

There's (almost) nothing special about our times

"The only thing we know about the future is that it will be different"

- Peter Drucker

Revolutionary change, or speed of evolution?

It's been a while now, since we've been talking about this digital revolution. About 10-15 years ago, when technology became so ubiquitous, we started to discover new civilizational problems and find new solutions for those problems, that were unimaginable for our parents. With those problems and actions came new threats. More and more often we feel like in a S-F movie, surrounded by unbelievable machines cracking inside out fragile living. Now, in 2015, we're actually accustomed to the feeling, that there's simply no such thing as "impossible" for new inventions. We blame "these times" for being so special (most of the times in a negative way), that you barely catch up after the great technological revolution. When we watch it from a single point in time, we see, that the world we live in today has nothing to do with how it was yesterday. Eventually, this whole madness comes to a single, yet tough task - keep up with the world. Learn faster, think faster, adapt faster. Or drag behind, and become excluded.

Watching how the world is from the present-day standpoint is one way to do it. Then we're probably in the middle of the biggest revolution the world has ever seen. But on the contrary, we can put our times in a context, in which they're not so extraordinary at all. First of all, let's assume we'll measure revolution and distinct it from changes by a degree in which it influenced people's lives. Shortly said, if it radically changes the way people live, it's a revolution. Keeping that in mind, let's compare our digital revolution's impact to some other known revolutions in history.

The ancient Greeks, especially during the Classic period, laid a cornerstone of the societies and high living we know today. Although this revolution wasn't entirely about technology, it seems they enabled it to reign for centuries. Pythagoras, Archimedes, Hippocrates or Euclid have invented some mathematical, philosophical and scientific tools crucial for our development. Greeks invented the first alphabet available for ordinary mortals. They introduced sport and culture in a form of entertainment, something we couldn't imagine living without today. Greeks revolutionized societies - by inventing democracy, and science - by using rules of mathematical proof for the first time. They also linked beauty and architecture, constructing buildings in respect of the golden ratio.

The Romans, on the other hand, somehow invented the cities we know today. They let the civilization emerge by creating roads (the whole modern industry is shaped by a roman roads width, which in turn was a derivate of two-horse carriage width), inventing aqueducts, sewers, or hiring first policemen and firemen. Those were the real game-changers for Roman people, not only a base for modern cities. Maybe the most influential movement in history of our culture, Christianity, also appeared in Rome and was spread by Roman Emperor Constantine the Great. Among many other inventions, Romans started to craft glass windows, use concrete, and invented glass blowing. We can imagine how those changed everyday life.

One of the greatest revolutions, often overlooked in this discussion, was age of exploration. It was relatively short, although it radically changed the world , just as seemingly exceptional digital age. We can imagine those times as an older brother of the internet revolution. The discovery of new continents opened absolutely new perspectives for international trade. In fact, almost all food we eat today comes from triangular trade (Africa, America, Europe) - potatoes, rice, peanuts, maize, etc. International trade spread goods like sugar, cotton or tobacco all over the world. With them, it also brought diseases and slavery to America, alcohol overdose and guns to Africa, and ubiquitous genocide. However, people connected with each other for the first time, with all the pros and cons. Europeans redefined their beliefs and habits, as they could start a new life in the New World, liberated from church domination and biblical dogma, now somehow compromised by world's diversity. Definitely, the world became a dramatically different place to live after those years of exploration.

And at last, the obvious example - the industrial revolution. In a short period of time world has made a 180 degree turn. Steam engine, Diesel engine, airplane, telephone, telegraph, Ford's mass car production, and many, many more. Even if you take modern criteria of revolution, and narrow the comparison to technology, world changed more in 19st century than today. Of course, that's not all: anesthesia, food canning, air conditioning - all of those popped out during circa 100 years. Just to

mention - industrial revolution was also the time when capitalism established its dominant role in the world.

All of those irremediably changed the world and the way people lived. In each case, if we compare the moment before the revolution, and a single point in time after it took place, those were completely different realities. What's worth pointing out, time interval between each following pair of those equally significant revolutions is shorter than former. It's quite obvious for us when we look at history, that long time ago time tend to past slowly. In middle ages, for example wars lasted over hundred years (XIV - XV centuries), and were full of military conflicts. Biggest war of our times, the World War II lasted for 6 years. Modern wars, predominantly, are much shorter.

Irrespectively of discipline - economics, military, legislature - things tend to go faster. I do believe it's strongly connected with technology development. In fact, Daniel Smihula shows this law in numbers in his work¹ about technological innovations waves. He lists 6 big technological revolutions with a timespan of innovations wave, that is, a time that this revolution took to revolutionize the world. And so, after Smihula, for financial-agricultural (17st-18st century), industrial (18st-19st century), technical (1880-1920), scientific-technical (1940-1970), information and telecommunications (1985-2000) and our ongoing digital revolution, the wave of innovation length lasted, respectively, almost two centuries, a century, 60 years, 45 years, 30 years, and about 20 years.

Despite length of those periods, it's important to remember here, that these revolutions were all equally "revolutionizing", that is, they've changed people lives to the same extent. It seems like we're talking about long-lasting periods and still call them revolutions. So aren't we in fact talking about an ongoing process of evolution, that's simply speeding up a little bit lately? Therefore, what's so special about our times anyway?

What happened to the knowledge worker?

Thoughts about evolution of surrounding world are crucial to find an answer for how to manage oneself today. But even more important is a question about "oneself" in this context. Peter Drucker introduced the "knowledge worker" term in 1959². In a world that changes so fast, it should be examined, whether this over 75 years old term still fits our age.

Drucker called the knowledge worker a most valuable asset of 21st century institution, and defined him as a person who uses his knowledge (that is, *ex termini*, information and skills) to be more productive, and by that to contribute to creating goods

¹ "Long waves of technological innovations" - D.Smihula, *Studia Politica Slovaca* 2/2011

² "The landmarks of tomorrow" - P. Drucker, Harper and Row (1959)

or services. The rise of the knowledge worker was an obvious consequence of a technical revolution at the turn of centuries. Former most valuable asset, physical worker, was easily replaceable by machines that worked longer, harder and gradually became more reliable. When our physical capabilities became obsolete, we found a way to generate growth, by redefining “work to do” from doing to thinking. Skills and information replaced strength and craft.

Today, information and knowledge are being devalued very quickly. It's faster to google something out, than to recall it from memories. We don't need to know dates and historical facts any more, and it's unnecessary to quote our company's sales volume on the go, as we can access it right away everywhere we are, ie. from our smartphone. Actually, we're living in a world, where everything happens now, as D. Rushkoff brilliantly points out in his book “Present Shock”³. One of the consequences, that author didn't mention, is that we don't have time to use our knowledge any more. The information is outdated too quickly. A message tweeted an hour ago is old, a basketball game retransmitted 10h after it had been played is boring. Same about business - experienced manager in a mobile applications IT company knows almost nothing about how to conduct a high value service in a modern SaaS dominated startup reality. 5 years, and we have to learn everything from the scratch. Big international corporations hire and pay people straight from the college without any knowledge or skills needed to do their new job. They know it's better to have people close and teach them what they need to know, rather than buy their knowledge directly.

If so, what's really valuable today? I think we can find the answer in a weird way that huge companies like Google form a relationship with society. It looks like it doesn't really matter no more if one works for them, uses their products, or spent money they've invested. Now, it's all about people's engagement and bond with the company. To succeed it's not crucial to acquire greatest skills any more (they'll be deprecated quickly, anyway). Now, it's important to acquire the biggest devotion and passion, that will let people stay competent and contribute in some way. It's also simply cheaper to teach someone eager a new skill, than to buy it on the employee market.

I think we need a **new term**. A person who gives his heart in a cause, someone who believes in a values that lasts irrespective of technology revolution or trends shifts. Someone, who believe he's contributing to a greater good, whether he's being on an 8h shift, or during his free time.

Dov Seidman, author of the Era of Behavior concept, calls our reality “human economy”. He defines it by confrontation with knowledge economy, where we hired brains and industrial economy, where we hired hands. Seidman concludes, that in a modern world we hire hearts. Going further, we're talking about a new kind of worker -

³ “Present Shock - When everything happens now” - D. Rushkoff, Penguin group (2013)

contributing not with hands, nor with his skills. Maybe it's time to introduce an **emotions worker** - someone, who create growth by his heart and devotion.

Asking the right questions

To answer the question of managing oneself in our age (called digital), we've started from a sketch of how we could perceive the nature of our times (ongoing evolution), and a definition of oneself in this context (emotions worker). On top of those conclusions, it's reasonable to clarify our understanding of "managing oneself". How managing an individual resonates with emotions worker in continuously evolving and rapidly changing reality?

The problem we are facing today is a lack of clear indicators of success, adaptation, or whatever that concerns measuring a value, therefore an object of management. You can always assess a behaviour by a predefined set of criteria. But that way it's almost sure our assessment will be inadequate, due to speed of change. On the other hand, we can evaluate a person afterwards, but that's definitely not the way to plan or manage. This issue is maybe one of the reasons why so many modern philosophers and scientists rediscovered the eternal question to answer: "what's the right question to ask about human and its nature?". The speed of change reminds us, that what we "should" do with our lives isn't necessary a matter of what's sufficient to survive and gain profits. This digging in human's nature was popular in 20st century - just to mention few, completely different in style of asking the question: Aldous Huxley, Carl G. Jung, Alan Watts, or the whole wave of eastern gurus, like Juddi Krishnamurti or Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. If we look closer at the set of questions Peter Drucker asked in his widely appreciated article "Managing Oneself"⁴, those also touch this subtle topic of finding the right questions, instead of answering specific schema. Drucker's questions, like "Where do I belong?", "How should i contribute?", "Who am I?", "What are my values?", all have a twist of philosophical searching for meaning. It's not my intention to delve into this important matter here, only to point out, that "managing oneself" isn't about doing right or wrong stuff, or fulfilling some expectations and indicators. It's about finding the right questions to build our self consciousness.

What's special about our times?

By now I've argued, that there's actually nothing new in the world we're living in. The evolution is on, as it has always been, human is finding new ways to create value by shifting from hands work to brain work to dedication and devotion, and the big

⁴ "Management challenges for the 21st century" - P. Drucker, HarperCollins (1999)

questions are resounding as they've always been. But there's actually something special in our times - hence "(almost)" in topic of this paper.

Peter Drucker wrote about the issue of "the second part of life". He pointed out, that first time in history, people will outlive organizations, therefore we will face a new challenge: What to do with the second half of one's life? Drucker explained, that people will have to find their way, when their employer is gone. He raised this issue because of one big change people will have to manage in their professional life. And I'm completely sure, P. Drucker knew, that years later, people will have to face this kind of drastic change multiple time in their lives.

That's what's special in our times - for the first time in world history, the speed of change is so high, we can experience those technological and social revolutions more than once in our lifetime. Although nothing changed as a rule, our small perspective shaped by length of life has been shifted dramatically. It changes how we educate kids: there's no point in teaching them practical skills, as they will be obsolete by the time they'll go to high school. It also changes employment market: you can't catch up after technologies replacements, so your staff fluctuates a lot, or you build a clan that is all about learning new things. Some research tells, that most of freshman students will work in professions that don't even exists now (who've imagined a "drone pilot" 3 years ago?). Nowadays, we can't even plan our retirement reliably - we have simply no idea how the world will look like 40 years from now.

So they're not special because of specific technology, nor because of new possibilities or "the rise of robots". The clue is acceleration of change, that we're not familiar with yet.

Conclusion

We, as a humankind, have been through a lot of revolutions throughout the history. Each and every time, it made us stronger and opened new possibilities. The old questions we've been asking, about our identity and the nature of creation, always helped us find our way. Now, when everything is happening so fast, it's even more important to look back and make use of what we've learned.

I don't think we should be afraid of machines, robots, or technology. Neither do I feel there's some special path we should follow in our times. The solution for us is to stick with fundamentals, just like those questions Peter Drucker asked for 21st century managers. The one thing we should definitely consider, is to keep in mind, that our ideas about future are probably false as much as they could be. Therefore, the solution for an emotions worker in an ongoing evolution is to abstract from what's new and what

we think will meet us along our way. Ask those questions, but drop the concept of exceptional circumstances.

The only thing we know about future, is that it will be different, so just stick to what's natural and authentic, and everything will be just fine.

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