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The future of digital

## The world of work is changing

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The fourth industrial revolution is upon us – a period characterised by the disruptive and explosive growth of new technologies and systems.

But is the digital revolution mostly hype? And what does it really mean for established companies looking to crest the wave of tech and emerge successful?

We got together with four key players from four very different enterprises to explore the future of digital for them – both in an organisational setting and on a more personal level.

The results weren't quite what we were expecting.

### The participants:

- Alex Marples  
Director of Consulting at Indigogold
- Mark Dickinson  
Chief People Officer at TalkTalk
- Melanie Tansey  
Group HR Director at ITN
- David Reay  
HR Director, International at Sony Music
- Jig Ramji  
Global Head of Leadership and Talent Development at Bloomberg LP

## Alex:

Digital is undeniably changing the way that we do business. The way I see it, the digital impact is happening on three levels:

### 1. Allowing organisations to access new markets

Think Uber's entrance into food delivery.

### 2. Creating a route to new customers

Think the BBC using podcasts to reach more people with the same product.

### 3. How decisions are made internally

Think, almost any B2C corporation using digital to streamline customer experience and speed decisions.

But, digital comes in many flavours, so I'll start with the question:

# What does digital mean in your organisation?

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## David:

Digital has transformed business everywhere – and music is no exception.

The consumer is in the driving seat as they never have been before: they choose what they listen to and when. This has been and continues to be a fantastic growth engine for the organisation, but it's also a challenge to meet the expectations of a more discerning consumer.

## Melanie:

We've felt the power shift from the provider to the consumer too. ITN has evolved from a traditional TV news business into a multi-platform, multi-genre, content creation company.

As technological innovation has driven changes in consumer behaviour – faster than anyone could have predicted – ITN has created a parallel offering for viewers, an integrated solution that combines both digital and traditional platforms.

## Mark:

Digital is fundamental to us. It's the primary way that we interact with our customers, and it's the basis of our product itself. You only have to look at the exponential growth in bandwidth that our customers require and you can see that digital is playing a greater part in all our lives.

It's inherent in the way we serve our customers, as we provide them with the connectivity to enable them to lead more efficient, better connected, enriched lives.

## Jig:

There's no doubt that digital is making its mark. But I think we also need to inject a note of caution to how much power we give it. Whenever we talk about the fourth industrial revolution, it's often in an emotional, tabloidesque tone that is driven by the media's hunt for a "juicy story".

But this tech has been embryonic and in the mix for some time – people are choosing to make it a "thing" now; there's a lot of scaremongering going on.

The tech itself isn't the issue – how we use it is.

## Alex:

Jig, I think you're right – digital can become a convenient label under which we file our business worries, and I don't think that's particularly helpful.

What does seem to be clear though is that it is necessitating often quite big changes in the way organisations do business, and (done reasonably well), it represents an advantage over competitors. So, it makes sense to figure out what it means for your business.

So, maybe we could look retrospectively at the responses you've had to make...

## What are the major changes the digital revolution has catalysed in your company?

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### Melanie:

The advent of digital meant we had had to evolve the way we published our material – and it's also had an impact on the nature of the content we create to meet the needs of broader audiences.

We recognised that due to the shift in the way people were consuming content, we needed to distribute it across a range of channels, not just on TV.

So we brought in digital leaders to spearhead the transformation, supported by a gifted team of digital producers and online journalists with the requisite skill-set and outlook to meet the shifts in consumer demand.

Integration between traditional broadcast news teams and the new online teams was crucial.

For example, in one of our TV newsrooms, every employee who worked in a TV or online role spent time working on the other side, and we set up channels for regular communication. What emerged was an agile collaboration with an integrated team that could take a story and mould it into the best format for each platform.

## Mark:

It's been a journey for us, like with most businesses, but we knew for certain that more customers wanted to carry out more of their interactions with us via digital, self-service led tools. That was coupled with the data that showed we could provide the best levels of customer satisfaction through those channels. Plus, as the value brand in our sector the associated cost savings were important too.

We noticed early on that digital-native businesses seemed to find it easier to move with this shift, but more traditional, long-standing organisations like banks, Telcos, and utilities have had to go on a huge journey, retraining the way they operate and communicate – with varying levels of success.

## David:

In the role I have played, we've also had to introduce digital gradually from a people perspective. One example of this is experimenting with how you can use talent within your business to innovate and shine a light on opportunities for change and evolution in a digital context.

## David:

We've worked proactively on bringing the best out in people, giving them a platform to bring themselves to work, and to be creative. This has created a real buzz and energy around the place that's been fertile ground for some truly effective outcomes in how we work in a digital world, how we use technology to enhance and open up new business and how we can work together and collaborate in new ways.

Through talent programs like this, we've developed our people to be more confident – to be innovative leaders in their own right.

## Alex:

So if digital is being adopted, the first challenge is how to lead and manage the change. How we do this will be dictated to some extent by organisational culture as well as leadership capability. In turn, these factors will determine the vehicle by which we deliver the change. An effective way of doing this seems to be to integrate the digital shift to other major business challenges like Talent, Product, or Customer-led initiatives.

If we look at how internal change is playing out,

# How is digital changing the way your organisation functions internally?

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## Mark:

“Digital” was incubated in the organisation for some time before it gained precedence. We started forcing it into meetings – “surely it would be better if we could do that online?!” – and eventually, it’s become a necessary and accepted part of the way we do things.

## Melanie:

It’s now a crucial aspect of every part of the organisation. When we hire leaders, we ask them what their predictions for how people will be consuming content in five and ten years are, and what that means for us as a business and how we can best serve our clients and ultimately all those who consume our content.

It’s vital that we create compelling content for multiple platforms and keep evolving in line with changes in people’s viewing behaviour.

## Mark:

Developing the skills to make the shift to a digital-led way of operating has been a gradual process. We bought in some talent: people with multi-channel experience who would come and intentionally disrupt the status quo, often from digital-native backgrounds.

This has been both positive and difficult – some of the workforce struggled to grasp and accept the changes. We've also partnered with other organisations to create a broad-based digital development programme, inculcating a digital mindset and building familiarity with the new way of working.

A lot of the internal shifts have been towards an agile model of working, creating multi-channel and multi-product teams: crucially, they'll also bend the accepted hierarchy and break people out of their silos to focus on getting the best results. Agile working like this has been transformational, making digital a part of the very fabric of the organisation, not a bolt-on element or a siloed function to be avoided.

There is a tension between more traditional ways of doing things and the newer "agile" way of working, and each has their place. We're happy to hold and manage this tension, recognising that different models work for different people and different functions.

## Jig:

I definitely agree that holding this tension is important in creating a culture of growth, not fear of the change.

I think at times companies may be getting caught up in excitement over the opportunities that the tech offers and neglecting the human angle. In times of change like this, good leadership becomes more important than ever and our people are the key to success.

Many current senior leaders have established ways of doing things and are now being asked to jump into the AI revolution. I think at times the fear inherent in this situation is causing leaders to act out to protect their roles, diminishing the quality of their leadership – making them inward- rather than outward-looking.

HR needs to generate a people strategy to support these leaders. We need to create a more compelling narrative to get them on board with the benefits of digital, not only to the organisation but to them in role. We need better workforce planning to support people in changing their approach.

I think we also need to ask if we have the right leaders to drive the journey around digitalisation.

We need leaders who will be the architects of their digital engagement, not hapless followers. They don't need to be techies, but they must be cognizant of and fluent with using the tech. It's more about mindset than skillset.

## Alex:

We also need to be conscious of finding a balance in change that injects new talent and team structures, while retaining what will continue to work well. With a shift like this, we should stay inquisitive and analytical; the battle that we're fighting for digital talent doesn't mean we need to throw away the valuable people we already have.

Existing talent may not have a ready-made set of technology-related skills, but with the potential to integrate a digital-friendly attitude they can still be a powerful asset.

This comes back to Mark's point – the pivotal approach here is cultivating the ability to hold the tension between the old and new, traditional and digital, to allow growth that's directly related to what the organisation is trying to achieve. This injects something of a cautionary note into the developments;

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## Are there precautions we need to take, or limitations?

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Jig:

I think that we need to ensure that we're looking for solutions that enhance our roles rather than compromising them. We need to be wary of using tech as the next PR stunt – discerning about the tech we need to serve our organisation's long-term strategic goals – not get caught up in methods that are actually detrimental to organisational efficiency and effectiveness in the long term.

In the race for data, some companies undoubtable have poor quality of data relative to their needs; for things like predictive analytics and hypothesis testing this simply doesn't work. The data needs to be robust, in both quantity and quality, for initiatives to function as they should and not undermine the integrity of the systems.

For example, there's massive scope for increasing decision-making agility and improving workflow – things like CV filtering.

But we need to be careful. Often, the presence of "tech" means that we assume objectivity in the system, when often unconscious bias is getting baked into the process. We need to ensure that by selecting for certain traits we don't exclude a large sector of society - people with poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, for example.

## David:

I agree that the technologies we use should always be in direct service of the ultimate goal. The digital focus should always be brought back to the fundamental questions: how do we serve our artists and customers better?

Digital should be used to nurture an idea that has real merit, not as an end in itself. I also think that the disruptive nature and breakneck speed of the changes demands that we use caution in combination with innovation. If we start small with an idea – here we use the minimum value proposition concept – we can test it with minimal risk. This makes people more comfortable to try, in the knowledge that the idea might not always be as we originally envisaged it.

## Alex:

I agree. Again, it's a question of finding balance in the pace of change. It's easy to get caught up in pushing greater operational efficiency and lose sight of the bigger things the business is trying to achieve. We've seen several organisations backpedal from digital interventions – mainly automation – as they realise that they've compromised their ability to make dependable decisions.

So we're seeing a combination of opportunities and precautionary tales; with both of these elements at play,

# What's the future of digital?

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## Mark:

It's inevitable that digital will advance our internal effectiveness, as it speeds things up and helps us connect the dots more quickly.

This is true of many of the more logical, intellectual actions: take recruitment. Managers' ability to predict success in a role can still be incredibly subjective. Using data analytics helps take out some of this inaccuracy and efficiently select a shortlist of candidates to move forward in the hiring process.

Of course, we need to be aware of the ethical considerations around what data we draw, how we do it, and how we process it. There'll also always be a need for candidates to connect to a human being in the process, and to personally buy-in to the organisation's value and purpose.

A lot of the more creative functions, and those requiring a high level of emotional intelligence, won't be replaced by digital. Although we're creating an e-learning platform designed to teach people how to self-coach, for example, this will never replace the energy and trust you can get from a human coaching relationship.

## David:

The world of digital makes us more discerning, savvier; it puts a wealth of information at our fingertips that we didn't have before. I think we need to keep honing our people and teams, and use digital solutions to maximise this capability. People create the ideas: technology helps us execute them.

## Melanie:

The evolution to digital has resulted in some incredible successes for us, giving the organisation a real sense of confidence and belief in how digital platforms can greatly extend the reach of our content, with our news brands even stronger as a result.

For example, Channel 4 News has more views of its content online than any other news producer in Europe. That shows that there is an enormous demand for high quality, high impact, public service journalism from an increasing number of viewers, more of whom are now online than watching on TV which was the only option available to them before now.

At the same time, interestingly, with so much inaccurate and biased 'news' content available online, we're also seeing a shift back to more trusted sources. In fact, Channel 4 News recently announced a partnership with Facebook to produce a weekly news programme on 'Facebook Watch', its digital VOD platform. So, the opportunity to work with trusted organisations like ITN, who have that credibility and reputation, is seen as really important in the digital sphere.

## Jig:

I think that digital will reinvent how we conceptualise the labour pool. It's enabling the gig economy, portfolio careers, and the rise of entrepreneurship: this is going to change the rules of engagement across the board.

## Mark:

As Chief People Officer, digital never ceases to amaze me. I can be at work in the office, get food delivered, tweak the heating at home and order some things I need, and get a cab outside – all without even using my computer.

I'm really proud to be part of giving people that level of choice and engagement with life, and believe that as long as we do it right, digital will strengthen our traditional values and enrich our lives for the future.

## Alex:

It's been really enlightening to see how the digital shift is playing out in your organisations. For me, there are three points I will continue to ponder:

1. **We need to maintain trust throughout change.**

Organisations are still fundamentally human systems, and if we place too much responsibility and emphasis on digital, we may erode the trust of our people and our customers.

2. **We need intelligent users.**

Digital is a means to achieving an end more efficiently, not the solution itself. It requires the right people steering the ship and managing the technology.

3. **We need to open our eyes to the full potential of digital.**

Both internally and externally, new technologies are offering us greater choice in how we approach challenges and transform the status quo. Digital can enrich our brand as well as our experience of work, and we need to stay open to this progress.