

the digital worker 1.0



The smartphone, a novelty a decade ago, is now in everyone's pocket or handbag. Since 2009, Apple and Google have each procured millions of smartphone and tablet apps downloaded billions of times.

The smartphone is now increasingly also a hub for personal networks connected to health monitors strapped to our arms, otherwise stuck to our bodies, or lurking in our environment ready to measure us. As digital technologies are moving closer and closer to our bodies, we are increasingly rendering our bodies and activities digital. This data can be analysed, shared, and aggregated to increase our insight in ourselves. This "quantified self" movement extends beyond the private sphere to the working self – the digitised worker. This supports both individuals understanding of their own choices, and others understanding them. For example, over the past five years, I have tracked all my computer activities on [RescueTime.com](#), measuring my balance of productivity and procrastination (see figure).

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Being a digitised worker is a natural extension of the increasing individualisation of work. Digital technology makes it possible to coordinate and trace minute contributions from individuals who can be itinerant workers linked together by allocated commitments. Those still in traditional long-



term employment with one organisation, are also subjected to increased pressure to perform and to immediate availability and accountability through electronic means. Managing interaction and pressure, and focusing on delivering step-change decisions is no longer an executive prerogative alone. It has been democratised to all levels within the organisation in order to collectively meet the challenge of exploiting current technologies and markets, while at the same time exploring future ones through innovation.

For organisations and individuals alike, the challenge is captured well by [Drucker's famous quote](#): "What gets measured gets managed." However, the quote has an often-forgotten second part: "– even when it's pointless to measure and manage it, and even if it harms the purpose of the organization to do so."

We are still learning how to understand our own roles, behaviour and responses as digital workers, and may end up "knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing" as the quote goes. How much of our time should we spend reacting timely to requests from others? How do we balance planned and emerging decisions? How important is it really to keep checking email during holidays? What is the impact on our health of constantly reacting to immediate external pressure? We are each of us our own small organisation with little to protect us against the onslaught of interaction, requests, and demands.

The future of the digital worker will be shaped by three significant challenges forming a perfect digital storm:

1) DIGITALISATION

The wholesale digitisation of individual characteristics and behaviour visualised, aggregated, and shared.

2) AUTOMATION

The continued exponential growth of digital capabilities leading to new symbiotic human-machine relationships where the machines will engage in tasks previously considered uniquely human, and allowing for services unthinkable just a few years ago.

3) DISTRIBUTION

Emerging highly unpredictable aggregated effects from highly distributed individual actions by networked digital workers.

While each of the forces of digitalisation, automation, and distribution in their own right present challenges and opportunities, the combined effects leaves us with one hugely exciting and challenging unknown. We will need to rethink privacy, work, and identity in the context of organisational innovation and strategy. The possibilities will be endless and the challenges likewise.

One thing is clear to me – the digital worker will be as different from today's office worker as he or she is from a hunter-gatherer.

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Carsten Sørensen is a keynote speaker at the 2016 CRF International Conference in Prague (12 – 14 October). [Click here for details.](#)

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