Managing Oneself in the digital age

"Now I'm the Oxbridge alumnist on the blocks with the youngest.
Round here there are rocks and abundance.
But there is not enough keys for the locks in the dungeons.
Shots in the hundreds, lots of them youngers are clockin' them numbers.
(...)
How does this happen?
How is there so many speakers and no voices?
The loudest is rapping and the crowd is just clapping."

George the Poet, Wotless

There may not be many parallels between George The Poet and Peter Drucker, but they both pinpoint an interesting phenomenon: everyone is expected to be a success in the knowledge society, but yet this an impossibility. Some might experience early success and only face failure as they become managers or leaders, others will struggle just finding where they belong. Left are the few that will find the keys to the locks in the dungeons.

New generations are meeting a confusing reality, where the demand for skills is rapidly evolving. Consequently, students are seeking more than tangible skills out of their education. For example, [the most popular class at Stanford is not computer science](#), but one called Designing your life, which 17% of seniors enroll in. While '[software is eating the work](#)' students in one of the top tier schools for computer science choose to learn about: gratitude; generosity, self-awareness and adaptability - because these are the skills that they perceive as necessary to equip them for a successful career. Drucker rightfully predicted that knowledge workers would need this type of self-understanding in order to manage themselves because their employments would be short-lived and many. Moreover, in strong contrast to the organisational career planner departments in the 50s and 60s a popular narrative today is that individuals must become entrepreneurial and plan their careers as the '[start-up of you](#)'. In sum, the idea of 'Managing Oneself' is diffused into the public consciousness and a myriad of self-development courses and books echo Drucker's classic essay. But one aspect has changed to Managing Oneself

since 1999. In 2014 [39% of the world population were online and 23% had smart phones](#). Technology is increasingly being incorporated into our lives, which creates new possibilities also for how we manage ourselves.

The whole is always smaller than its parts

In the the digital age the sociologist [Gabriel Tarde's work has gained new meaning](#). Tarde argued that understanding individuals' micro-behaviours (in his terminology monads) rather than the aggregate behaviour of groups leads to a greater understanding of society. Broadly speaking Tarde made the claim for big data a century before it was technically possible and hence received little recognition in his time. Today, however, we have the instruments to collect a wealth of granular data he envisioned and many people are.

The Quantified-self movement is spearheading the possibilities in gathering micro-behavioural data about individuals, while Open data initiatives are driving collective analysis. This trend has fostered many imaginative ways to quantify life, but the tendency is also taking its entry to aspects of everyday life. With the advancement of mobile phones, computers and wearables most people have a device that can surface data about their own behaviours, which previously have been immeasurable.

In the context of work project management tools, productivity apps and tasking system have become a central part of most knowledge workers' and teams' practices. In the daily routines a key difference between software supported and analogue practices is that software can track progress, rank performance and report without creating an additional resource or cost. For managers, operations and individuals micro-behavioural data can be a lever for new types of insights about themselves and others, which can help them achieve better results. But it also has its challenges.

Building self-knowledge to understand and act

One of the greatest challenges of Managing Oneself in the digital age continues to be understanding oneself. While the technology can empower us with a wealth of information, it it is not enough to give us insights, because that requires sufficient self-knowledge and reflection in order to translate data about one's behaviour to

valuable self-awareness. So a key question of today's society is *what self-knowledge people need to understand and act in a digital age?*

Drucker points to some defining characteristics that people should understand about themselves, including;

- how do I understand (readers, listeners),
- how do I learn (writing things down, creating space for reflection, having an audience),
- what relationships do I work best in (subordinate, team member, coach),
- and finally; how people produce the best results (decision maker, adviser).

While I believe that these characteristics are still as relevant as pre-web, I would argue that there are a few additional characteristics that knowledge workers should understand about themselves to accelerate in the digital age.

How do I remember?

One of the greatest advantages for the knowledge worker in the 21st Century is that we have the world's knowledge in our pockets. It is therefore more important to know how to refresh one's memory compared to memorising discrete facts. Hence, a key skill for today's high achievers is understand *how do I remember*?
There are three types of sensory memories that characterise whether people predominantly memorise visual information, auditory information or touch stimuli. While it would seem that people who are visual have a benefit in the digital age, I think people who memorise using auditory information or touch stimuli can leverage their unique asset, if they understand how to incorporate it in the way they organise their knowledge. People who remember via sound can make it a habit to read out loud and categorise content with striking keywords, while people whose memory is based on touch stimuli should try to capture distinct aspects of a situation when they encode information.

Personal knowledge management (PKM) is the discipline of gathering, classifying, storing and retrieving knowledge in daily work activities. It can provide best practices to how people efficiently can separate the relevant from the noise, and organise content in ways that make it findable when it becomes relevant in a separate situation. But these best practices becomes less impactful, if people cannot organise their knowledge in ways that will be match how they remember.

How do I take feedback?

Another characteristic is related to the production in knowledge organisations. As Drucker pointed out knowledge workers are highly dependent on other's skills to create valuable outputs and organisations are increasingly organising employees in multidisciplinary teams. Independent of which relationships that works best for people, as knowledge workers, they are likely to be dependent on peers' opinions and willingness to cooperate even if they have superior knowledge about the subject matter. Hence, I would argue that the people should also try to understand *how do I take feedback?*

When your performance is depending on your ability to work with others, it becomes a vital skill to understand how to handle feedback from collaborators. While getting input from collaborators can be highly valuable and decisive for a successful project, it can also be difficult to welcome. People should therefore try to understand what type of input is valuable for them to get from collaborators and when in a process it is most valuable.

In the last few years the emergence of Enterprise Social Networks and blogging platforms have made Working Out Loud and social collaboration popular in most knowledge organisations. However, only few truly embrace executing and narrating their work in the open. Most often people work in other spaces, that being on paper or other computer programmes, and only share their work with the rest of the organisation when it is finished. This highlights the underlying tension that people are not managing how they receive feedback. Instead, people should tailor the way they share their output to prompt the type of feedback that is valuable to them. One tactic is to always include an introduction that explains the three main considerations, which the worker has with the current material produced. Another approach is to ask questions about areas that the worker knows is a weakness or previously has been a blind spot in a similar project.

How do I nudge my own behaviors?

The two characteristics 'how do I remember' and 'how do I take feedback' highlight areas that individuals should know about themselves to achieve better results in a

digital age. But these aspects do not consider how individuals can ensure that they adapt their behaviours to what they learn about themselves.

Successfully changing behaviour and creating new habits is challenging. One study found that it takes [at least 18 days to form and on average 66 days](). So becoming better versions of ourselves do not only require self-knowledge about how people can optimise for their unique characteristics, but also understanding how they can create habits that stick.

Technology offers plenty of solutions that can remind, encourage and show progress for most types of behaviours, and these solutions can be leveraged by individuals to better design personal nudging tactics, if they understand where their own resistance to change behaviour comes from. Thus, as with the Quantified-Self movement individual can tweak their work behaviour based on data from emerging technology and thereby become smarter about themselves and create better results, which is a good thing. But in the context of organisations there is often a separation between the people whose behaviour produce the data and the people that have decision power over the related activities. Hence, if not careful the insight to micro-behavioral data can lead to micromanagement and optimisation for effectiveness, rather than improving the individuals' ways of working.

Allow for insights to be incorporated in ways of working

"And so historically everybody grew up with one way of doing the work. Here perhaps is where the new technology may have the greatest and most beneficial impact. It should enable even the merely competent teacher to find out how a student learns and to encourage the student to do the work the way that fits the individual student."

Peter Drucker, Managing Oneself

Managing Oneself in the digital age has great possibilities, but the potential stands little change in organisations if associates do not have the autonomy to incorporate their self-knowledge into their daily work. One way to allow for associates to adapt their daily routines to their characteristics is self-organising. Self-organising is

already used in organisations such as DPR Construction, General Electric, Morning Star, Favi and Buurtzorg. Conceptually it refers to allowing individuals to take responsibility for their own tasks and priorities, and to allow them the latitude to organise and manage the way they meet objectives. The primary argument for self-organisation is that it leads to associates' feeling ownership and taking more initiative, but I would argue that it also creates the space for individuals to adapt their ways of working to an approach that works for them as long as they meet their objectives.

In organisations that use self-organisation the managers' responsibilities change from delegating, monitoring and reporting to supporting associates in improving their functional skills and guide them in how they self-organise. While Drucker's thoughts on Managing Oneself has received great popularity, it has predominantly inspired people's self-development in a private setting, although they often focus on their work related skills.

But if we acknowledge that expanding people's self-knowledge improve their performance in, then why should it not be a manager's responsibility to guide subordinates in developing self-knowledge? Managers' could host group workshops or one-to-one coaching sessions to help associates be more aware of their own behaviour and encourage associate to find new ways of working that better fit their individual characteristics.

Dealing with potential failures

Organisations where it is a manager activity to work with associates in increasing their self-knowledge should overall gain a better performing workforce. However, as mentioned above it is an impossibility that everyone succeeds in a knowledge society. For every company, even if it is self-organising, there will be some that fail. Perhaps they find that they do not share the company values, do not belong in the organisational setting or that they cannot perform under the organisational circumstances.

When this is so managers need to be equipped to deal with associates that come to realise that they are failing in their current position. One standout example is [Requesting Sponsors](), used in WL Gore to help associates find the right position for them. Associates are assigned a sponsor, whose objective it is to understand the

associates' skill set and support associates in finding a niche in the company and a permanent role in a team, but not necessarily in the sponsor's team. Sometimes the associates will have to move through a number of teams before finding the right fit. But requesting sponsors allows new associates to take an active part in shaping their roles and finding support from more seasoned colleagues.

However, alternative management practices are few and we need to develop new approaches that can help managers and associates in this dilemma. I believe this is the biggest challenge for managers in the digital age.