Talent and New ways of working in the age of digital transformation
Businesses the world over are placing big bets on the power of profound digital change. According to the International Data Corporation, global spending on digital transformation will reach nearly $2 trillion in 2022.¹

At Wipro, we believe that the lifeline of digital transformation is the way a company works. Traditional ways of working that are siloed, hierarchical, and averse to failure will not provide the agility needed to meet the growing demands of continuously increasing customer expectations. Business leaders need to first recognize the new world order: Information technology is no longer just a supporting layer but a critical partner to business.

We have adopted new ways of working at Wipro that values our talent, breaks down organizational silos, and fosters collaboration. This article details some of these new ways, from changes to workspaces to cultivation of communities around practice areas, to creation of a digital academy to skill and reskill our talent.

This article also illuminates our belief that there is a critical difference between doing digital and being digital and that while digital transformation may seem to depend on better algorithms and more advanced hardware, its success rests fundamentally on the innovations of talented people working together. Clearing the way for their contributions is essential, and Wipro is thrilled to be at the forefront of this human-centric, value-driven revolution in the way businesses work.

I hope you will find the paper useful.

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¹https://www.idc.com/getdoc.jsp?containerId=prUS44440318
Digital transformation has grown up. Once a buzzword with numerous interpretations—going paperless, moving to the cloud, adopting new technologies—digital transformation is now a business imperative. Today, the term “digital transformation” is widely understood to mean the integration of digital technology into all areas of an enterprise to fundamentally change how it operates, in order to deliver greater value to its customers.

Thanks to the ubiquitous nature of technology, the gap between what consumers want and what enterprises can deliver is ever widening. The need to respond to the customer’s desires rapidly and continuously mirrors a seismic change in where today’s empowered customers sit in the enterprise value chain. In his book “Practice of Management” published in 1954, Peter Drucker stated that businesses have only one valid purpose: to create a customer. More recently, management guru Steve Denning observed that a paradigm shift is underway from the 20th-century view of customers revolving around the stationary “centre of the universe”—represented by the value chain of the enterprise—to that of the enterprise as one of many organizations revolving around the customer.

The competitive edge of these companies lies in their agility to sense and respond. Business success is now being measured by the impact of customer experience applications rather than on meeting budgets or milestones. This means businesses need to find new sources of inspiration to bring continuous innovation to their clients, ushering in new ways of working that are fast becoming a core differentiator. While born-digital organisations like Amazon, Google, Spotify often come to mind—organisations like Capital One, Walmart, Philips, and Suncorp are some of the others that have been able to cross the chasm and reinvent themselves. In all cases, it’s the ways of working that differentiate companies that try to ‘do digital’ from those that are ‘being digital.’

To keep pace with the evolving expectations, businesses must be hyper-sensitive to their customers’ behaviour and desires and get ahead of their expectations by continuously improving their products and services. Among those organizations most successful at this are digitally disruptive businesses like Airbnb, Uber, Netflix, Zappos, and Spotify. These companies are delivering exponentially high value to their customers because they can sense and respond rapidly. They have successfully leveraged computational capabilities that have evolved from being systems of record to enabling systems of engagement in a rapid journey towards insight and intelligence.
New ways of working

So what are these new ways of working? While open offices with whiteboards covered in stickies, and employees innovating on beanbags or clearing their minds at foosball tables may be the images that come to mind, a complete adoption of new ways of working involves more than changes to infrastructure and physical spaces.

There are four key elements to the new way of working and they call for:

1. Bringing a human-centric approach to re-imagine the product and service design around the needs of the customer. The more unique and scalable the insight, the greater the potential for strategic differentiation.

2. Driving active collaboration among different subject matter experts who can manifest the design into viable products and services. This requires breaking down or reaching over organization silos and redefining structures to streamline the flow of value and insights across the organization.

3. A paradigm shift from a world in which the business interacts with customers and IT services business needs. With technology now being both the driver for changing customer behaviour and the system of engagement, what was earlier an exclusive business domain is now a melting pot of IT, along with system thinking, design, and domain. This is where the customer desirability, business viability, and technology feasibility are synthesized and put through a working hypothesis—often called the minimum viable product (MVP).

4. Adapting in real time. It isn’t enough to convert insights rapidly into a product or service. Instead, collaborative teams must be able to do this iteratively and constantly adapt by incorporating customer insights.

Adopting these four elements in how we define, design, and deliver work is essentially the ‘new way of working.’

Organisation impact areas

The new ways of working impact every single area of an enterprise – including its customer engagement model, business operating model, organisation structure, policies, and processes. Here are some common shifts made by businesses as they adopt new ways of working:

Almost all of the shifts mentioned above have an impact on talent across these organisational layers:

- The front line, execution teams (i.e., engineering teams)
- Middle management
- Senior management or the strategic layer

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The execution teams

For execution teams, adopting the new ways of working means taking the following steps:

1. **Develop the ability to work with a fuzzy future.** Absent any definitive, long-term plans, the team can thrive by being guided by an overall direction. This requires teams to inculcate a culture of innovation and continuous improvement.

2. **Work in smaller teams for greater agility.** The teams of today are small and nimble “two-pizza” teams working towards a common goal. Teams are not only sized to be no bigger than what two pizzas can feed, but more importantly, they provide the much needed agility by reducing the communication overhead and silos that exist with large teams.

3. **Learn how to self-organise.** With speed being the ask of the day, teams cannot wait for directions. They have to move from the manager-led model to a path that moves from self-managed to self-organised and finally to self-governing.

4. **Become multi-skilled.** Enterprises that follow iterative methods will deliver faster thanks in part to teams of generalist-specialists, versus the legacy model of deep specialization. Skill-building thus needs to change individual competency from an I model (uni-skilled – single area of expertise) to a T model (multi-skilled—one area of deep expertise, plus one area of broad expertise), to TT model (multi-skilled—two areas of deep expertise, plus one area of broad expertise). Some can even transcend to being a full-stack with the requisite skills to work across multiple domains and technologies.

5. **Focus on the value delivered.** In the new world, team members are held accountable for what they deliver as a unit, rather than as an individual. Success is experienced and rewarded at a team level, which requires team members to collaborate and help each other. This is the classic “we versus me” challenge which individuals need to overcome.

Middle management

For middle management, the challenges are possibly more complex, simply because they have the unenviable task of implementing the direction and changes set by the leadership. The new ways of working call for these action items:

a. **Become a coach.** In flatter organisations where the execution teams apply their technical skills and work closely with customers to deliver value, mid-level managers often run the risk of becoming irrelevant. This is especially true for those used to working in a command-and-control, “I-say-you do” model. In the transformed organisation, the coach must listen to his team and help them succeed. Often this includes giving team members the space to fail and to learn from these failures, mentoring them, and providing feedback that is actionable, specific, and kind.

b. **Learn new engineering methods.** Mid-level managers work with engineering teams who are skilled in the latest technologies and innovation. To add value to these teams, the manager needs to upgrade their skills around modern engineering practices. Usually this means going back to their roots and spending between 25-30 percent of their time learning every day.

c. **Become servant leader.** The toughest part in the middle managers’ personal transformation is learning how to be a servant leader. As a servant leader, the manager morphs into someone who exists to serve the team, rather than lead the team. Serving happens by listening to the team’s problems, helping to resolve conflicts, empathising with the challenges faced by the team, removing impediments, identifying team behaviour patterns and anti-patterns, and building consensus.

d. **Becoming an exemplar.** The mid-level manager must become an exemplar for the teams by demonstrating all the values that the execution teams need to embody. It is very easy to fall back into the hierarchical, command-and-control way of working. The successful middle manager is one who is able to transform from telling the team to run fast and reach the goalpost, to one who is able to remove the obstacles and help the teams run faster.
Senior management

Senior management has the daunting task of reengineering the organisation’s systems and processes to build a new culture around agility, risk orientation, customer centricity, and cross functionality. Some of these include:

a. **Organisational restructuring.** The agility that organisations are seeking in the digital world requires them to remove the structural silos. Because most of these silos are built around capabilities, they lead to work handovers that can disturb the smooth flow of value. Aligning and realigning teams to reduce deliverable handoffs will help to improve flow.

b. **Providing a safety net to change the culture from fail-safe to safe-to-fail.** While experimentation, innovation, and risk-taking are conceptually exciting, each of these have failure as the often unstated, other side of the coin. Giving teams the space to fail and to learn from these failures have to be systemically enabled.

c. **Changing the way performance is measured.** Rather than depending on a yearly cycle of feedback, formally and informally provide feedback in more frequent cycles. As well, changing the performance system from rewarding individual success to team success encourages teams to collaborate for a shared success.

d. **Rethinking the talent hiring, incubation, and reskilling process.** Organisations need to hire talent based on their potential and ability to learn agility. With skilled talent being in high demand, the leadership team needs to focus on re-skilling the existing organisation—not only in terms of technical skills, but also in terms of their mind-set to help them adapt to the new ways of working.

e. **Providing an environment which encourages open communication and collaboration.** This is usually manifested by the open offices, where teams can sit together and information is readily available to all. By doing away with voluminous reports and bubbling up challenges, hurdles and blockers can be resolved as soon as they are identified. The physical workspace plays an important role in driving collaboration and creativity, allowing innovation to thrive. The open workspace embodies the new ways of working by providing a test bed for their development, while fostering the conditions for producing valuable, desirable, and feasible solutions at speed.

f. **Building a creative culture** means leadership has to adopt a new mind-set that rewards innovation, experimentation, learning, and customer-centric design thinking.
Call for Action

What are some of the talent-specific steps organisations can take? While each organisation must design its strategies based on its vision, below are some examples from organisations who have gone through or are in the process of undergoing the change.

Restructured organisations

Most organisations seek to break down their silos by taking steps to restructure itself, to systemically enable different teams to work together, or both. This is often manifested by an absence of distinct development and QA organisations; instead, product or feature teams are created with their members having these skills. The business interacts closely with the IT teams almost daily through a product owner when they adopt the Agile DevOps ways of working.

New people management processes

To support the new way of working and the new organisation, many leaders overhaul their people management processes. This involves adding new roles to the organisation's staffing lexicon, outlining the new roles' responsibilities, career management frameworks, and performance management programs. Wipro, for example, supports associates who work in such programs, initiating new roles with clear responsibilities and corresponding career frameworks. This allows the associates to be clear on what is expected of them in their new roles and to consider how to shape their careers. The organisation is clear that a lot of the change will remain only on paper, unless it is systemically addressed as a part of the HR processes. The performance management process has changed to reward team success and the right behaviour as informed by team members.

Re-skilling of talent

Certain global enterprises have required their talent to reapply for their jobs, having created new positions aligned to the new organisational structure. To enable the talent, programs are in place to reskill the talent to take on new responsibilities. In a large bank, for instance, a workforce transformation program focuses on new employee skilling and re-skilling initiatives for engineering team members, middle managers as well as senior managers. The bank has identified business and architecture training, technical skills training, tools training, soft skills training as some of the core themes of their strategy. What also stands out is the focus on mentoring and role rotations to help the talent.

New workspaces

Over the past few years, most organisations have invested in a redesign of their workspaces to create more open offices. Wipro has created “digital pods,” consisting of large desks for collaboration, with meeting and breakout rooms for discussions, whiteboards and writable walls for teams for displaying a team's project details, calling out impediments and highlighting other useful information. The pods are characterised by chill-out zones which houses foosball tables, coffee zones, reading corners, and bean bags. Notably, the pods do not have offices. The famous corner office is conspicuous by its absence, and the head of the business sits on the floor along with the rest of the team. This goes far to not only create a culture of collaboration, but with the leader being in the gemba (Japanese for ‘the actual place’ or the place where work happens), he or she is aware of the challenges the teams face and can help to address them immediately.

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New hiring process

Hiring processes within many organisations have changed. For example, Wipro holds hiring hackathons to evaluate both the coding skills of new associates—and their mind-set, especially if the associate joins the organisation laterally. For example, engineering managers who have adopted XP in their programs often ask new associates if they are comfortable or willing to adopt the pair programming model. Associates who show hesitation are often passed over, even if they have excellent coding skills. Hiring managers also evaluate each associate’s learning agility as a part of the process.

Team-building

Many organisations seek to transform their existing workforce. The biggest transformation happens in the Gemba – and this is where the teams need to be realigned to think, work, and behave differently. At Wipro, coaches follow psychologist Bruce Tuckman’s four-step model of forming-storming-norming-performing while building new teams. This often starts by training the teams on the new ways of working, giving them a specific name, defining the team charter, writing a social contract of dos and don’ts, conducting meet-and-greets, and building team boards where associates can share news about themselves and get to know and appreciate each other. These artefacts and processes create a one-team culture and fosters teamwork.

Democratization of information

An open organisation that thrives on collaboration needs to ensure that information is freely available and knowledge is widely shared. Most organisations have thriving communities of practices; open communities where practitioner freely share information and knowledge while learning from others. In many companies, these communities hold events like Agile coffee sessions, Friday Sharings, Unconferences, DevOps Days, Cloud Roadshows within their teams and across the organisation. These communities deploy communication vehicles such as microsites, Yammer groups, newsletters where members share their learnings, successes, and failures.

In conclusion

By adopting the new ways of working, organizations will inevitably experience tough changes and challenges. For the transformation to be impactful and successful, leaders must ensure a unified understanding on the why, how, and what the impact will be for all of the organisation’s stakeholders—both internal and external. A successful digital transformation will have nothing to do with the organization’s size or the technology, but everything to do with how it is able to create a new culture and take the talent along its journey of change.
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An agilist and a practicing Servant Leader, Ritu leads the Agile DevOps transformation initiatives for Wipro. She is a strong advocate of supporting teams to adopt and adapt to new ways of working. Ritu thrives in an environment of change and has successfully driven multiple transformation initiatives as a part of her career. Her core philosophy of transformation in the Digital era is centred around people. Enabling individuals to shift their paradigms by calibrating the existing systems, processes and tools is close to her heart. In her 20+ year long career, Ritu has worked with multiple clients, helping them define their transformation roadmaps and partnering with them in their journey. She has established global consulting teams and driven enterprise wide transformation initiatives, as a part of the same. Ritu is a certified in Lean, Agile, CMM®, CMMI®, ITIL® and a Six Sigma Black Belt. She has several white papers in her name which have been published in industry bodies like SEI and ANQ.
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