world of work and the subtitle for this is '12 Action Points for Essential Workplace Transformation' and I just wondered from each of you what does it mean, in your view, when the digital workplace becomes what the manifesto, at least, calls 'the *essential* workplace'. Manisha, would you like to start with your reflections on that?

Manisha

You know, what COVID has done, it has acted as a catalyst to massively accelerate the digital workplace agenda. In the last 15 years in various formative roles in people strategy or now more closely employee experience we've been championing the creation of the digital workplace – reimagining how people would work in virtual teams, right from the days of SharePoint to now in the era of Microsoft Teams or G-Suite – and then here comes COVID and, overnight, the work had to move from physical to digital only. And so there were no more questions on how, what or a business case, we had to overnight create this infrastructure, bandwidth, access to resources, to ensure that people can work digitally. It's really been a transformation which was in the making but COVID made it real –and digital is now the real place where the work happens. Physical is not available yet in many countries, although in China we're becoming normal, and it's essential now. It's not a 'nice to have'.

Paul

Great thank you, and James, what are your thoughts around this question of the digital workplace going from a sort of 'nice to have' – something that people were kind of adopting and adapting – to this idea of it becoming the *essential* workplace?

James

Well, I think Manisha put it really elegantly when she said that this is a thing that's been coming for a long time. I mean, Paul, you and I for a long time have been talking about how maybe we should take this digital thing seriously (laughs), certainly in large organizations but even in small ones – and I think what COVID has shown is that the digital experience for our employees is both really easy, but also really hard. The really easy thing is that, when it isn't optional, when it is essential, when it's necessary, actually it does work. That you *can* have meetings without being in person, you *can* collaborate together across geographies, you *can* allow people to have the flexibility they need to do what they have to in these difficult situations with digital tools to support them. But if that's the easy bit, I think it's also shown that this is also really hard in that, okay, so, I've worked with a lot of organizations over the last six months that have rapidly pivoted to being everyone working from home, only to discover that maybe the licences weren't available for people to connect, or maybe when they actually have to connect through the networks that are available, or through the security protocols, that, while in *theory* they could work from home, in practice there is a reason why they didn't before –because the tools are horrible and hard to use, and the experience is really clunky and incomplete. And I think it really shows that if we're to do this well, and to do it in a sustainable way for what could be quite some time, then we do need to look much more seriously and much more holistically at what is the digital workplace and the experience of the digital workplace that we're giving to staff. And that's exciting. I mean, I think that's what fuels the conversation we're going to have over the next half-hour, hour – it's what do we need to do to make this work incredibly well for everyone?

Paul

Yes, and just looking at the manifesto and the 12 points in there, I was really pleased to see the kind of comments you both made about it and wanted to get you on the podcast to speak about this. What was it about the manifesto that caught your attention overall? Was it a general thing or specific points?

Manisha

I still very vividly remember Paul, that it was bedtime in the US when it came into my feed and I was just doing one last crawl before going to bed, and I caught sight of the manifesto, 'The Decade of Courage', and

then I just opened it. To be honest with you, I was thinking it would be a lot of digital things but, you know, as I read the 12 action points, I felt there was a good mix of how to make the digital workplace part of the experience, but then you also talked about reimagining the organization as a living organization, and how to put leaders into this transformation, and I think there was a third cluster of things – you know, your 12 actions spoke to me in three clusters – and the third cluster was a tremendous focus on rehumanizing this whole shift to the digital workplace, and it appeared very comprehensive to me. So I have to confess, I read all of it, and as in the last four and a half months, we've all been pivoting, as James said, into more and more working from this digital workplace, some of us are working on new guideline policies, new ways of working, and what complements we should be looking at – and when I went through your manifesto and the 12 action points, I was like, you know, this looks like a very cohesive way of having a work area, workstreams to look at if we want to make this transition really work for everybody's wellbeing, for our organizational wellbeing, and for revival and recovery, and for employee wellbeing and rebirth.

James

Yes and for me, I guess it's the human aspects that have been driving me in the work I've done over the last 20 years. I mean, the bits of my job I enjoy the most is when I get to go out and spend time out at client sites with staff doing actual work. That's the exciting thing, the motivating thing, because you can see they're humans who are trying to do a great job, in whatever it is they're doing out on the frontline or in the back office – but often held back by tools and also, I think, to a certain extent, just overlooked as humans. And I think that this is something again that, Paul, you and I've talked about for a little while now, which is there's an ethical component to this which says that *ethically* we should be giving, for example, the same equity of experience across roles within the organization. And why should we be doing that? Because organizations are made up of humans. And that really jumped out to me – that empathy for the individual, alongside those bigger-picture transformational things about the location of work and patterns of travel and all of that; just bringing it back to the human, which is the heart of where I'm at.

Manisha

And the human piece, James, that particular empathy that you're making, is really so important. So, if you look at the crisis we're in today, there's been extraordinary effort by every individual in our organization to keep Schneider going, to keep Schneider winning, to take our communities and customers along. And while there's a tremendous digital piece like you were saying, James – overnight more bandwidth, more VPN connections, more voice video conferencing, tools and licences, what has been the key differentiator is all of these people connecting one-on-one or one-to-many in a very unique way, solving big problems – so really the human is at the centre and technology is an enabler.

Paul

Yes, and one of the things I'm thinking about is that – and I think it's one of the reasons why I was attracted into the world of technology in work is – it's actually a disruptive change agent in work, so if you think of organizations up until probably 20 years ago, the way work happened was fairly, kind of, similar. It hadn't changed fundamentally – and then technology came into the workplace; email systems and then the arrival of the internet, then collaboration and then mobile technologies – and all of these disruptive systems of change. And one of the things that's fascinated me is that – and we've all heard it for years and years – is saying to people: “Look, you can work wherever you want to unless your work is delivering a physical activity that can't be portable, like a restaurant. You can actually distribute the work wherever you want.” But people would endlessly say: “No, that's not us, we don't work like that. We really value our physical proximity with each other”, etc., etc. But then through the crisis, people have been forced to see whether it's possible to work in, what I'd call, a fully distributed way – and actually they've discovered: “Wow! We can! It does work. It's not perfect, but it does work.” The organization's discovered productivity is up, and it doesn't want to go back to where it was.

And I wonder, why does it take a complete crisis like this to allow people to make this sort of deep-level cultural change in the way that work happens? And if they can make this change, what other changes might be possible? That's really quite a tough question... I don't know if either of you want to try and respond to it?

James I guess I would challenge what you've just said to some degree, Paul, to say that actually in a lot of organizations, quite a lot of people have already been working away from the office and been working remote from other folks – and yet actually they've been really poorly served up to this point. So it's really interesting, certainly when us white-collar workers are suddenly disrupted, that maybe we gain a greater empathy for some of the frontline and field workers, the blue-collar workers, that actually have been rather poorly served.

So I got to spend time talking with carers out in the community, looking after people with disabilities or aged people – and their experience is terrible. You know, yes, they have mobile phones, but they don't have the intranet access. They can't manage their rosters. All of their policies and procedures are printed paper in the boot of the car. So I think there's that William Gibson quote at play here :“The future is already here, it's just unevenly distributed.” And that, I think, for me is kind of the exciting thing in that this disruption to us white-collar workers is now actually shining a light on the whole organization to say: “Well actually, maybe we do need to support everyone better now than we have in the past with these digital tools.”

Paul Yes, and that reminds me of the tenth of the action points. Actually, the manifesto went through various different iterations and it started off as 10 points, then through feedback it ended up as 12 points – and one of the ones that got added in was to: “Saturate the frontline with the most advanced technology and services possible, enabling and supporting and empowering this essential firstline workforce of your organization”, getting exactly into what you've been saying, James ...

James Yes.

Paul ... and Manisha, inside Schneider, do you feel that is something you as an organization have done historically or are doing, or plan to do – getting the best technology out to the frontline of the organization?

Manisha Yes, that's a powerful call to action in the manifesto, which was really illuminating. I would say that pre-COVID, also because of digital transformation and the pressure of automation, we were already imagining the role that frontline is going to play in helping create

solutions which our customers need. So there was awareness and there was effort in trying to bridge the digital divide as you call it, Paul, in your manifesto, between the frontline and the higher elite in the organization in terms of giving them coherent employee experience tools with which they can do their jobs really well. But COVID really accelerated it. For example, our customer service centres: you know, they had to shift overnight, sometimes in some countries perhaps at 8 hours notice, to shelter at home, to a virtual way of working. Now, those were the people who already had started to get some advanced tools but then we had to really accelerate it.

So I would say that, just like the rest of the world, Schneider was already good in terms of your first question; it's a pretty federated, global organization and we have a multi-hub strategy, where we have three global headquarters and our leaders are distributed. So, quite a significant portion of the organization was used to working remotely and working with flexibility. But we are taking that to the frontline at a pace that is only now desired – so COVID has helped a lot.

Paul Yes, and just looking at the action points, are there particular ones, James, that you feel are the most important? And do you see any kind of prioritization in your mind?

James I think it's a couple of things that Manisha has touched upon. I definitely do see that there is importance in recognizing that, particularly in larger organizations like Schneider but also others and even smaller ones, some organizations have kind of kidded themselves that they operated just within one or two buildings. But that's never really been the case and so I think there is something really important from the top down to say: "Let's work in that more federated model, let's push out decision making, let's empower the organization and all levels in it to take action in a more flexible way." So I think that is crucial and the leader behaviour and stuff that goes with that.

I do think also, from the bottom up, there is that question that you pull out in the manifesto about digital literacy, something that seemed really dawky – you know, this is the thing where you taught your parents how

to use a phone. That was what digital literacy was – teaching them how to turn on a computer! The digital tools we've got now are immensely more powerful – but they're complex and not magically used in effective ways, and so I think there has to be a ten-fold focus on digital literacy at a much deeper level in the sort of direction Elizabeth Marsh has been looking at for some time. I think there's a lot of insight to be gained from her on this.

Paul And Manisha are there particular points that you think are the most important out of the 12 and any kind of prioritization in that?

Manisha So this is my time to share. In a way, I fell in love with digital and technology, and I started to become more and more of an advocate of digital transformation. If you look at my career, I started in organization development, you know, with a lot of passion for organization development and enabling a kind of biological living organization that, if you want to drive a change or if you want to create a winning organization, a high-growth organization, which is a precondition to unleash the tremendous potential and hope with which every employee joins the corporate, you really need to have a system which is more living, which allows people to trade. So digital had that power to enable those conditions and that's why I started to become an advocate.

So when I look at your manifesto and 12 action points, more than prioritization, I think, like I said, the three clusters are there. One, there is tremendous focus on this whole digital as an enabler, with the digital workplace as the essential workplace. I think the two other clusters that you bring need to be a fine balance if we are to harness the power of this shift that COVID is kind of enabling for all of us to be in a reimagined arc with flatter organizations and leaders leading from their digital present, their behaviour. And then there is the last bucket of *hyper-human* – and you say this very well, Paul, when you say we need to manage this hyper-digital, hyper-human – and I would say we are at the organizational angle and that we need to take it along.

There is one that if I *have* to pick one, would be that the human is the centerpiece, because this is one piece that we are all still unravelling. While we do, at a feeling or a thinking level, know that's the right thing to do – a more ethical way of evolving digital – but then how do you

incorporate that into your actions and workforce plan and strategies?
So that it really becomes true as we move along.

Paul

Hmm, and one of the questions I've been sort of wrestling with a little bit is that we're seeing this acceleration of automation, robotics, AI – and I felt until the beginning of this year fairly confident that the human-centric organization working alongside technology was the way that we would evolve and think I kind of believe that's where we will go eventually.

But I think there's quite a lot of pressure now coming from technology to replace more human beings and I interviewed somebody on DW24 last year called Andrew Yang, who at that time was a US presidential candidate and he'd stood all on the basis of universal basic income, around trying to protect the US workforce from being automated out of work. What's your feeling about that? Let's say you're a financial services organization and you're faced with questions around people or technology, how do you ensure that you keep it as a human-centred organization when, if you like, the spreadsheets might suggest, well, we can introduce technology, robotics, AI here and actually get rid of another swathe of people? How do you balance that sort of ethical question, as you brought it up before James?

James

Well, I think it can come down to something really simple and really pragmatic, which says that the quality of your customer experience is in reality limited by the quality of your employee experience, and obviously the *digital* employee experience since the digital bit is the thing that we're all mostly responsible for. Because the reality is that if you ring up your bank and talk to someone in the call centre and you ring them up three times, then the chances are you will get three different answers. Now, you could say: 'Okay, we're going to replace the human that you've been talking to by a bot.' But it turns out that banking is rather complex and maybe the bot takes longer to train than the humans and so, instead, maybe what we should be saying to Manisha's point, is if call centres are the front face out into the land of customers, then maybe we need to be thinking more about how do we support the humans and, in particular, how do we digitally support those humans that provide the customer experience? And so, we know that organizations care about customer experience. We've now learnt

that lesson, we're not always ideally great at doing it from organization to organization, but we know that's inescapable. So I think when we do that – we focus on customers – that will actually end up forcing us to focus on employees and not just the tools that sit within the organization that may or may not automate stuff.

Paul Okay that sounds good and Manisha, any thoughts you have around this point of keeping your organization as human-centred rather than technology-centred as possible?

Manisha Ah, this is a question that I spend quite a lot of time thinking about, pondering, wading through the research and the viewpoints available. And at one end, like James said, it could be there has to be a pragmatic and simple approach to solve it under the umbrella of some guidelines. But at the same time, you know, businesses are rethinking in digital, and COVID added complexity to which customer segments are going to grow, what parts of the business are going to grow. So what are the jobs to be done in the future and how will these jobs be done? What skills will become more relevant and how do I upskill people or help them to reskill into those growing domains vs the ones that will be getting left behind? So, in your example of financial services, there were retailers, tellers in the bank and, as the digitization happened, the first wave of digitization, people thought their jobs would go but then they became relationship managers. And now, I remember reading about a financial services firm; as they transitioned into COVID, they had to convert their relationship managers into consultants, consulting customers on complex financial solutions, so these role transitions or transformations will need to be taught and proactively kind of waded through as we are creating the digital transformation model for them. We need to think about what will be the human model and lastly, like James said, we need to think about augmenting. So in the new way of working for our business, for XYZ function, how can we augment humans to help our businesses to grow but at the same time this whole human piece is taken care of.

James And I think if I can follow on from that, Manisha, what you've highlighted is why we need a diversity of voices in this discussion and this is one of, I guess, the challenges of throwing down to the community, which is to say: "Okay, this time round we need to have

more people involved in this discussion than the usual suspects of before” – which is the former IT folk, the intranet folk, maybe even the internal comms folk. But actually, these conversations are meaningless without that HR view that you expressed Manisha, and the physical workplace view that Paul you capture so effectively in the manifesto. Because unless we take a truly multidisciplinary approach to this, and genuinely this time around, I don't think we're going to make any more progress than the last couple of tries at this. This is a really holistic set of questions and I don't think any of us have all the answers.

So how are we going to work together as thinkers and doers to really shape things? How do we want to be working? And how do we want people to be working within our organizations of today and tomorrow?

Paul

I think this is a kind of year that I've never experienced in work. I don't think I've ever been working during a period when there's been so much intensity of work, transformation and change happening. It almost feels to me like we've kind of crossed a river. Somebody said to me: “2020 feels like the future arrived early”, with all the challenges and intensity of that. But it feels like we're now on the other side of a river that we kind of knew was coming. There's this sense that work was going to be liberated from certain constraints that it's always been in – cultural norms, habits – and now we're in a different kind of geography. And I think organizations, quite understandably, are still sort of reeling from it, trying to adjust to it, get their heads around what feels like a several year kind of process.

I think there was a sense at the beginning maybe that COVID would be something we'd experience and then kind of move through but, actually, I think we all know that the world we're in now is fundamentally different. And I'm just wondering what that means, because I think one of these weird things I've noticed with the virus effect on organizations is, we sort of know how the virus affects human bodies but it also affects organizations and reveals, if you like, the system, health, immunity, agility, flexibility, resilience, all these kind of qualities – and there was a fascinating thing said to me by somebody yesterday, which was that if you look at the sectors in the economy that are really being damaged through the virus, they're, in this person's view, sectors that were already dying; it's just been accelerated. So

you could argue that about physical retailing, business, air travel, maybe the idea of leisure tourism in an environmentally conscious world – I look at the way I've travelled throughout my life without even really paying much attention to its impact – and has the virus sort of accelerated in some industries, you know, how they function? I am not sure if that rather rambling (laughs) statement provokes any thoughts from either of you?

James

I agree with all of that and we are going to see massive structural changes. What's interesting, though, is that there are some industries that have been massively hit that, well, we hope are *not* dying. So, if I go back, I guess, to last year for me, I spent some time in aged care homes, again as part of work, pre-COVID. And, as we know, aged care homes have been slammed by the virus and a huge disproportion of deaths have happened within aged care homes. And so this is a sector under massive pressure right now and I would argue that actually it's a sector that just wasn't sufficiently thought-out from a digital perspective amongst other issues, because they have not had the resilience to your point, Paul, that they needed to have. You know, when I went off and talked with people, the nurses in aged care homes had clunky systems that gave them 100-page clinical patient records that they were required to read at the start of every shift – so if they had 20 patients that they were looking after, then somehow they were supposed to read 2000 pages of poorly formatted stuff. They're using cordless phones to communicate and there's a buzzer that the patient presses if they want a glass of water or they're having a fit. Now, in that environment, when we helped them talk about what does a day in their life look like in the future, some of them said: "Being paid on time!". And so it's just this extraordinary environment in which they have been rather forgotten and thus, when this has hit, now they're really struggling. So I think there are some areas that COVID has shone a light on that says: "Actually, these industries we can't have die and digital is going to be a part of that, an important part, of keeping them functioning in the way that they need to be in these really difficult times."

Paul

Yes, and, you know, aged care homes are a place I've spent quite a bit of time. When you talk about it, because my mum was 98 – she died six weeks ago, in her care home – and when I think about it, actually I

used to jokingly say to her when I was visiting that there was always a buzzer going off somewhere! It was just like this constant sort of beat. I mean the staff are incredible and the job they're doing – and I think that whatever you can do, James, to bring that world into a digital age, would be fantastic.

Manisha, does that spark any thoughts or stories from what you've noticed in the last few months? Because I think we've all noticed examples and stories, maybe from our own organizations or worlds around us, that have really brought home, maybe as James was saying, the deficiency of technology or the power of technology.

Manisha

So there are many stories but the one that's coming to my mind is, even at Schneider – you know, we are into providing access to energy and automation of energy – so, many of our services were identified as critical or essential services. And what we have seen is the appetite in our customers to go digital on the energy management; multilocation entities have gone tremendously, significantly up. So one side of the story is that really they want to accelerate digital at a much faster pace, to adopt smart factories and things like that. But on the other side, there are some customer segments which are really low in terms of like travel. You've talked about airline, oil and gas – some of these are suffering. One area which was growing pre-COVID and has been hit hard by COVID is the commercial real estate, right? It was growing. I think the world was going round on that, from remote working to core location. There was not enough point of justification and now suddenly commercial real estate is, if everybody from Google to Facebook, Twitter to Schneider, is just freelance, everybody's talking about how much a physical space is really needed. So there are all kinds of examples out there and I think, as somebody said, it's an extraordinary time, an intense year and right from leaders to the last employee in the organization, everybody has to figure out: What is my role going to be in this situation to help my company survive? And to reimagine what that new growth path will be – and then how do we help accelerate that?

Paul

Yes, and I think that, looking through the action points in the manifesto, the one that really grabs me is the eighth one, which is about reimagining and redesigning organizations from machines to living

systems, from organizations to organisms. And I'm off for a writing retreat for a couple of days to finish off the book that my colleague Shimrit James and I have coming out shortly, called *The Nature of Work*, about work as a living system... and I think that one of the things we're going to discover is that the way organizations are structured doesn't work in a living age.

I think that one's important and the other I think is really interesting is this experience that leadership have had of accelerated decision-making through the crisis, where the decision-making and the leadership got connected *back* into the frontline – and it's really struck me how liberating leaders have found that experience and how much they don't want to lose it.

So a question for you both is, what do you feel has been left out of the manifesto that deserves to be included? Because it's certainly not comprehensive.

James

I guess for me, it probably comes back to that word 'experience' and just that sense also of the lived experience, because I think, for example, it's one thing to say that we're going to saturate the frontline with the most advanced technology and services possible, but that's a very functional view and it's not wrong, but I think it's missing a trick. Because I think what we *should* be saying is that we should be providing the best possible digital *experiences* to our frontline staff, because that is a much bigger view that says: "Yes, no kidding, we should be giving them the best tools because actually they're the most important staff, no question about it." But, it's how we deliver them and actually how they work together, because it turns out that getting Office 365 and Workplace by Facebook and Workday and corners of Slack and bits of Salesforce... that actually getting more technology, which is what we've *madly* been doing over the last five years, is not inherently better than less. So there's a degree of: How does this work? But then there's that human component, bringing it back to to what Manisha has really been talking about. I think that's what I would challenge you to do, maybe put in a 13th thing in around the digital experience.

Paul

Yes, I think I just want to rewrite number 10 now, so it's much better. It's like saturating the frontline could feel like drowning the

frontline in the most advanced technology – so they don't know which way is up (laughs). That's great.

- James (Laughs). That's not what you had in mind, of course.
- Paul No, and Manisha what would you feel you'd like to include?
- Manisha So, as I said when I first read it, Paul – and I think this still remains very important – what I think about is employee experience, and I've been on this journey for 15 years, right, from the intranet SharePoint days to now – it's the comprehensive employee experience. When I think about that, it's meaningful work, meaningful relationships and giving employees back “voice and agency”. So, voice and agency is the point that I shared with you in my comment, and I think when you're talking about the living organization, an empowered frontline and leaders being present, it's important to talk also about how do we give employees more voice and agency to drive this whole transformation, to decide how the future organization could be made more human at the same time as helping the organization to win in the marketplace – to give them more voice and agency to decide on this complexity of tools that James was mentioning. What is the right combination and what value do they need to do their jobs better rather than just because we are a Microsoft shop, or a G-Suite shop, or we have Salesforce. In that, we actually burden them because these frontline employees are also the ones who are *doing* most of the work and then they have the burden of learning and working on these tools, which instead of enabling them becomes an additional job on top of an already productive day that we expect. So, to me, it's voice and agency. In the last two decades there's been, if you see employee engagement stats, since the day I entered HR in 2003 to now – If we just leave the COVID time; I think in COVID time engagement has shot up a bit, and only in one or two years will we come to know whether it was a temporary phenomenon driven out of the whole sense of survival or if it's really a new thing that we're seeing – so if we leave them out, employee engagement for discretionary efforts have stagnated to 32% or 30%, 35% the world over, no matter which geography you pick up. There's been a sense of powerlessness or what I call “learned helplessness” that employees in big, massive

organizations have come to acquire, saying: “We are just a cog in the wheel and the change is really driven from somewhere else”. And in the many, many transformations I've been part of – because digital is a new force which is forcing us to transform but in the past there has been globalization or other forces which were asking organizations to change – what I've learned is that it's not the best-laid strategy that made it much easier, and it's not really the best-laid tools, or only the most superstar kind of leaders which matter; what matters is how empowered employees felt they were to partner, collaborate and harness that collective intelligence which led to the change the organization wanted to do – and it's the same situation today. So, voice and agency, Paul.

James But isn't that lovely? “Voice and agency.” I've just madly scribbled it down on a piece of paper. That's my takeaway for the evening!

Paul It's great.

James Because I think, most of our infections in Australia from COVID came from the *Ruby Princess*, which I think most people have heard of – the ill-fated cruise liner. Everyone was let off without actually testing them and it has just gone through a whole inquiry around this and there must have been 100, 200, 300 people involved across multiple organizations. And to Manisha's point, that idea of the “learned helplessness”... “Well, this seems like a bad idea to be letting them off, but I'm just a cog in a wheel in a huge machine. I'm sure someone else knows what they're doing. It'll all be okay.” And you think, should not many people have had that voice and agency to go: “Actually, I'm just going to flag that this seems like a stupid idea... maybe we need to keep them on the ship.” So, yes, beautifully put Manisha.

Paul Yes, and I think that when you start to think in this sort of living system, living organization way, you know, all parts of a living system come with their own intelligence and agency... rather than being a cog in a machine – and you might feel like quite a small cog in a machine, and therefore think “Why does what I think or why does what I do matter?” It's interesting.

So, just as we come towards the end... I called this ‘The Decade of Courage Manifesto’ and, for better or for worse, towards the end of last

year I said: "This is going to be the Decade of Courage. We're going to need courage and we're going to need to *encourage* ourselves." Encourage each other I think is really important. And I wonder for each of you, what does courage look like in work? Because I think it's a really important and unused resource.

Manisha

Courage to me really is to acknowledge that we *don't* have all the answers. Courage also means to depend on partners and on collective intelligence. This is a word I have started to use a lot more and a lot more responsibly, to create this collective intelligence ecosystem within the organization and even outside the boundary of the organization – and Paul, you've been a part of my collective intelligence network from which I learn a lot. So in each one of our roles, how do we create this? And we pivot. And also courage to create quite a few experiments, maybe contradictory to each other, often with limited resources and agility. But all three things that I'm saying are not always practical in the corporate world. You know, let's take the frontline sales person... I want to create two groups: to one group I want to give all this combination of tools; to the other group I just want to give one tool – and then see how it goes. And I want to do all of this when I'm in the COVID environment when I have limited resources and I want to make the decision fast so courage is, how do we take all of this? And lastly, how to kill what's not working, accept failure and move on quickly, no matter how much we love it.

Paul

That's great, thank you. And James, what does courage look like to you in work?

James

Yes, I think those are all really important points and so I guess I would just supplement them by saying I think we need to collectively and individually take the courage to deliver what I would call "100% solutions"... so rather than a lot of 80, or pragmatically, actually only 50% solutions. That is, there was a need within the organization and we delivered a tool that was kind of okay and we gave a bit of training about how to use the tool, but not necessarily why. And we didn't really take any extra effort to design the tool or actually spend the time with the people we were inflicting this tool on to really understand what they needed. So I think, for me, there's this idea that if we're going to take a more purpose-driven approach – which I think this manifesto is very much an example of – then we have to take the courage to actually

deliver the outcomes we are saying need to be delivered. If we are going to help the frontline, then let's *properly* do that. If we are going to support knowledge workers, let's really do that. And so that's, I think, the courage to go beyond the minimal to the best possible and, to Manisha's point, recognizing, of course, that we don't have all the answers now. But we can certainly, I think, try harder than we have in the past.

Paul Yes, thank you, and anything you'd just like to add before we bring things to a close, Manisha?

Manisha I loved what James says – you know, the purpose-driven approach and how do we cultivate that sense of purpose in everything that we do? And I also loved, James, when you said “beyond the minimal to what's best possible” and you said it very simply – but it's so important, let's really do it. So, all those things are very simple but let's, at leadership level, let's get intentional about really navigating through this time and even after that in a very purposeful way, keeping humans at the centre.

You know, the positive part of COVID is just tremendous trust in the organization. There's tremendous resilience and a collective sense of being which has emerged – by going through the shared difficult experience. Now, how do we retain the good of it and use it to navigate the digital transformation world in a meaningful way?

Paul James? Final reflections?

James I do think, to Manisha's point, that there are absolutely positives to come out of this experience and maybe one of them is that it's helped us – you know, the three of us and our colleagues, professionals in this space – maybe it's helped us to find something that senior leaders can really care about... and I say that kind of glibly. But, you know, I've written three books on intranets, but do I get the sense that senior leaders care about intranets? No. But do they care about Office 365 and the digital workplace? Well, some do, don't get me wrong, but largely no. But do they care about the digital experience of staff? Do they care about the issues that you're raising in this manifesto then? Well, yes, actually, I think they either do or they can, so I think this does give us a new way over the coming year and years, and obviously decade, to connect better with our senior leaders and to

provide them with something stronger or more meaningful that they can rally around – and I think that's exciting.

Paul Great thank you. And I'm going to conclude with a sort of a callout to anybody listening to this who's part of an organization who can contribute to this: I think there's a real tremendous opportunity that James has outlined in care homes for technology that really would support the people living there and the people doing incredible work caring for those people. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have them served with really incredible technology? And it's a huge business opportunity and a huge need. So that's a sort of entrepreneurial shoutout... to anybody who's got the resources to do that. I can imagine what it would look like without knowing it in detail.

So, thank you so much, Manisha and James, for joining from different parts of the world and different time zones – and, yes, it's given me courage. It's encouraged me and it's been a delight talking to you both.

James Pleasure has been mine.

Manisha Thank you Paul for being an evangelist and a faith and, you know, and thinking ahead on behalf of all of us. Thank you.

Paul Digital Workplace Impact is brought to you by the Digital Workplace Group. DWG is a strategic partner covering all aspects of the evolving digital workplace industry through membership, benchmarking and boutique consulting services. For more information, visit digitalworkplacegroup.com.

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