

**Entry into the
Peter Drucker Challenge 2017
On
Human Prosperity in a Changing World
Student Category**

**Learn, Unlearn and Re-learn:
The Knowledge Worker's Mantra for Prosperity in a Changing World
(2997 Words)**

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

– Peter Drucker

About a year ago, I was being interviewed for business school. The questions revolved around my reasons for joining an MBA program, my short and long-term plans and the standard “Where do you see yourself in 10 years?” query. I had always found this an extremely challenging question. Consequently, I spent a considerable amount of time trying to arrive at my own perspective on the matter. The thought of an MBA degree in India evokes images of professional success, high standards of living, financial affluence and a prosperous existence. But I was wary of arriving at any conclusion too soon.

I knew by my experience in the industry that the world was more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous than ever and any picture of the future that I could possibly craft in my mind had to account for innumerable factors and changes both beyond my control. Until recently, I was a knowledge worker in the knowledge economy, a software engineer in the humongous Indian IT industry which employs 3.1 million talented, smart and competitive individuals. The general Indian perception is that this is a financially well-off lot who form the creamy upper strata of the India’s socio-economic structure. This is true up to a certain degree – the financial benefits are good. However, as members of this closely knit coterie will tell you - there is nothing prosperous about having to survive giant waves of technological change each day-most of which are capable of rendering one jobless. There is nothing prosperous about being talented and equally replaceable- at times by people and at others by machines.

Every single one of the 3.1 million smart, wealthy and talented IT professionals in India including myself live in realization of one glaring truth- we are all expendable. We are nothing but replaceable cogs in the giant wheel of the multi-billion industry and no amount of financial wealth can fill in the vacuum of our truly unprosperous selves devoid of any iota of social, emotional, spiritual and intellectual prosperity born out of a fear of worthlessness. The challenges of sudden changes in technology and business, the constant need to reskill and learn to remain relevant can be best felt in an industry which has been infamous for high attrition rates and humiliating retrenchments. Newspapers, business magazines and journals berate this in bold headlines even as HR departments remain mute spectators. Added to this is the fear that automation shall take away even more jobs as more skills are stultified. To my understanding, prosperity looks nowhere similar to this.

To answer the question of my vision of myself 10 years down the line, my reflections and experiences led me to the conclusion that the only determinant of my future that I had some influence on, was myself- my own skills and knowledge would serve me best on the path to a prosperous existence in the future. I therefore answered this question with all sincerity, stating that in view of the unprecedented change that characterized the 21st century, I wished to remain a relevantly skilled worker in the work force, capable of adding value to people and processes around me. Little did I know then, that more than half a century ago, a management thinker had identified the need for constant learning for knowledge workers of the 21st century knowledge economy? In my quest to add to my professional qualifications in the metamorphic information era, I had unknowingly set myself on the path advocated by the most prolific and foresighted management guru of all times.

DECODING PROSPERITY: THE FEELING OF BEING VALUED

Prosperity, I observe, seems to be an evolving concept, personal to individuals and specific to societies, shaped by the socio-economic and cultural contexts of their environments. To illustrate this – to my parents and to their generation of the earliest knowledge workers, a respectable educational degree followed by a stable, secure and well-paying job are unquestioned symbols of prosperity. My decision to earn a management degree was met with surprise- why did I need new skills when I was already a trained engineer with a well-paying job? Much like the American idea of a white picket fence, a housing society apartment, healthy bank account savings, a bi-annual family vacation etc. have been coveted symbols of prosperity for Indian employees of that generation. In those days, the average Indian in a post-colonial developing country valued financial stability over everything else. The struggles of the middle class of the economic strata of the country through the latter decades of the 20th century combined with the values and beliefs handed down to them by their predecessors have shaped their understanding of prosperity.

However, when this generation tried to hand down their vision of prosperity to the one that came next- the famous millennials of the 1990s, the latter found it difficult to see eye to eye with them. Houses, cars and salaries have morphed into shares, travel for work to exotic locations, shoe-box sized condos designed for convenience of the 21st century knowledge worker. Virtual organizations, high-paid volatile workers of the gig economy, coffee shop interviews, work at home and 24*7 accessibility are taking the fourth industrial revolution of our times to a whole new level. Today, any one professional degree or skill is not enough to survive the competitive world by any standards. Start-up cultures have rendered the term “boss” nearly obsolete and massive technological change continues to disrupt business and societies every day.

The question that comes to my mind then, is that: is prosperity a dynamic concept? Why do the standards of prosperity upheld by my parents find no place in my vision of a prosperous existence? Most importantly, is there any overlapping understanding of prosperity that I share with my predecessors? Are there any common tenets of prosperity that uphold today and shall continue to do so into the future?

For me, the answer lay in understanding why certain physical or social attributes made my parents feel prosperous and why some radically different things symbolize prosperity for me today. My reflections led me to realize that there is a common thread connecting their prosperity with mine- the feeling of being “valued”. ***To be prosperous is to be valuable, to hold worth in the society. To be prosperous is to be capable of contributing and adding value to the world around us. Losing value is losing prosperity. Increasing and gaining value results in increased prosperity.*** When my parents felt prosperous with defined skills in nine to five jobs, they felt valued and valuable doing what they did. Their skills and expertise were capable of creating worth which granted them employment, wealth and respect in their environment. All material assets and lifestyle attributes which reflected their prosperity to the external world were merely physical expressions of the inner prosperity that they felt. In other words, their inner sense of value was expressed by tangible valuables. On the other hand, those physical, social and emotional attributes that held worth then seem to have lost value over the years and are being replaced by new symbolisms.

The world changed leaps and bounds as my generation, the millennials grew alongside the internet, the dot com bubble, the economic boom and recession of the first decade of the 21st century, the rise of social media and the surge of the knowledge economy. The challenge to feel and be valuable i.e. to be prosperous in the new age world has become a steep uphill climb as rapid changes in technology demand multiple new skills and faced paced machines marginalize human contributions, leaving our world with what Davidow and Malone vividly describe as “hordes of citizens of zero economic value”. When one loses value due to absence of relevant skills and knowledge and is unable to contribute with meaningful work to the society around him, one loses prosperity in a number of ways- mental, emotional, physiological and financial. How we as societies and economies deal with this constant depreciation in the value of our greatest asset – the human capital shall determine the quality of our cumulative prosperity. The question cannot be better expressed than in the words of Drucker himself:

“The great challenge to management today is to make productive the tremendous new resource, the knowledge worker. This, rather than productivity of the manual worker, is the key to economic growth and economic performance in today’s society”

- Peter Drucker

PROSPERITY IN CHANGING TIMES: KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

“Today knowledge has power. It controls access to opportunity and advancement”

- Peter Drucker

How do we prosper in a world that is uncertain, complex and ambiguous? In my opinion, the answer is “by knowing, learning, unlearning if required and re-learning if necessary”. The Information Age that we live in is defined by the crucial need for knowledge and like many other characteristics of our times, Dr Drucker’s insight on this almost looks like a prediction. Often, we come across statements such as “information is the new resource” or “data is the new oil”. I like to think of the scenario as “knowledge is the new valuable”. Since the economy is increasingly led by mental labour, opportunities to prosper lie in the access to knowledge and skills.

Today, the demand for knowledge is driven by constant change. Knowledge acts a compass in volatile times. For people, this translates into the right set of skills and abilities to stay afloat in times of uncertainty. For businesses and governments, knowledge is the key to creating value driven by the skills of their people. To me, this appears to be a cyclical process. The skills and abilities of our people within the organization translate into value-additions for those outside. In turn, we create a cycle of prosperity for all of us. However, until recently, learning and education had been limited to educational institutions and generally catered to the young. In the information era, how can learning be brought closer to the working professional, eliminating barriers of age and location?

TECHNOLOGY FOR PROSPERITY: THE CONDUIT OF KNOWLEDGE TODAY

“We now accept the fact that learning is a lifelong process of keeping abreast of change. And the most pressing task is to teach people how to learn” – Peter Drucker

How do people learn today? Through what channels does knowledge flow? How has the learning process been improved and revolutionized today? The answer to all of these questions is- through technology, which has democratized the learning process in unprecedented ways. Everybody has an opportunity to learn and increase their value. Digital pedagogies, MOOCs on Coursera, EdX, MIT Open Courseware, Ted Talks and video lectures such as Khan Academy, Online Digital Marketing, Machine Learning, Data Management, Programming Language Certifications, Distance Learning Courses powered by ICTs, the list of technology facilitated learning channels is endless. Moreover, new approaches at strategic virtual task simulations based on artificial intelligence and machine learning aiming at immersive experiences are opening new frontiers for learning. I had an unforgettable experience with an empathy simulator called “RealLives” developed by Neeti Solutions. The founder, Mr. Parag Mankeerkar (an Ashoka Awardee) in his talk at my B-school touched upon the importance of usable, on-the go practical skills in the younger generation and emphasized on applied learning as the key to problem solving and leadership skills.

Much like knowledge workers, organizations have also realized the strategic value of information. The ideas of business analytics, data management, big data, data mining, knowledge discovery, cloud computing, real-time systems, AI and machine learning etc. are spin offs to this one crucial idea: *to know is to be valuable*. Even governments have recognized that the path to progress is made of human capital development. In India, where the state bears responsibility for social welfare, vocational training and skill development have received a major fillip as the country is home to the world’s largest chunk of young population.

LIFELONG LEARNING: UNLOCKING THE KNOWLEDGE WORKER’S POTENTIAL

“Knowledge has to be improved, challenged and increased constantly or it vanishes”

- **Peter Drucker**

When I joined the workforce as a graduate engineer trainee, I came with advanced proficiency in a popular technology called java. However, when I was assigned to my first project, I discovered that my earlier technical skills had minimal use there. I was required to learn data warehousing instead. When this happens to you in your first job and first project, your sense of self-worth and confidence built over years in college and internships takes a hit- but in the technology industry, this is a regular phenomenon. To this day, I am deeply grateful to my manager and several senior colleagues who took me through the “on-boarding process” in an adequate manner and taught to learn and deliver simultaneously. I learned the tremendous value of knowledge sharing and training in organizations and teams. By the time I met the deadlines

on the deliverables assigned to me, both my learning curve and worth in the knowledge industry had shown a steep rise.

Sadly, judging by my experiences I noted that not all employees find equal and adequate training opportunities. The role of HR departments and managements in skill-assessment and reskilling leaves plenty to be desired. One of the prominent horrors for low to mid-level professionals in the IT service industry is the “bench”. Professionals who do not manage to clear client interviews or whose technical skills are facing obsolescence are often, in industry jargon, “on the bench” and unless they are “on-board” a fresh project soon, they are compelled to take the pink slip home. In times of recession, this segment is the first and hardest hit.

When Dr Drucker talked about effectiveness of the knowledge workers, he emphasized on the need to invest in them. Not only was he among the first to propose that people in organizations were assets and not liabilities, but also the pioneer of the idea that organizations should invest in their human capital and that lifelong learning opportunities should be created. The genius of his vision is captured by the idea that as early as in 1970s, he identified that ***all organizations were also training institutions for their people***. When I analyse my own experiences as an intern and employee with three different multi-national-corporations in the IT industry, I am amazed by how relevant and important his ideas are and how crucial his contributions to both, the discipline and practice of management are.

Today the learning phenomenon is not limited to early career professionals. As technologies and disciplines overlap in the quest for elegant products and solutions, multi-disciplinary knowledge is a valued asset at the higher end of the organizational hierarchy. The hours that I spent learning to warehouse Tera-bytes of information, one of my senior managers spent understanding data lakes and a new technology in the market called Hadoop for new projects in the pipeline. Several other senior executives flocked to B schools for executive MBAs to augment their know-how, mid-career. Later in business school, I managed to connect the dots when I found out that this was another enduring legacy of Dr Drucker who helped develop the first Executive MBA programs at Claremont Graduate University.

The lifelong learning process is the beauty of the 21st century knowledge economy- its scope is vast and exciting. The value of a knowledge worker lies in his knowledge capital. Any investments made here are direct investments into the prosperity of both, the employee and the organization. Managements have an opportunity to unlock the potential of their employees by training them into competent and valuable skilled workers. The consequences we observe today are exciting - boundaries between several jobs are blurring, mid-career and late career professionals venture into new career paths, in-house talent development and career management yields specialised and sensitive individuals who understand the heart of their company’s business and are thus capable of excellent decision making. Besides, the motivational boost, job satisfaction and career growth that skill acquisition provides is unparalleled by any other incentive. Employees feel “valued” as they become truly more valuable assets.

CONCLUSION: THE ROAD AHEAD

All human endeavour to achieve prosperity is marked by the necessity to attain and retain worth in the society. In the Information Age, this worth resides in possessing relevant knowledge - it eliminates job insecurity and provides people the necessary motivation to perform, achieve and innovate. Constant reskilling and lifelong learning are no longer inaccessible to large swathes of knowledge workers - technology has facilitated the creation of these opportunities. An increasing number of individuals continue to collaborate and systematically innovate to create better learning solutions for enthusiastic learners and organizational workforces alike. Harnessing Dr Drucker's wisdom, it is time that managements brace themselves for the future and make paradigm shifts towards skill development and training of knowledge workers to achieve superior performance.

Discovering Dr Drucker's philosophy after facing tectonic change in the IT industry has been the greatest experiential learning of my life. It is as though each idea has been explained with precept and concept, the remarkable fact being that not only did Dr Drucker anticipate that people would generate more value with their minds than with muscle more than 50 years ago, but also that his insightful advice continues to point out the appropriate course of action for managements and organisations. Increasing the productivity of knowledge workers is, in his own words, "the most important contribution management needs to make in the 21st century".

Dr Drucker's post capitalist, knowledge society is the reality of our times. It is in the best interests of businesses and people to recognize this alike and focus on human capital development for joint and inclusive prosperity. Innovative management styles and leadership approaches that are people-centric and skill-centric are need of the hour. To conclude, I quote Alvin Toffler, the American futurist who famously said: "The illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn".

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