

ABSTRACT FORUM 2021



THE HUMAN IMPERATIVE

NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY IN THE DIGITAL AGE



by **Richard Straub & Julia Kirby**

As exponentially advancing digital technology transforms so much of work and the world, questions inevitably arise about the place of the human being. Some say human roles will be diminished; others insist that the growing possibilities of “data-driven” decisions and actions will call even more for people who can combine science with common sense. The past years’ experience of global pandemic has thrown such questions into high relief, whether in organizations choosing to invest more heavily in automation or among policymakers implored to simply “follow the science.”

We can expect economic, fiscal, cultural, and political crises to escalate in the wake of Covid, and the tension between the technocratic and the humanistic forces to reach a breaking point. The former see a time of upheaval as an opportune moment to force a large-scale “reset” to a system currently flawed in many ways. The latter reject revolutionary redesign as counter to human nature – which craves, as Peter Drucker put it, a balance between “change and continuity.” Which is the best way forward, and how can we ensure that it prevails?

Leading thinkers at our 2021 Forum will grapple with important questions including but not limited to the following:

- Must there be a human imperative at the core of organizations? How would we define it? What threatens it most today? How could good management serve it better?
- Forced to make decisions under highly dynamic conditions, should organizations rely more heavily on data and analytics? What are the risks of moving away from human judgment?
- Do we need better ways of discovering truth and thinking through the complex issues of our time? What insights should we take from philosophy, psychology, and other realms to prepare our minds for the age of AI?
- What should we hope for—and fear—in the aftermath of a year of remote working? Will less in-person contact become the norm? How might human beings as social animals and community builders respond?
- What lessons can we take from the Covid-19 crisis about the clashing perspectives of scientific experts, policymakers, business leaders, and ordinary citizens and workers — and how they should be prioritized or integrated to best serve the needs of humanity?
- As in every time of upheaval, some today say we should not let “a serious crisis go to waste.” But is seizing the chance to enact sweeping change a humane impulse? What can we learn from the history of sudden revolutions, whether political, cultural, or organizational?
- Central to the human condition is the ability to learn from evidence and experience — both our own and others’. How is it, then, that human organizations prove so resistant to collective learning? How do we stop making the same mistakes?
- What changes to management education would better equip managers with the knowledge and competences they need today? Are there useful models to be found in how other professions are mastered?
- Peter Drucker insisted that to be a change leader, an organization must also “establish continuity internally and externally.” But that human-friendly balance he advised means nothing to a computer. Is it still valid as a principle for management?
- So much of recent human achievement has resulted from growing capabilities in administration and leadership that the past hundred years have been called “the management century.” How can we extend that run and make even greater progress in the future?

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