People Take Back the Power in the Next Industrial Revolution

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The first industrial revolution used mother nature to mechanize production through water and steam. The second found mass production through electric power. Electronics and information technology was the third, which significantly contributed to the automation of the production process. Now, the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) is the digital era, which blurs the lines between physical and digital, professional and personal, work and home, have and have-nots. However, this trajectory has been short circuited by people power, therefore, the next industrial revolution will not solely be focused on technology but on the people. This article explores how COVID has accelerated and transformed the once de-humanised 4IR of digital technology, back to a human-centric approach, that morphs the two and gives the power back to the people.

COVID – The Accelerant of 4IR

Both people power and technology usage has been ramp-up due to another, potentially more powerful innovation and transformative phenomenon- the virus. COVID has arguably projected more people, more quickly (or forcefully) into the digital world and this current industrial revolution. QR codes, virtual check-in, online ordering, touchless delivery, remote smart devices to work from home (WFH), entertainment on demand while in lock-down or on quarantine, have empowered the everyday person. Due to the challenges the virus presented, some voices also seized the opportunity to be louder and push their opinions further with the facilitation of the digital era. People have never been more vocal and thanks to advanced digital technology have more mediums and platforms to express themselves. Interestingly though, the preferred approach for expressing their declarations is a very old technology- protesting, in person, on foot, outside and together (albeit the masses were rallying together with the use and support of the digital age). What did they want? Freedom to be human and everything that means such as being connected, heard, seen, felt, touched, involved, engaged and critically self-efficacy. All these very personal traits and emotions that digital technology alone left us feeling cold and COVID found us isolated from needed an overhaul. Increasing demand for humanity is driving the next industrial revolution to bring back morality.

Not all People Have Power

Not even an industrial revolution of info-access, online connectivity, hi-speed WIFI and user-friendly tech from a plethora of devices all driven from the palm of your hand anywhere at any time, could bridge the gap between the disproportionate negative impacts of COVID on our workplaces and living situations for women and Indigenous people. If anything, it may have made it much worse both for our 'old' antiquated workspace and the 'new norm' for these groups of people in the WFH ecosystem. The challenges include financial inequality with increased job insecurity, majority of caring responsibilities and house-hold chores, higher infection risk rates, increased cases of family domestic violence, increased isolation and mental health issues. These are real and significant challenges, with women reporting feeling they have gone back in time, stuck at home- often with children, as the educator and/or homemaker again. On the other hand, for some, the revolution was a unique and masterful opportunity.

Careful What we Wish For

The saying 'you can't see the forest through the trees', meaning you do not know you are in something until you are out of it, is true for many on the remote working circuit. We did not know how much we either hated or loved the traditional office environment until it was taken away. Sure, everyone loved WFH, but when it was 'our choice' and it best suited our needs of whatever we wanted to get done- additional to still being paid for working that day. However now there is no escape from WFH. For many, our eyes have been opened to what restrictive, controlling and archaic spaces we had to conform to. The ground-breaking work-life-balance and flex experiment of remote working was another revolution- again credits go to the 4IR and COVID. Work cultures that demanded long hours in uncomfortable footwear and crammed commutes sucked, but at least we were doing them with other people and thankfully, most critically, could turn off. Now we are forced to be always on. Technology has enabled this opportunity, but the challenge is that we are going it alone in isolation, connected to our devices but disconnected socially. Technologies aimed at bringing us together have facilitated us to be torn apart and those most at risk are being left out and left behind. A perfect storm that increases the challenges of those already disadvantaged.

The opposition to this is, as a result of humans being meaning making machines, the digital revolution and COVID have left many searching for greater meaning to it all and questioning what was so great about how we did it before. For example, we hear and see; the great resignation, the great vacation and the great escape. People leaving their jobs, leaving their city locations and leaving the 9 to 5. All this could read positively (and it is for many) but there are still those without the privilege, luxury, financial freedom or access to those choices.

What Happened and What's Next?

Our current world of digital technology changed our connectivity, but it was COVID that changed our connections which had us rethink our purpose and place, providing people with unique opportunities- but not for everyone equally. Digital technology may have been the first force that dramatically changed our physical connection to both our work environment and with others/our community, but it was the force of COVID that permanently transformed people through our social interaction and relationships. The next industrial revolution has in many ways been given its biggest opportunity from the virus, as how we live and work with COVID has propelled the movement and enforced the need for humanity to regain its rightful place as the focus. Power to the people- all people.

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Giulia is the Group Manager Diversity & Organisational Effectiveness at St Barbara Mining Limited. She has over 12 years' experience working in complex and challenging environments as a senior leader specialising in stakeholder management and culture transformation. Giulia demonstrates a passion for the mining industry, specifically developing an engaged and diverse workforce based around creating inclusive communities.