

**crf**

CORPORATE RESEARCH FORUM

# POST MEETING NOTES

## DIGITAL CULTURE –

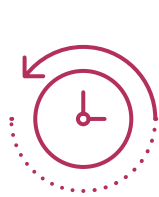
HOW TECHNOLOGY IS CHANGING THE WAY WE  
COMMUNICATE, WORK AND BEHAVE

13 June 2019, London

# DIGITAL CULTURE –

## HOW TECHNOLOGY IS CHANGING THE WAY WE COMMUNICATE, WORK AND BEHAVE

### KEY TAKEAWAYS



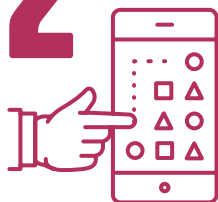
#### 1 Are we prioritising recovery?

Organisations must equip their people with the skills to navigate a world of data abundance. This means thinking about the 'why' behind each digital question, and giving ourselves timeouts from digital to assess its impact.

#### Are we designing for diverse information?

Digital is taking us rapidly toward hyper-personalisation, but it's diversity of thought and information that creates robust products, services, people, and societies. Organisations and individuals must now take responsibility for consciously incorporating diverse information into our processes, thinking, and actions.

# 2



#### Do our beliefs align with our tech?

Beliefs vary across cultures and groups, but the concentration of power in technology means that a few people's visions have outsized influence. We each have to take responsibility for co-creating the vision.



# 3

#### Are we encouraging experimentation and exploration?

Learning organisations, not 'knowing' organisations, are those that will survive in the future. We must give our people time to sit and think, to grapple with the implications of our technology and to use it with intention.

# 4



#### Will we hold ourselves accountable?

We must hold ourselves accountable for the impacts of our technology. This means asking the right questions, and constantly evolving our answers.

# 5



# DIGITAL CULTURE –

## HOW TECHNOLOGY IS CHANGING THE WAY WE COMMUNICATE, WORK AND BEHAVE

On 13<sup>th</sup> June, CRF members gathered at Sea Containers for our Summer Lecture with Digital Anthropologist Rahaf Harfoush.

Rahaf argued that, in a world where there seem to be new gadgets, apps, and digital tools released daily (if not hourly), it's easy to get lost in the flood of new technology and overlook how quickly, and profoundly, our world is changing. Technology is weaving itself into the social fabric of our lives and influencing everything from how we make friends and date to how we work and parent. It is providing new opportunities on a massive scale, and is transforming every aspect of business, from HR (think about the increasing role technology plays in recruitment, performance management, employee engagement, and so on) to Operations, Marketing, Product Development and every other function, too. Many businesses find themselves in a mad rush to harness the power of technology to outsmart, and outrun, the competition – and there is a lot of new competition.

But when we talk about technology, we tend to have tool-centric discussions, focused on surface-level innovations – changes to processes, workflows, and pipelines. We tend to forget to talk about the ways technology is actually influencing us – how we form community, how we connect to people, the truths it is revealing about who we are and what we want, and the implications of all this for the type of world we are actively co-creating together.



### INTERVIEW WITH RAHAF HARFOUSH



Rahaf took us beyond that tool-centric, surface level to develop a deep, human-centric understanding of how technology is changing our relationship with the world. We looked at five forces through which digital culture is influencing our behaviour, and we left armed with five key questions to ask when trying to make sense of our new constantly connected lives.

#### **1. Data Abundance – Moving from data scarcity to data abundance is a huge and fundamental societal shift.**

We have moved from data scarcity (data used to be expensive, difficult to find, and difficult to use) to data abundance (data is now cheap or free, easy to find, and easier to use) in a very short period. This represents a fundamental shift to our society. We have all become data powerhouses, adding more to the ecosystem all day, every day. We're sharing not just data, but many new types of data (for example, the steps we take in a day, our ovulation cycles, our mental wellbeing, sleep quality, financial goals and performance, and so on). It's not just information we are sharing, but an increasing amount of intimate information – thus we are seeing a normalisation of digital intimacy. We have become accustomed to sharing very personal information with strangers, and we're becoming increasingly digitally dependent (think of the frequency with which you consult your

# DIGITAL CULTURE – HOW TECHNOLOGY IS CHANGING THE WAY WE COMMUNICATE, WORK AND BEHAVE

smartphone, and the number of apps installed on it). At the same time, we're struggling to understand how to manage all this new information. We are suffering from information overload, which is overwhelming and can negatively impact not only our personal lives, but our performance at work. For example, one study found that 62% of people reported that their quality of work suffers due to information overload, 52% were demoralised or at 'breaking point', and 91% of employees routinely disregard information without fully reading it.

Anxiety related to information overload is becoming normalised, as many people feel pressure to be constantly connected. To understand this, we must look at how our relationship with information consumption has evolved over time. We have moved from a linear to an infinite information ecosystem (the internet), and we are not yet equipped with the skills to navigate an infinite ecosystem. We need to rethink how we process information; education has conditioned us to look for an exit point that no longer exists. The constant stimulation of the infinite ecosystem is also negatively impacting us cognitively. The new ecosystem provides a never-ending string of dopamine hits, impacting our brain chemistry, and ultimately making us incapable of listening, focusing, and concentrating. Ironically, there is now a market for tools to help people deal with information overload (think of digital detox retreats, which are rising in popularity and are, essentially, spaces that people pay a great deal of money to enter, where they can talk to other people without the presence of technology).

At the root of much of our anxiety today, Rahaf argued, is the lack of skills to navigate our new infinite information ecosystem. We need to update how we process and relate to information. As information overload becomes the norm, organisations also need to rethink how they acquire and share knowledge with their teams. What are the skills needed in order to navigate the age of data abundance? It's not just about information, but about the right information. It's not about what we can measure, because at this stage we can measure just about everything, but about why we're

measuring, and what we hope to learn from the information we gather. For example, why are we measuring a given employee metric? It shouldn't be 'because we can', but 'because we need it' or 'because it will help us'. Rahaf asked us to think about whether we are prioritising recovery into our data strategy. Do we need more data, or do we need to give people more time to sit and think about the data and its implications?

## PANEL QUESTIONS

**Q** **Power over data (and its monetisation) currently sits in the hands of the companies who gather it; how do you see the landscape shifting over time, back to us as individuals?**

**A** *As individuals and consumers, we have a responsibility to become informed and responsible about our own digital data and identity. We can take the initiative to protect ourselves and reduce our vulnerability. For example, there are now tools available to protect our privacy when browsing, and to scramble our online identity. We should also remember our power to shame organisations with bad practices. As citizens, we should be asking leaders to respect human digital autonomy. And of course, we ultimately still have the power to choose not to use many of these technologies.*

**Q** **The opportunities are exciting, but the risks of information overload are concerning. Doesn't government have a responsibility to regulate? Or should companies be self-regulating?**

**A** *Citizens, government, and companies all have to play a role. History has shown quite clearly that we can't leave companies entirely to self-regulate. But government regulation has to happen in collaboration with people who know the issues. It's not just a mindset of 'the government should do it'. In this new world of blurred boundaries, everyone has to play their part and be accountable for it.*

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## 2. Digital Relativism – We are creating a world built in our own image.

Products and services are increasingly hyper-customised to the individual (think of personalised clothes, makeup, and dietary advice, or personalised entertainment such as Netflix's recent 'choose your own adventure' film, *Bandersnatch*). This is unsurprising, given how much information we are sharing about ourselves.

But a consequence of this is that we are entering a phase of informational complacency – everything is so personalised that we're losing our objectivity. We are increasingly creating our own versions of the reality we want to see, rather than actual reality, and this 'personalised reality' is based on a limited and biased number of inputs. Technology is hacking our relationship with uncertainty.

Rahaf asked us to think about our algorithm diets. How much information are we consuming based on what a machine has decided to show us as opposed to what we've sought out? What are the benefits and disadvantages of this? How will we make sure that we are constantly looking for new perspectives, new opinions, and new datasets? How will we push ourselves out of our comfort zones and constantly challenge our data assumptions? For the creators of the algorithms themselves, is everything they thought was true when they programmed it still true? Or does it need to be adapted?

At the organisational level, Rahaf urged us to ask ourselves whether we are designing for diversity in our decision-making processes. It is critical that we avoid having the same people in the same room making the same decisions. Cross-pollination across functions is important because it diminishes the chances that we, and our organisations, will be caught out by our blind spots, and left behind in the new hyper-competitive business context.

## PANEL QUESTIONS

**Q** Shouldn't we be training AI for our values?

**A** *We're now building algorithms that program themselves; and we don't understand how or why. This is called the 'black box of AI' and it is an insane edge to be standing above. We are using AI for serious things such as criminal sentencing and insurance claims, but there is little or no transparency to know how and why the technology got there. We urgently need to be creating a universal standard protocol around the transparency of these technologies.*

## 3. Digital DNA – We are embedding our values into our code.

With emerging technologies gaining access to more and more parts of our personal lives, who decides what's ethical or not? How should we think about ethics and values in the age of disruptive tech?

Increasingly, we are digitising moral imperatives, but how objective are algorithms, really? They aren't, because we're the ones teaching them (and only a few of us, at that), and our moral imperatives vary widely between cultures, geographies, and identities. While algorithms allow faster decision-making, those programming them make the choices about how they work, thus introducing plenty of bias into the systems. The bias may not be malicious or overt, but it is there nonetheless. And with the concentration of tech influence and power in a few hands (Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, etc.), a few very limited worldviews are developing an outsized ability to influence society.

At root, morals are far too complicated for algorithmic decision-making. Modern technology is increasingly the manifestation of belief systems, but these belief systems are rarely easy to figure out. Rahaf challenged us to ask ourselves whether our technology aligns with our beliefs? When it does, we can do great things (for example, Salesforce has used technology to remedy pay discrepancies along demographic lines throughout the organisation). But all too often, technology does not align with the full spectrum of our beliefs.



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## 4. Dissolution of Boundaries – The boundaries between our offline and online worlds are rapidly blurring.

So much of innovation depends on setting boundaries, but our boundaries are being rewritten by technology. The human experience is increasingly transcending platforms, which creates new spaces and opportunities for engagement (and raises the question, 'what is an asset?'). New social norms are developing that blend our online and offline worlds. 'Internet purchase exchange locations', AR-enabled contact lenses, and tools that allow us to project screens onto parts of our bodies are examples of the offline world responding to the online world. But this also means that the lines we drew around business years ago no longer hold. How will we create meaningful experiences for consumers, talent, and individuals as the world gets more connected and the line between online and offline continues to blur? How will we navigate the redrawing of these digital borders?

The key question for businesses in this new blended world is 'how are we shifting from being a 'knowing' to a 'learning' organisation?'. This is a major philosophical shift. Organisations must ask themselves: Are we prioritising and rewarding learning? Are we giving people time to learn, to sit and think, and at all levels of the organisation? Are they able to try new things? How are we integrating exploration and experimentation into our strategy? Leadership doesn't have all the answers in this new terrain; leaders need to be learning too.

Rahaf shared an example of how SAP, the software company, radically shifted its focus with respect to talent to meet the challenges of this new environment. SAP realised that the technology market was moving so quickly that by the time they recruited for technology skills, the skills were outdated. So they shifted from acquiring talent to developing talent in-house – a major change to their entire recruitment strategy. At SAP, it's no longer about finding talent, but about nurturing and developing the right talent. This changed the profiles of who they were looking for (curiosity, adaptability, and a learning mindset became much more important than specific technical skills).

HR should be challenging itself, like SAP, to think about how it can best respond in a world of constant change and dissolved boundaries. How can we forecast the right skills when those skills are changing constantly? Should we even be hiring for very specific roles? Or should we be reconsidering job descriptions and responsibilities entirely?

## PANEL QUESTIONS

**Q** Do you think there will be a natural rebalancing at some point whereby there will be a reaction against tech / digital; that it's all happened so quickly, but we'll catch up and reassert our human authority?

**A** *The future is both awesome and terrible. Technology offers incredible opportunities, such as in healthcare and disaster management, but we've all seen the divisiveness and political turmoil it has also created. It comes back to us taking control. The most important thing we can do is act with intentionality with our technology. A lot of it really is up to us, to our self-control. These are skillsets. We have to learn to limit ourselves and take control. It's a skill that can be built and strengthened.*

## 5. Evolutionary Ecosystems – Forget digital transformation; embrace digital evolution.

What does all this change mean for the way we create strategy and identify the way forward? How do we create an agile, responsive strategy? How do we transform the unknown into a place of strategic opportunity? How can we celebrate ambiguity? What will organisations need to do in order to continue to thrive?

Rahaf argued that we need to get beyond the buzzword of 'digital transformation' and instead focus on embracing digital evolution. Organisations must embrace constant evolution for survival, and there is no end point to which we will arrive, and no exit. Evolution is a question of culture, values, and leadership, not technology and tech skills.

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Part of this evolution involves fixing the imbalances we've created. For example, businesses, governments, and consequently educators have spent decades prioritising technical skills at the expense of other skills. Prioritising STEM while deprioritising liberal arts (art, writing, and so on) has created a world in which a generation of kids know how to code but not what or why. What's the point of training the most brilliant minds to build technology that makes the world a worse place?

We also need to strike a balance between progress and decency. Just because we can do something, doesn't mean we should. For example, it was discovered that the digital assistant Siri, when asked 'should I jump off a bridge?', responded by giving directions to the nearest bridge. This is a stark reminder that everything we do reflects someone's vision of progress. Shouldn't we all be responsible for co-creating this vision?

Emerging technologies are facilitating profound societal changes that many of us are unaware of. Are we holding ourselves accountable for the impact of our technology? Are we even asking the right questions? Constant evolution is a key process through which we can get better at the questions we ask, and hold ourselves accountable for the answers.

## LANE4 REFLECTION

**Richard Parker**, Client Director at Lane4, used his experience within sport and business to summarise the key points from Rahaf's lecture. Richard highlighted that, often, the biggest challenge organisations face when implementing digital transformation is ensuring that their employees are engaged throughout the journey. They are, after all, the key to the success of any large-scale change. Richard also raised questions around the implications of digital change for leadership. Are we thinking about the leadership skills – personal resilience, a learning/growth mindset – that are needed for this era when we recruit and train leaders? And in trying to address this need for balance, how many of us find we have tech skills but not adaptability skills?

**Lane4**  
Engagement, excellence, edge



# SPEAKER

## DIGITAL CULTURE – HOW TECHNOLOGY IS CHANGING THE WAY WE COMMUNICATE, WORK AND BEHAVE



### RAHAF HARFOUSH

Rahaf Harfoush is a strategist, digital anthropologist, and best-selling author who focuses on the intersections of emerging technology, innovation, and digital culture. Her research centres on the human impacts of artificial intelligence, algorithms, social networks, and big data.

She is the Executive Director of the Red Thread Institute of Digital Culture and also teaches Innovation & Emerging Business Models at SciencePo's MBA program in Paris.

Her latest book – *Hustle and Float* – reveals how the collision of disruptive technologies and centuries-old beliefs about work is creating an untenable tension for workers in the idea economy, and what organisations need to do to help their creatives thrive. Rahaf is also co-author of *The Decoded Company: Know Your Talent Better Than You Know Your Customers*.

**GET IN TOUCH WITH RAHAF**



# FURTHER READING

## DIGITAL CULTURE – HOW TECHNOLOGY IS CHANGING THE WAY WE COMMUNICATE, WORK AND BEHAVE

### BOOKS

**Harfoush, Rahaf.** 2019. *Hustle and Float: Reclaim Your Creativity and Thrive in a World Obsessed with Work.*

### VIDEO

**Rahaf Harfoush.** *Hustle and Float.* Keynote.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYAOoluO4XU>

**Rahaf Harfoush.** *Digital DNA.* TEDx.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mS\\_i8Wv14U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mS_i8Wv14U)

**Rahaf Harfoush.** *Entrepreneurship and the Future of Protest.* TEDx.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3DEhs86O18>

### WEB

**Creating an Inclusive Culture.** (CRF Speed Read).  
<https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/speed-read-creating-an-inclusive-culture/>

**Employee Health and Wellbeing – Whose Responsibility Is It?** (CRF Research Report).  
<https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/employee-health-and-wellbeing-whose-responsibility-is-it-2/>

**Rahaf Harfoush.** (CRF Presentation Slides).  
<https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/digital-culture-how-technology-is-changing-the-way-we-communicate-work-behave-presentation/>

**Rahaf Harfoush's website.**  
<http://rahafharfoush.com/>

**Resourcing – How HR's Core Competence Is Evolving.** (CRF Research Report).  
<https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/resourcing-how-hrs-core-competence-is-evolving/>

**Strategic Workforce Analytics.** (CRF Research Report).  
<https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/research-report-strategic-workforce-analytics/>

### WEBINARS/PODCASTS

**Creating a Truly Inclusive Culture.**  
<https://crf.wavecast.io/live-webinars/creating-a-truly-inclusive-culture>

**Navigating the Future of Jobs, Work, and Careers.**  
<https://crf.wavecast.io/live-webinars/navigating-the-future-of-work>

# NEXT CRF EVENTS

## RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS: HOW CAN HR DRIVE THE AGENDA?



**LONDON**

**TUESDAY 10 SEPTEMBER**

9.00 – 16.00

Church House  
Great Smith Street  
London  
SW1P 3NZ

**FIND OUT MORE AND REGISTER**



**BARCELONA**

**MONDAY 7 – WEDNESDAY 9  
OCTOBER  
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE**

Sofia Hotel  
Plaça de Pius XII, 4, 08028  
Barcelona, Spain

**FIND OUT MORE AND REGISTER**



# FEEDBACK

## DIGITAL CULTURE – HOW TECHNOLOGY IS CHANGING THE WAY WE COMMUNICATE, WORK AND BEHAVE

Thank you for attending CRF's event – *Digital Culture – How Technology is Changing the Way We Communicate, Work and Behave*. We hope that you enjoyed the event and found it to be useful.

We would sincerely appreciate any feedback you can give us regarding the organisation, running and content of the event.

This survey should take no longer than 5 minutes to complete. We really appreciate your time and will actively use your suggestions to improve future sessions.

Thank you, and we look forward to welcoming you to the next CRF event.

The Corporate Research Forum Team

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate the following:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Overall event										
Venue										
Pre-event communication										
Delivery of content										
Quality of content										
Relevance and quality of materials										
Opportunity for networking										
Opportunity for discussion										
Applicability to my organisation										

2. Was the content of the session helpful for you and your organisation? And what did you get out of the day?

For you:

For your organisation:

3. Please leave us any additional comments on the event in the comments box below, as well as any suggestions on how we can improve future events.

4. Can we contact you in the future or use the information provided here for marketing purposes?

Yes      No

Thank you.



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