Six key competences for dealing with a 'topsy-turvy' world

What skills does the "individual of the future" need in order to adapt and succeed within confusing and chaotic contexts in which change is a constant?

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At present, no one is surprised when it is said that the instability we are experiencing in economic, social and political terms is the new "normal", nor when, what at other times were thought to be surprising facts, for being extreme, considered rarities (what the lecturer Nassim Nicholas Thaleb popularised as "black swans" – something abnormal and unpredictable because no one pointed to their possibility before they took place), have almost become part of our new daily life.

We are living in a *topsy-turvy* world, in which the speed at which changes occur has, objectively speaking, no precedent in history.

We are still trying to digest what the so called "third industrial revolution" implies, which is marked by digitalisation and hyper-connection, and we are already told that we are at the gates of the fourth one, which is going to be accelerated[1] by the so called exponential technologies such as robotics, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, neuroscience and biotechnology, which will have a dramatic impact on our lives over the coming years and announce a radical change in the rules of play. Perhaps seeing the effects of this fourth revolution will take more time than what the so called "techno-optimists" say, but it cannot be denied that we all notice something is definitely changing.

Some foresee a change in the socio-economic paradigm (with either a hint of catastrophe or a glimmer of hope, depending on the way one looks at it) in which at least one thing is going to have to be redefined; whether what is understood today by job (and the salary paid for that job) is to remain the bargaining chip around which the entire economic system is structured. Because it would seem that, in most cases, machines are going to replace individuals in performing many tasks, and millions of jobs are going to disappear[2].

It is said all the time – and it seems reasonable enough to us – that only the best prepared, will survive and prosper in this era of change. And the term "best prepared" should highlighted here, as we don't say the "most prepared". That survival is not going to involve the accumulation of *technical* expertise, but rather, a greater capacity to provide something differential, personal and unique. There is already talk on several forums about the adaptability quotient rather than the intelligence quotient, as the best predictor of the possibilities a person has to succeed in this new medium that is being administered. In a world of constant change, the ability to adapt will be of paramount importance and, hence, one will need to be fast and put what has been learnt to one side (what helped us to achieve success in the *previous game screen*) in favour of re-learning.

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[1] All revolutions have been the result of some *accelerating engines*: the 1st revolution *accelerated* and compressed the time needed to do things using the steam engine, the 2nd using the combustion engine and this 3rd one using the search engine that has made access to information and dissemination of knowledge universal, and which has enabled small players *without size* to be able to compete on equal terms against the major incumbent players who had forged their dominant position in the preceding industrial paradigm.

[2] "Will Your Job Be Done By A Machine?", 21st May 2015. http://www.npr.org/sections/money/2015/05/21/408234543/will-your-job-be-done-by-a-machine

THE INDIVIDUAL OF THE FUTURE

There is evidence to suggest that, within a relatively short time frame, knowledge is going to become commoditized as it will be universally available via tutorials, all types of course and online mediation platforms (Innocentive, Kaggle, Quora, etc.). These tools will grant immediate access to the so-called "collective intelligence" – a type of intelligence that arises from collaboration and the concurring of many individuals.

Therefore, what is going to make the difference will not be knowledge *per se*, but rather, the capacity/ability on the part of individuals to use it and adapt to a changing milieu. Yet, how will that individual not only survive but also take full advantage of (and excel in) a hyper-competitive and changing environment?

The *individual of the future* is going to have a command of logics and tools related to what is known as **convergent thinking** (focused, analytical and optimizer), so as to seek a suitable response within the minimum time possible when challenges may be considered "standard", and at the same time, he will need to have a command of the "art" of **divergent thinking** in order to use his imagination to find ingenious solutions with which to face the unknown (everything deemed to be new and for which we have no proven solution).

But no one should be misled – it is not that the individual of the future will have to be creative or otherwise, but rather, that he is not going to be able to live solely using convergent thinking. There will be so many "black swans" appearing on the horizon that it will become necessary to resort naturally to ingenuity in order to endure but also take advantage of them. And the same will also be applied to businesses. In volatile environments such as the one described, the capacity to adapt now becomes an essential asset, while the capacity for individuals to imagine new ways of making such adaptation possible will prove to be the main raw material for dealing with all those changes. That is why, what has been referred to as more active way of thinking will need to be developed.

Given that the capacity to adapt by using one's ingenuity derives solely from the singular nature of individuals, it will prove essential for businesses to be the ones to create a suitable ecosystem to ensure those capacities are exploited at home. Ecosystems characterised by:

A. **Networked organisational structures** that may be adapted, assembled and dismantled depending on the moment and the challenges being faced, and that may avoid any counter-indications of the typical organisation organized by functions or even business units – the silo effect.

B. **Inclusive physical spaces** that may allow foster and capitalise on the wealth deriving from transversality.

C. **Smart information systems** that may facilitate decision-making and minimise or eliminate any consequences deriving from the existence of cognitive-type bias that we know will impoverish the decisions we take.

D. **Reward systems** that may encourage risk-taking within an environment in which trial-and-error learning is deemed to be the only way.

SKILLS TO BE DEVELOPED

## 1. Curiosity, empathy and a passion for detail.
"We think in generalities, but we live in details". Wystan H. Auden (1907 – 1973), poet.

The individual of the future is going to need to be curious and develop the skill of perceiving those details that are missed by most others, as this is going to be precisely what makes them stand out from the rest.

Why? Because on over-tendered markets such as the current one, the power which was previously in the hands of producers to impose "their rules" - what they found convenient for the purpose of attaining their objectives in terms of returns (the best example of which can be found in the famous comment by Henry Ford when referring to the Ford T model: "*A customer can have a car painted any color he wants so long as it's black*") – today refers to consumers. The proliferation of competitors offering very similar products or services and the easy access to information that customers now have via the Internet – which enables them to understand beforehand about the distinguishing features and virtues of each alternative or option made available to them by an

endless number of competitors – mean that they only go for those options they believe will meet their specific needs and that "reach" them from an emotional standpoint. What were formerly considered "details" such as convenience, comfort, aesthetics, interface, friendliness-empathy on the part of the interlocutor, immediate access to enjoyment and "tailor-made" solutions (in short, the experience as user) carry far more weight in decision-making by consumers than basic (technical and quality-related) aspects of products which, on the surface, it is assumed are going to be well-covered irrespective of who is offering them. This is why, to understand what it is that mobilises the consumer, the individual of the future is going to need to develop their skill at observing, listening and asking (also wondering introspectively) without any prejudgement and with an open mind. He will also need to get out and meet customers so as to gain empathy with them and their circumstances by observing and listening to them within their context[3] (not just through laboratory experiments). The aim is to go beyond the obvious and thus be able to get the chance to discover opportunities where others see nothing – in short, acting as if he was an anthropologist.

Thus, developing oneself in the *"method of Elenchus"* (the core technique of the Socratic questioning method used to research, inquire into and seek new ideas) and in the "5 Whys" technique (developed by Sakichi Toyoda for Toyota in order to go beyond the symptomatic and get to the root cause of problems) is going to be one of the first capacities and tools over which a command will be needed. Analysing with a critical spirit how the different pieces of the jigsaw puzzle are interconnected by comparing what we are told with what we observe in order to find any contradictions between the rhetoric (discourse) and the reality, is going to be the key to being able to create a map of opportunities associated with the profile of the persona with whom we wish to win favour (see figure).

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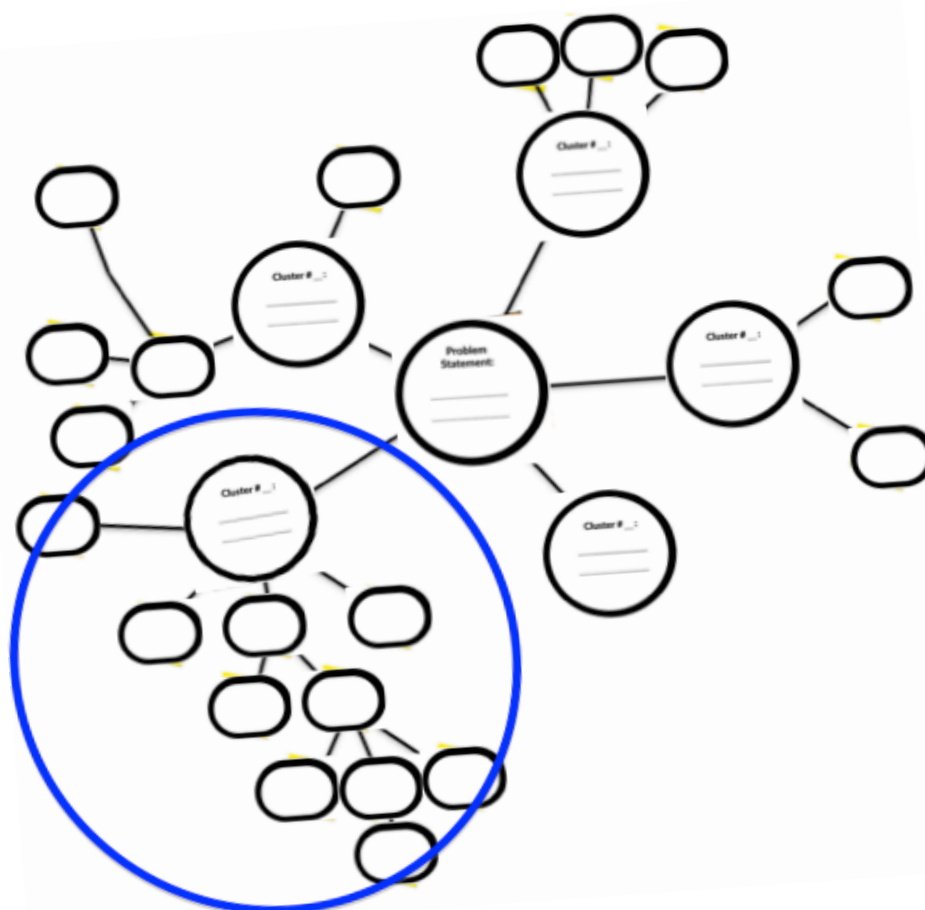
[3] *Practising immersion within the context in which people live in order to listen to their stories is fascinating, and is also essential for the purpose of gaining valuable insights. We need to pay a lot of attention to the problems we are told they are facing and take good note of the workarounds they use either consciously or unconsciously, in order to overcome some of the difficulties that current solutions on the market are causing and to infer many of those things we are not told about (whether because they consider them embarrassing, because they think they may be of little interest to the interlocutor, because they believe there is no need to say anything as it is obvious, or simply because they consider them a taboo subject). Finding inconsistencies, things that don't fit or make no sense and working on them is the key to confirming the fact that we might have something important here. It is going to be precisely such unexpected insights that will be gained after scratching beneath the surface – the true driving forces behind the subsequent course of action we will take.*

2. Lateral thinking

"Creative thinking is not a mystical talent. It is a skill that can be practised and nurtured". E. de Bono, doctor and writer.

A problem that has been taken much into consideration is a problem that is halfway to being resolved. That is the ultimate goal of everything stated in the previous point: being able to discern in order to focus on and deal with what really concerns us (the area highlighted in the previous figure). And to do so, we are going to need to develop skills in what is known as lateral thinking, which is none else than using one's imagination to be able to deal with any type of challenge in a different way, however new this may be.

Dr. Edward de Bono was the one who coined the term lateral thinking, and although nearly half a century has past since then, it remains more valid than ever. Lateral thinking is a methodology used to deal with problems that uses fairly unorthodox *algorithms* to create mental spaces that open the door to imaginative (disruptive) solutions. It is a consistent method used for giving rise to what is known as a provocation of what is deemed reasonable ("What if…?")[4], which questions basic assumptions and which, on the surface, makes no sense but at the same time arouses our imagination and that, once accepted (the provocation), compels our logical mind to seek a *way* (a means) to make it possible.

The interesting thing about this way of thinking is that it can be learned, given that the creative act is nothing out of the ordinary and that, as in many other cases, practice makes perfect. However, it can be noted, for instance, that there are certain individuals who naturally show a greater inclination towards this type of thinking, in the same way that there are others who are more spontaneous when an attempt is made to think in a more linear manner.

3. Critical thinking

"Whenever you teach, also teach to doubt what you teach". José Ortega y Gasset (1883 – 1955), philosopher.

The alternative ideas that are generated via lateral thinking (in an open milieu, in which everybody is invited to "fly high" without any restriction or prejudice) need to be judged in order to ensure their suitability. Critical thinking needs to be developed so as to be able to choose the option that most interests us in a reflexive, reasonable and reasoned manner, without preying to emotions and by clutching the data required to support our hypotheses.

And, moreover, doing so quickly is also of great importance within a milieu in which one is not going to survive merely on *strokes of genius* and in which decisions will have to be taken very often….and these decisions will need to be the right ones – critical decisions to ensure continuity and survival.

The capacity to analyse and argue about the viability of those new concepts generated via logical *algorithms* and knowledge within the organisational context, will be fundamental. In this respect, knowing about tools used for decision-making (such as the NUF test, an adaptation of the validation process used to obtain a patent, which assesses ideas based on three parameters: novelty, usefulness and feasibility or any other assessment formula) is essential for us to be able to prioritise and get out of the mire in which decision-making always ends up becoming. In this case, the individual of the future will need to avoid falling into temptations of the mind, in heuristic short-cuts that often make us consider system 1 when we should be facing the unknown and paving the way to ensure that system 2 takes hold of the reins[5].

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[4] **How is a "What if…?!" formulated**

1. The basic assumptions around the matter - which often go unquestioned - should be listed. For instance, in the airline industry, no one had thought about giving away plane tickets until relatively recently, because their sale was the main, if not only, source of income for that industry.

2. Reverse those assumptions through the "What if…?!". Following the previous example, a day arrived when someone had the crazy idea to wonder: "And what if we gave away the tickets?"

3. Ideas need to be generated that make a initial crazy statement…possible. "How might we survive if we did this? Well, perhaps if we gave away tickets, we would fill our planes with people who wouldn't have previously flown, because they weren't able to pay the price asked for the tickets and we might be able ´to sell´ that traffic we have been able to generate at airports with underused infrastructures located close to natural foci with tourist appeal".

[5] *Daniel Kahneman, awarded the 2002 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for having integrated aspects of psychological research into economic science (especially with regard to human judgement and decision-making under conditions of uncertainty), offered his account of two systems of thought in his book Thinking, Fast and Slow (2011). What is referred to as system 1 is a fast, almost automatic, effortless and intuitive response system of thought, which constitutes a response to the challenges and stimuli that we find within the milieu. System 2, in contrast, is a slow, conscious system of thought that requires concentration and effort and is rational-logical. Kahneman explains that, on most occasions, the responses generated by system 1 are valid, but in others, our biases (cognitive faults) are often beyond out control. In his book, Kahneman talks at length about what those biases are and provides a series of guidelines to avoid falling into such intellectual traps. Hence, he advocates diligence on the part of the individual as being one of the most important characteristics to be developed.*

4. Thinking with the hands

"Thinking with the hands and building with the head". Alberto Campo Baeza, architect.

The fourth skill to be developed is the capacity to learn through implementation. This is a key stage in the research process: *learning by doing*. This involves doing in order to be able to (re)think, develop the skill and the enjoyment of trying things out rather than merely resorting to intellectuality. And the fact is that putting ideas into practice compels us to deal with matters of structure, relation and logic, which, generally speaking, would go unnoticed if we were to face the challenge solely using our thought process and mere theoretical discussion. In a world such as the one in which we are currently living, in which trying out the validity/viability of ideas is cheap and easy it is unacceptable to only speak of ideas rather than experiments that are being carried out, as it has been well-proven that the number of innovations that come to light is proportional to the number of experiments performed (at these times when interest rates are around 0%, there is a huge amount of money in the system together with an eagerness to find projects that could provide returns and many platforms available for obtaining the funding needed to put our ideas to the test: Kickstarter, Indiegogo, Verkami, etc.)

Thus, The key is going to be for companies to encourage their change agents to try out their ideas and initiatives. In this respect, it may prove useful to apply the *5 x 5 method* put forward by Professor Michael Schrage, devised to foster the design of austere, flexible and high-impact experiments.

5.'Storytelling'

"People become the stories they hear and the stories they tell". Elie Wiesel (1928–2016), writer.

The fifth skill of which a command is needed is the science and *art* of imagining, building and telling stories that catch on – in other words, the capacity to explain and convince someone to become involved *motu proprio* and do something. In an organically fragmented world *without structures* such as the one being forecast for us (what has become known as the *gig economy*), it is going to come as no surprise that, depending on the moment and circumstances, we may find ourselves facing some task or undertaking. That inspiring leadership role that we may need to take on is going to be successful insofar as we are able to communicate with each other in order to ensure the bonds and commitment we are striving for and require of others. If before it was said that active listening and Socratic questioning would be the keys to understanding, the capacity to explain oneself in order to convince others is going to be inseparable from any success that an individual may attain. It will not be enough to be good at everything else if we are unable to communicate properly and create enthusiasm and bonds among our colleagues and associates. Without it, it will be difficult to succeed, given the magnitude of the challenges we will have to face.

6. Team spirit

"No-one can whistle a symphony. It takes a whole orchestra to play it". H. Luccock (1885 – 1960), Professor of Homilectics.

Is it going to be possible to find and/or develop complete individuals such as those that have been defined?

That would be desirable and the goal to be attained, although even if this were to be the case, what seems certain is that the future will be so complex and the task to be faced so vast that it will be necessary to work – like it or not – as a team. And that's where the final competences to be developed lie: humility, rigour and competence in order to be able to do one's best as part of a team.

Whether we like it or not, we are going to work in teams – in multidisciplinary teams that will be formed ad hoc according to circumstances and will be dismantled once the task has been completed so as to regroup straight. They will be multi-paradigm teams that will combine different functional perspectives (the reality is what it is depending on the angle from which one views it) and will be diverse in terms of gender, culture, life and professional experience and the way of thinking of the individuals who form part of such teams. Members will need to be reflective, action-oriented individuals with a tendency towards feeling comfortable practising convergent (focused) thinking and inclined towards divergent thinking and a tendency towards abstraction –old and new ones from the place. They will need to manage well in confined spaces, and enjoy the close contact by accepting that sometimes we will lead and at other times, others will do so – and that is going to constitute a genuine challenge.

CONCLUSIONS

A passion for capturing the most minute detail (via empathy) and not overlooking any opportunities that we often don't see (read capacity for observation), active listening, Socratic questioning, introspective reflection through another's shoes, critical thinking and lateral thinking (sometimes, one; at other times the other), learning by doing (thinking with the hands) in order to smoothly and economically validate hypotheses, eloquence in communicating, attracting and convincing and showing humility in leading and allowing oneself to be led, always with a genuine, convincing team spirit – these are (going to be) the keys to excelling in a world that will be *topsy-turvy*.
Do you dare?