



## Executive Summary

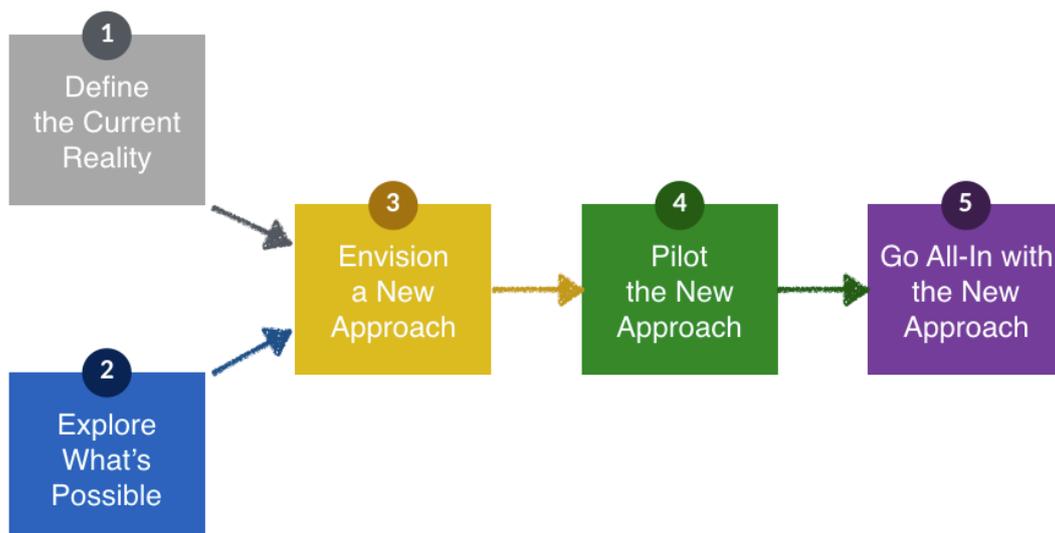
Leveraging of advanced technologies for transformation requires more than mere purchase and typical usage patterns. Seeking more than a tactical embrace of new technology demands a change in us—how we look at how work can be changed, what we believe to be right about the design of work, and even the role that we ascribe to technology in creating opportunities for transformation. Two tools are necessary: a set of principles with which to transform our mindset and a process to follow.

The six principles of reimagining effective work are:

1. There is no single best way to design a given work process. No work design is perfect.
2. The sands are shifting. New ways of designing work are continually under development.
3. “Improving” has a variety of meanings. Taking a single-dimensional view is not ideal.
4. Attempting to change too much too quickly usually fails. Building the adaptive capacity of individuals, teams or the organisation is essential.
5. Some areas of work don’t need to be improved—they are good enough. Others hold the key to breaking through to the next level.
6. Just because something is possible doesn’t make it applicable. It may be possible and suitable for another team or organisation, but their first moves don’t have to define yours.

The process for reimagining effective work has five steps, including two that happen at the beginning in parallel—or at least with sufficient boundaries to ensure both receive proper independent attention. See Figure 1.

*Figure 1. Five Steps for Reimagining Effective Work*



Depending on what else you have to do in life will determine how frequently you re-ignite the process from step 1. Pushing the edge of betterment is predicated on the willingness to start again.

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## Introduction

*Statistics that show purchase or use of some technologies, such as smart devices, has only a slight relationship to technology transformation in business processes. The majority of people only buy smart devices as status symbols and to entertain themselves or socialize. Leveraging of advanced technologies such as cloud computing is pretty low.<sup>1</sup>*

If leveraging of advanced technologies for transformation—rather than portraying status or seeking entertainment—requires more than mere purchase and common usage patterns, we need to develop the ability to approach technology differently. Seeking more than a tactical embrace of new technology and moving beyond the artificial or surface-level impacts demands a change in us. A change in how we look at how work can be improved, what we believe to be right about the design of work currently and into the future, and even the role that we ascribe to technology in creating opportunities for transformation. Two tools are necessary for embarking on this journey: a set of principles to transform our mindset and a process to follow.

In this report—the third in the *Reimagining Effective Work* series—we will:

1. Explicate six principles for reimagining. The principles create a mindset for how to think about and approach reimagining activities.
2. Outline a step-by-step model for reimagining effective work, pulling together the broader context and work changes explored in the first two reports, along with the principles described in this one.

## Principles for Reimagining Effective Work

App stores have made the acquisition of new digital tools simple. Locate the app you want. Touch (or click) the screen to buy it or get it for free. Wait for a couple of seconds—or several minutes for more massive downloads—for the app to install on your device. And boom! You're in business and ready to become the perfect future you.

Or not.

The mere acquisition of a tool is not sufficient to create transformation. Countless people have tales of a long stream of app purchases they abandoned after only a few days. Many leave a trail of discarded apps that didn't magically create the perfect future version of themselves. Because while tool acquisition is simple, changing your usage approach and associated behaviours are not.

When we look at the potential of a new enabler to reconfigure the design of work—be that a new software app, a new piece of hardware, or even a new organisational theory on how work can be designed—we need a set of principles to guide, inform and inspire the possibilities at the intersection between enablers, people and work design. We know that mere tool acquisition is not enough, but we also feel dissatisfied when new, potentially revolutionary enablers are embraced in the most basic way possible. So much potential! So little to show for it.

The discipline of reimagining is based on six fundamentals, or six core principles that offer a roadmap to a better place. The six principles are:

1. There is no single best way to design a given work process. No work design is perfect.
2. The sands are shifting, or put another way, new ways of designing work are continually under development.
3. "Improving" has a variety of meanings. Taking a single-dimensional view is not ideal.
4. Attempting to change too much too quickly usually fails. Building the adaptive capacity of individuals, teams or the organisation is essential.
5. Some areas of work don't need to be improved—they are good enough. Others hold the key to breaking through to the next level. Invest in the right places.
6. Just because something is possible doesn't make it applicable. It may be possible and suitable for another team or organisation, but their first moves don't have to define yours.

Let's take them from the top.

## Principle 1: No “One Best Way”

There is no “one best way” to do a particular task or function. There is the current way, which is reflective of previous decisions, existing tools, and existing approaches for training and how people are socialised into the work process. Several factors shape the current way:

- Your initial implicit preference due to hearsay or earlier experiences that make one tool or app appear the natural answer.
- What other people in your circle of friends or business network are using. These wider environmental signals may have no bearing on the specific situation you are facing. Still, the advocacy for a particular approach or tool within a circle of trusted friends and colleagues elevates preference.
- The explicit organisational mandate you work within. What your organisation says you must use (and by implication, must not use) carries significant weight in describing how the obvious best way looks.

And then there are many other options, opportunities, variations and alternatives.

### Example: Uneven Distribution of Approach

The current way becomes ingrained in habit and expectation, but nothing about the current way says that it is the best way. Even within an organisation with a defined tool and approach for a work process, there will be variation and uneven distribution in practice. Discovering that other teams are using the same tools with very different outcomes creates opportunities for broader improvement. For example, using data available in Microsoft Workplace Analytics, a global consumer packaged goods (CPG) company was able to uncover variation in financial reporting practices across subsidiaries:<sup>2</sup>

*... a people analytics team at a global CPG company was enlisted to help optimize a financial process that took place monthly in every country subsidiary around the world. The diversity of local accounting rules precluded perfect standardization, and the geographic dispersion of the teams made it hard for the transformation group to gather information the way they normally would—in conversation.*

*So instead of starting with discovery conversations, people analytics data was used to baseline the time spent on the process in every country, and to map the networks of the people involved. They discovered that one country was 16% more efficient than the average of the rest of the countries: they got the same results in 71 fewer person-hours per month and with 40 fewer people involved each month. The people analytics team was surprised—as was finance team in that country, which had no reason to benchmark themselves against other countries and had no idea that they were such a bright spot. The transformation office approached the country finance leaders with their findings and made them partners in process improvement for the rest of the subsidiaries.*

If one team is significantly more productive, they are a “bright spot”—showing that something different is possible—and can be engaged to teach other teams. At the same time, while one team is the bright spot in the organisation under analysis, there will be other teams in other organisations who do even better.

### Example: Capturing and Sharing Meeting Notes

Consider a universal but straightforward example: capturing and sharing meeting notes. You know the drill: after attending a meeting and participating in the discussion, a summary of the key points, decisions and next actions are distributed. What's the best way to tackle this situation? Options include:

- Use a personal notebook in Evernote to capture your meeting notes. Write up the key points from the meeting as they relate to your work, including any action points you need to address. Share a copy of your notes with others after the session has ended.
- Use Microsoft Word to write up the meeting notes. Distribute the resulting document by email, so everyone has a personal copy. Each person extracts their action points and translates each into whatever task tracking system they use.
- Use Microsoft Word to capture the meeting notes, and then publish the document to a SharePoint team site, so the team has a shared sense of where to from here. Duplicate the list of task assignments from the Word document into a task list in SharePoint or a board in Microsoft Planner.
- Use a wiki page to write up meeting notes. The wiki page should be accessible by everyone who attended the meeting, and after the session, each person can directly edit the wiki page to share an update on the tasks they were assigned or chose.
- Use a meetings database where each snippet of the meeting is separately categorised, and task assignments to allocate work to individuals explicitly declared. Team members can review the meeting notes in chronological order in the database. They can also slice-and-dice the meeting notes by topic, task allocation, and current status.
- Use a shared page in a Microsoft OneNote notebook for writing the meeting notes in collaboration with other people in the meeting. Once completed, share the page with everyone who attended. For added points, add a tab in Microsoft Teams and create all meeting notes for the team there, which offers automatic access to the collection of meeting notes for all current and future team members.

Each of the above options works for capturing and sharing meeting notes—along with many variations that also work. Each of the above options confer benefits on the people in the team (and incur some costs). But there is no “one best way.”

### Discussion on Principle 1

In any work process, the tools under consideration either do or do not have the capabilities to support the work. There must be a baseline of capability that's offered by the tool to support the process, often complemented by a long list of additional and nice-to-have capabilities. If the baseline is met and the tool selected to support the process, interpersonal social dynamics, language patterns, and shared expectations develop around the tool to entrench it in common use. It is this process of social envelopment that people come to see the tool and its expression in the work process as “the one best way.” These dynamics may remain in place for many years, although external forces can dictate the need to change. For example, end-of-life support for hardware, software and cloud services will often force a process of renewal of options and approach. Similarly, the appointment of a new manager—who comes into an established way of working with different experiences, viewpoints and expectations—can lead to questions being asked about means of doing better. Or in some cases, a mandate to do so.

## Principle 2. The Sands are Shifting

There are new and alternative ways being created all the time for how “best” to get work done. Some of these new ways will fundamentally alter the possibilities, while others only offer more of the same; in either case, most fail to catch on at scale. Creating these shifting sands are:

- New entrant vendors who challenge the status quo and introduce game-changing ideas and approaches. Exhibit 1: Slack, and its group-chat application that re-formed the way many teams worked together. While there is a higher degree of risk in embracing early-stage ideas from new entrant vendors—due to the higher likelihood of market failure—new entrants most clearly show that the incumbent approaches aren’t the only way.
- Incumbent vendors who need to keep innovating and demonstrating enough market leadership to remain an incumbent. Too little innovation will see people shift to newer options offered by newer and more exciting vendors. Exhibit 2: Microsoft and Microsoft Teams, in response to Slack and as a better way of supporting teamwork than SharePoint or Yammer. It took several years, but Teams now has more active users than Slack, according to Microsoft numbers.
- Experimentation by early adopters who share—often with evangelical zeal—their findings via blog posts, Twitter, and YouTube. Proclamations of the new latest and greatest app can fire other peoples’ imagination and ignite their willingness to try something different. When one person in a workgroup shifts their work practices, others, in turn, may take notice and want to be involved as well.
- Academic researchers who attempt through field research and controlled experimentation to assess the validity of new approaches. Often what’s found through academic research stands in contradiction to the marketing claims of vendors, although the time lag between the two favours marketing hype over research evidence.

### Example: Typed Notes vs. Handwritten Notes

What’s the best way to take notes in a classroom (or meeting): laptop or pen and paper? If you answer the question by what most people do, the obvious answer would be a laptop. But you’d be wrong.

A study several years ago looked at the differences in learning effectiveness when a student types their notes on a laptop—or another device—versus using pen and paper.<sup>3</sup> Since many students can type as quickly as someone can speak, they can create verbatim notes of what was said. However, since a transcript can be created without much mental effort, information recall and grading on subsequent tests were shown to be lower than fellow students who put aside their keyboard for a pen. Since few students can write by hand as fast as someone can talk, the physical limitations of handwriting call for greater powers of concentration, relevance assessment, and careful selection of what to write. These harder and more difficult mental processes deepen learning.

The sands of expectation are shifting with how to take notes best. While typed notes are easy to create on laptops and other devices, the way we practice notetaking reduces their quality.

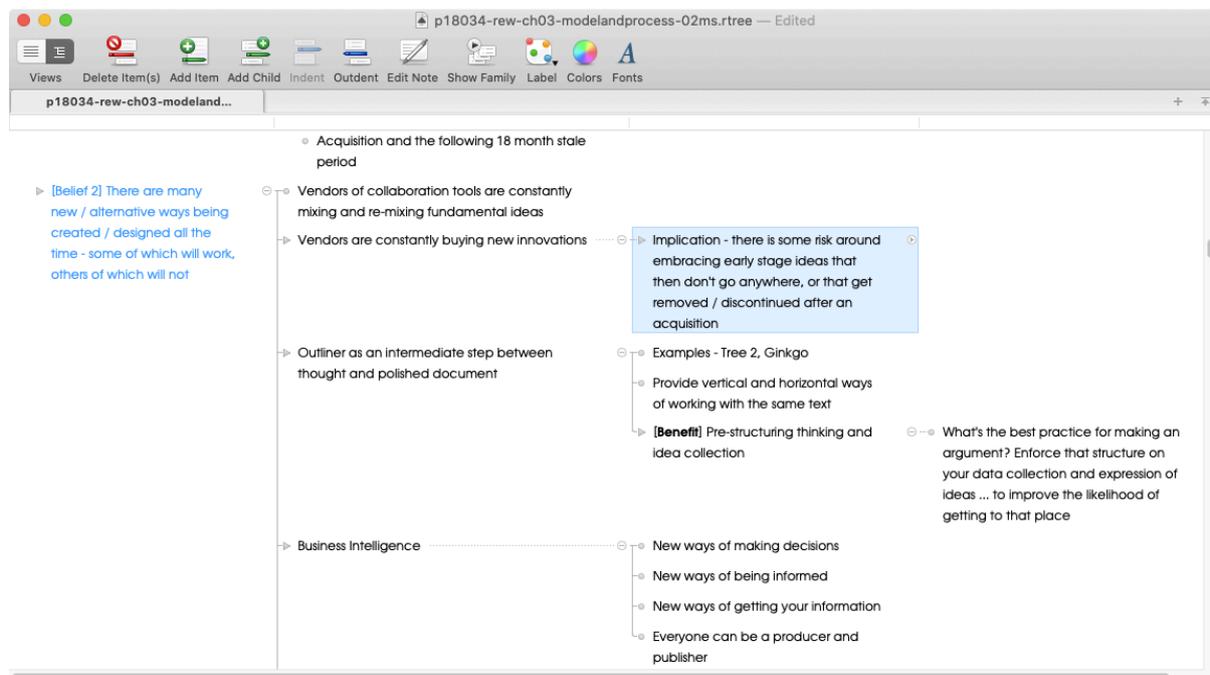
### Example: Drafting a Document

What's the best way to write a new report, white paper or business letter? Jumping directly into Microsoft Word (or Google Docs) is the default pathway practiced across the world. The sands are shifting though. Using a separate outliner app provides several benefits missing from the default approach of opening Microsoft Word and starting to type.

Outliners—of which there are many—offer less pizzazz than Microsoft Word and Google Docs. In doing fewer things, outliners force a particular way of thinking—in critical points and broad lines of argument before getting wrapped up in prose and formatting. Getting the arguments right before fiddling around with templates and paragraph styles improves the likelihood of preparing a winning document.

I call this pre-structuring the argument. The thinking, ideas, research data, examples and overall structure and flow are developed before committing to stringing the right words together to make sentences and paragraphs. Once the structure is right, the text can be transferred into Word or Google Docs for writing the prose and polishing its presentation. See Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Pre-structuring an Argument in an Outliner**



***Outliners offer fewer capabilities than Microsoft Word or Google Docs, and this spartan design forces greater clarity in thinking. Among other situations, outliners can be used to pre-structure the argument without having to commit to sentences and paragraphs immediately.***

### Discussion on Principle 2

Current “best practice” ways of working are constantly under threat from innovations in process and work practice design. New tools, new vendors and field research on what does and doesn’t work, among other inputs, creates fodder for rethinking current approaches. What’s leading-edge this year is frequently decried as legacy (out-dated, outmoded) before long.

### Principle 3. Improving Has a Variety of Meanings

I will be using the term “improving” frequently throughout this report series in the context of improving work, improving workflow, and improving how things get done. The word carries with it a range of nuance, and an improvement can be measured—qualitatively or quantitatively—across a number of dimensions. See Figure 3.

*Figure 3. Multiple Dimensions of “Improving”*



*“Improving” a process, practice or approach at work can describe many different ways of seeing change happen. Be clear on what dimension of “improving” is being advocated and prefer multiple dimensions in combination rather than one only.*

Let’s review some of those dimensions and meanings:

- **Better.** A general, generic, and basically meaningless term to describe an improvement. A good immediate follow-on question is “in what way is it better?” This will usually bring to the front one of the following concepts and put weight behind the nature of the actual improvement.
- **Simpler.** Signals the removal of extraneous steps or tasks from an activity, or the elimination of complexity. For example, consider the difference between manual and automatic transmission in a vehicle; for a driver, the latter is simpler because there are fewer steps involved in driving. Note, however, that there are some situations where an automatic transmission is more difficult than a manual transmission, including hill work and when pulling a heavy trailer (since a manual transmission gives the driver much more control over the vehicle). If these activities are the exception and only ever an irregular experience for a particular driver, the mechanics of an automatic transmission makes their usual drive simpler. If these are daily activities for a particular driver, however, he or she would get a simpler drive with a manual transmission vehicle.
- **Faster.** An improvement metric rooted in a time-based view of the world. When something is faster, it means that less time is required to complete the steps in an activity. This can result from simplification, or in an automated process, the result of greater processing

power that completes a given process in less time. There is nothing wrong with an activity being done faster, as long as the activity is still correctly goal aligned. There is a problem, however, when activities that no longer need to be done are sped up—see *More Effective* below.

- **Cheaper.** Fewer resources have to be spent or invested to achieve a particular outcome, where the resources are time, money, or energy. For example, it is cheaper in monetary terms to travel in economy class compared with first class. You get to the same place (achieve the same outcome), and in monetary terms, it has cost you less. Of course, there are other dimensions beyond money that are important when selecting a travel class, such as comfort and expected treatment.
- **More Efficient.** Similar to cheaper, an improvement creates efficiency when fewer resources have to be consumed in order to achieve a particular outcome. For example, distributing one page of information to 1,000 people via email is much more efficient than using letters—email requires no printing, no envelopes, no assembly time, no postage, and no time delay in delivery.
- **More Effective.** Effectiveness refers to the degree to which something meets a goal or aligns with a desired outcome. A common way of distinguishing efficiency and effectiveness is to say that efficiency is concerned with doing things right, while effectiveness is focused on doing the right things. As long as a system, process or activity enables the right outcome to be achieved, efficiency is important. If the right outcome is not being achieved, however, becoming more efficient is a waste of time, effort, and other resources.
- **Attractive.** An improvement can increase the attractiveness quotient of an object, system, or process. Attractiveness acts to pull a person toward something; it creates an emotional response within the person, increasing the likelihood of them purchasing a product, becoming engaged in an activity, or more broadly just using the object, system, or process. With being an emotional measure, however, attractiveness is hard to quantify in advance, and it is difficult to assess in advance whether a given person will be attracted to the situation or not.
- **Challenging.** A qualitative way of describing when something creates an increased inner drive within a person to complete an activity, process, or some other objective. Making a process or activity more challenging—increasing its difficulty level—can push some people to do a whole lot more. The challenge is what inspires and motivates their participation. The high difficulty level of the activity sets them apart from others who lack the same discipline, strength, and perseverance, and even sometimes just plain craziness. In choosing to make an activity more challenging and more difficult, the improvement is in increased engagement and participation from some people. Making things more challenging is often done in the sports field but is also embraced for luxury and high-end goods. The challenge, for example, of purchasing a first-class ticket on a long-haul flight rather than an economy class ticket is set high in financial terms.
- **Beautiful.** A qualitative improvement to the physical attributes or emotional allure of an object, product, or service. To increase the beauty of a dress, for example, a finer fabric may be selected, or a more flattering cut used. Apple crafts beautiful phones, music players, tablets, and computers, using apparent engineering magic to create something unbelievable that looks and feels stunning. Of course, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and what one person calls beautiful another will call ugly. There are times when that's the point: driving an extreme gulf between supporters and opponents.

There are many alternative dimensions against which improvement can be evaluated. Using multiple dimensions provides a more comprehensive viewpoint.

### Take a Multi-Dimensional View of Possible Improvements

The cost of taking a single-dimensional view of possible improvements is beautifully captured in the following memo—which I didn't write, nor can I trace its source.<sup>4</sup>

*From: EFFICIENCY & TICKET, LTD., Management Consultants*

*To: Chairman, The London Symphony Orchestra*

*Re: Schubert's Symphony No. 8 in B minor.*

*After attending a rehearsal of this work, we make the following observations and recommendations:*

- *We note that the twelve first violins were playing identical notes, as were the second violins. Three violins in each section, suitably amplified, would seem to us to be adequate.*
- *Much unnecessary labour is involved in the number of demisemiquavers in this work; we suggest that many of these could be rounded up to the nearest semiquaver thus saving practice time for the individual player and rehearsal time for the entire ensemble. The simplification would also permit more use of trainee and less-skilled players with only marginal loss of precision.*
- *We could find no productivity value in string passages being repeated by the horns; all tutti repeats could also be eliminated without any reduction of efficiency.*
- *In so labour-intensive an undertaking as a symphony, we regard the long oboe tacet passages to be extremely wasteful. What notes this instrument is called upon to play could, subject to a satisfactory demarcation conference with the Musician's Union, be shared out equitably amongst the other instruments.*

*Conclusion: if the above recommendations are implemented the piece under consideration could be played through in less than half an hour with concomitant savings in overtime, lighting and heating, wear and tear on the instruments and hall rental fees. Also, had the composer been aware of modern cost-effective procedures he might well have finished this work.*

### Discussion on Principle 3

Improving something in one dimension is unlikely to have an across-the-board improvement. When an improvement in one area increases, it is likely that another will decrease. There are times when this trade-off is a problem and can indeed cause an overall decrease that takes away from the product, service, or situation. However, embracing the trade-offs between metrics—and ranking one or two as more important than the others—can become the very thing that someone is known for. For example, engineering and construction firms always have to think about health and safety, but the inclusion of rigorous health and safety processes come at a cost to efficiency. Does the firm skimp and save on health and safety processes and therefore send fewer people home in one piece each night, or does it give up some efficiency to ensure everyone gets to go home at the end of the day? Decisions of this nature become defining values for organisations, people, and sometimes even nations, e.g., Germany for its precision engineering and ability to craft beautiful, fast cars.

## Principle 4. Beware Exceeding Adaptive Capacity

Adaptive capacity refers to the ability of a person—individually or as part of a larger group context—to effectively embrace changing conditions into their repertoire of action. Strong adaptive capacity means they have developed a good rhythm for doing so; weak adaptive capacity means they have not.

Being cognisant of the adaptive capacity of an individual, team, group—or even the organisation as a whole—decreases the likelihood of attempting to introduce too much change in too short a time. On the flip side, it offers a pathway of making changes that stick, and over time and repeated practice, strengthening the capacity to adapt to the next round of changes. Hence, adaptive capacity is an enabler and a constraint. Strong adaptive capacity in an individual, group or organisation supports the introduction, exploration and embrace of change. Low adaptive capacity hinders the same.

One approach for building adaptive capacity is to embrace small but frequent improvements over time rather than pursuing a single colossal initiative. Many people have previously expressed this idea, including:

- Dr Donald Wetmore wrote in one of his newsletters on personal productivity years ago: *“Brainstorm ten ways to improve your life each day. It only takes 10 minutes but gives at least one good idea a day. That’s 365 ideas for continuous improvement each year.”*<sup>5</sup>
- Dan Kennedy tells the story of a chemist who made a list of 300 things to change in his dental practice. Dan writes, *“Every week, he did ten of them. After 30 weeks, he had done everything on that list, big and small. And, without a penny increase in advertising, without a dollar’s difference in marketing, in the same office, with (almost) the same staff, his practice had more than quadrupled in volume.”*<sup>6</sup>
- Exodus 23:29-30 conveys the same idea, stated a very long time ago. When the Jewish people were moving into the promised land, they needed to learn the ability to manage their growing land holdings productively—but only in small pieces and not all at once. If they didn’t, the land would be overrun with wild animals and become desolate.
- It has been conveyed mathematically by raising 99% to the 365<sup>th</sup> power and comparing it to raising 101% to the same power. The first gives an answer of 0.03. The second 37.8. That’s a massive difference for doing a small extra thing consistently, whether over 365 days or weeks.

### Example: Packing Checklist for Travel

Having a checklist for packing when travelling is a widespread recommendation. It prevents you from forgetting essential items, provides a way of learning what is and isn’t useful when you are away from home, and eliminates the stress of trying to remember everything to pack when faced with a sudden trip. When I started travelling a lot in the late 2000s, I needed to develop a checklist for what to take quickly. I started, as many people do, with a typed list in Microsoft Excel—although Microsoft Word or Google Docs would have been an equally valid approach. I got the benefits above, but something was missing given the variable nature of my travels. Sometimes it was quick trips within New Zealand or across to Australia; other times it was an extended business trip to the United States or Europe for up to 16 days. All the core items were the same, but the duration made a big difference in what I needed to pack and the luggage items to use. Excel worked for a while, but I didn’t like having to recreate the same things in multiple lists.

For Christmas 2012, I gave myself the gift of time to write a database that allowed a given packing item to be associated with more than one list. I carefully documented in the database everything I

had learned about what to take, when to take it, and which luggage items worked best. It was a significant uplift on the capabilities in Excel, and I use it to this day—albeit with minor tweaks and changes to the design over subsequent years. The option of writing the database was available immediately, thereby avoiding the use of Microsoft Excel entirely. However, it was a leap too far too quickly. I didn't have the visceral sense of what I needed at the outset.

#### **Example: Sudden Remote Working Due to Global Pandemic**

As COVID-19 began spreading across Europe and the United States in early March 2020, many firms had to enable remote working arrangements for employees suddenly. Working out of traditional shared office locations was discouraged due to the likelihood of spreading or catching COVID-19. Added risks of exposure were threats to those using public transportation to and from the office. Vendors of remote working tools—who have been around for a long time and have offered similar free usage in previous emergencies—were quick to offer free use of their services in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many people found themselves suddenly bereft of their usual office facilities and had to create something of a productive workspace from their home quickly.

It won't last. The change is too much too quickly for the vast majority of organisations, managers and employees. As soon as the pandemic is over, people will revert. The uplift in remote working will quickly disappear, and the tools provided for free just as quickly abandoned. While COVID-19 is a massive trigger for change in the short-term, remote working is just a band-aid. It's a surface change only in the location in which people work, forced by an external environmental factor.

Microsoft itself provides the best example of why the change will be only short-term. Microsoft currently offers the most widely adopted suite of tools that enable remote working, including Microsoft Teams. Even as the vendor of Microsoft Teams (and the broader Office 365 suite), Microsoft hasn't transitioned previously to a widespread embrace of remote working. It has to in response to COVID-19, but its buildings and campuses around the world emphasise working together face-to-face, and its employees often move to new cities to be close to those office locations. Its extreme short-term measures for remote working will peter out when the threat is gone.

#### **Discussion on Principle 4**

Always be improving, and sometimes take a significant leap forward. The energy, power and impetus for confidently taking the major leaps builds through the strong embrace of many smaller steps. But the combination of many smaller actions, made in pursuit of an overarching vision of the desired destination, usually leads to deeper and longer-lasting change than solely relying on swinging for the fences. Smaller steps provide teams and groups with the opportunity to practice change behaviours and to build their adaptive capacity for more.

## Principle 5. Pursue the Next Step

Developing mastery or elite performance in any area relies on deliberate practice, which means practicing at the learning edge.<sup>7</sup> It's not practice that endlessly repeats what has already been mastered; it's practice that builds on current mastery levels and continually asks "what next?" Being embedded in the pursuit of elite performance gives the performer and his or her coach insight on where to focus next. Some areas will settle at a sufficient level of performance and can be ignored going forward, as long as current performance doesn't degrade (e.g., maintain the area). Other areas hold the key for pushing through to the next level of performance, and it is these not-yet-achieved areas that performers seeking betterment pursue.

The concept of deliberate practice can be applied in reimagining effective work. It means looking at current performance and asking:

- What have we mastered sufficiently—and therefore, can pay less attention to going forward?
- In what areas are we not performing as well as we could? How much of an impact could we obtain if we lifted the level of performance in this area?
- What is holding us back from performing better?
- Who is consistently delivering a better performance in areas we are underperforming in? What can we learn from their approaches, beliefs and capabilities?

Identifying potential areas for taking the next step relies on a willingness to experiment, to seek out new input from other people or groups performing similar or related work, and most importantly, to examine where performance is lacking today. Individuals wanting to lift their performance can do this alone or with a trusted advisor. Some groups can do it together as a standalone unit, while other groups benefit from external perspectives to complement their ruminations and explorations.

### Discussion on Principle 5

The word choice in "deliberate practice" is no accident. It is not a casual practice, nor an unthinking reflexive one. Instead, it is borne of a deliberative process of trying, failing, experimenting, learning, succeeding a bit better, debriefing, and resetting to try again. People in it for the long run have a clear advantage, because not only are they committed to the outcomes they seek to achieve, but also have a deep investment in improving. In team and group settings, trust is built between individuals as they work together to deliberately improve how they perform together.

## Principle 6. Possible Doesn't Equal Applicable

Not every possible change or way of embracing what's possible will be applicable. Often it is enough to look at something new and say, in effect: *Interesting, but not for me/us*. In response to the evidence presented, the change or the new thing is obviously (or only apparently—not all that glitters is golden) makes sense for another team, group or organisation. You can discount the nature of the direct change as being irrelevant and non-applicable in your situation, while at the same time taking inspiration of the effort (if that is appropriate). For example:

- Just because a team in another organisation starts using Microsoft Teams or Slack doesn't mean you have to follow suit. It could be applicable, but their action does not make it so.
- When another organisation wins an industry award for an innovation in their work practice, the applicability to them is commendable but does not have to infer that you should do the same.

Equally, there are other times when you look at something another team, group or organisation has done and say: *Wow, I want some of that*. The change makes sense for what they've done, and there is also direct applicability to the challenges you and your organisation are facing, the opportunities you are trying to leverage, and the technology, enablers and culture you already in place. The direct change is directly applicable, hence giving both inspiration for doing something new and also evidence of its impact in another context. For example:

- Teams transitioning from an email dominated way of coordinating work to using a shared workspace—e.g., Microsoft Teams or Slack—achieve benefits of coherence and traceability that most business teams across the world would benefit from.
- Deemphasising work-as-place and embracing a business model that cultivates a location-independent, distributed workforce provides access to expertise wherever it is located. Hiring decisions are not limited to the talent resident in any given city. Some highly successful firms refuse to have office premises, creating a distributed work culture instead.
- Standing meetings drive focused conversation and decision-making by linking meeting duration with physical endurance. Walking meetings force a different rhythm for sharing ideas, exploring concepts, and drawing conclusions. Many day-to-day meetings in organisations around the world would benefit from one or both alternatives.
- Open digital forums for cross-organisational discussion provide the ability for people to meet others in their organisation with common professional interests. Working out of different places doesn't preclude sharing ideas.

Concluding either way is fine. Just because someone else does it doesn't mean it is right for you. And conversely, just because someone else doesn't do it, doesn't mean it is not for you.

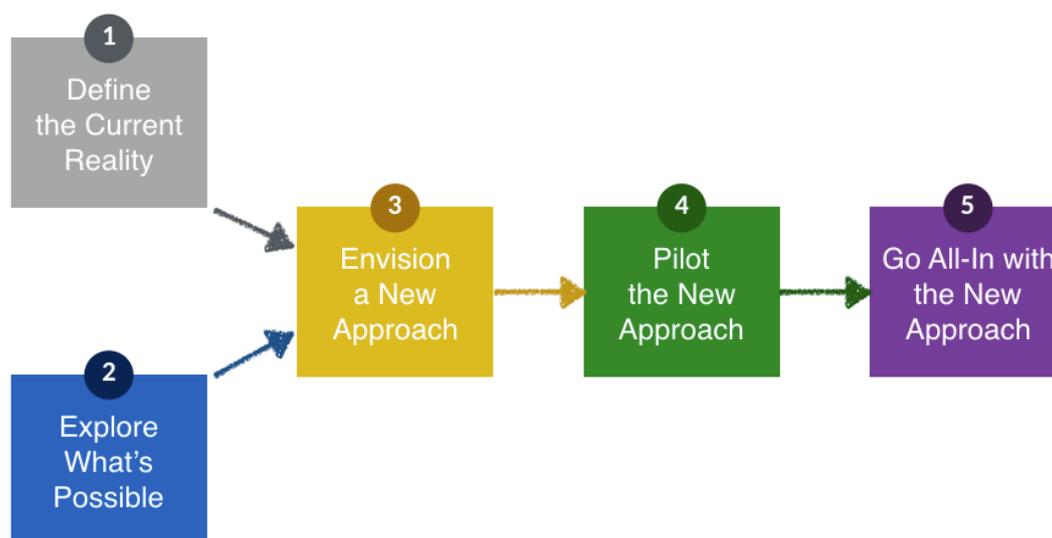
### Discussion on Principle 6

Reimagining requires paying attention to what is changing in the wider context without developing a Pavlovian response. Wider changes in the context provide necessary input, but input that is insufficient alone to determine applicability in a given situation. Reimagining also relies—in parallel—on an understanding of current ways of working, a historical sense of how change has been approached previously, and why a given change is likely to fail or succeed. We might tap our foot to the marching band of those peddling change but must in the end march only to our tune.

## Five Steps for Reimagining Effective Work

This report has laid out six principles to guide our efforts with reimagining effective work. In combination, they offer a mindset for how to embrace the reimagining opportunity. What we need now, however, is a step-by-step process for reimagining effective work that allows these principles to be put into practice. See Figure 4.

*Figure 4. Five Steps for Reimagining Effective Work*



*Reimagining effective work has five steps, including two that happen at the beginning in parallel—or at least with sufficient boundaries to ensure both are given proper independent attention.*

The five steps of reimagining effective work are:

1. **Define the Current Reality.** How does the current process, work activity or organisation work? Describe the current ways of working using whatever representations make the most sense.
2. **Explore What's Possible.** Every process, work activity or way of structuring an organisation can be done in different ways. Some of those different ways are new due to recent changes. Others are long-standing options that have been previously discounted or not yet evaluated. Some are internal, incremental improvements. Others come from external possibilities.
3. **Envision a New Approach.** In light of the learning from both steps 1 and 2, formulate a vision of what possibilities are applicable to the current reality. Formulating a vision calls for creativity, insight, a-ha moments, and more.
4. **Pilot the New Approach.** Equip specific individuals, teams and groups to embrace the new approach in their work. Embracing or piloting the new approach creates space for hands-on learning about actual applicability, exploring relevant iterative changes, and beginning to get a sense of what would be required to take the new approach to a broader audience.
5. **Go All-In with the New Approach.** Scale the new approach from step 4—updated with any learnings and incremental improvements enacted during the pilot—to all relevant teams and groups across the organisation. Make the new approach the new way of working.

Depending on what else you have to do in life will determine how frequently you re-ignite the process from step 1. Pushing the edge of betterment is predicated on the willingness to start again.

## Summary

In a post-engagement document to a client several years ago, I wrote:

*Remember that your role is one of reimagining. There's a drawing out aspect to that, as well as an opportunity setting aspect. For the drawing out, you need to gather information from the people you are working with to understand what they do, and the processes they make use of. For the opportunity setting aspect, you need to paint a picture of what's possible, to demonstrate and explore possibilities for how work could be done. It's a two-way, interdependent, collaborative approach ... and you need to model this approach more than you need to provide the technology to enable it.*

In this report, I have outlined and explored the mindset for the reimagining approach, covering both the principles to use and a model to embrace. The principles guide, challenge and safeguard the reimagining process. The model wraps a repeatable process around what can appear chaotic. In the next report, we turn our attention to Step 1 of reimagining: Defining the Current Reality.

## About Michael Sampson

Michael Sampson is an author, analyst and advisor. Michael's domain of interest is how people and teams can embrace changing conditions to pursue transformation, with a focus on new technologies that support rethinking work practices, organisational design, culture and business models.

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### Disclaimer

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<sup>1</sup> A comment by Ian in Michael Fitzgerald, *Embracing Digital Technology: A New Strategic Imperative*, October 2013, at <http://sloanreview.mit.edu/projects/embracing-digital-technology/>

<sup>2</sup> Chantrelle Nielsen and Natalie McCullough, *How People Analytics Can Help You Change Process, Culture, and Strategy*, HBR.org, May 2018, at <https://hbr.org/2018/05/how-people-analytics-can-help-you-change-process-culture-and-strategy>

<sup>3</sup> Maggy McGloin, *What You Miss When You Take Notes on Your Laptop*, HBR.org, July 2015, at <https://hbr.org/2015/07/what-you-miss-when-you-take-notes-on-your-laptop>

<sup>4</sup> I can't trace the origin of this memo, although many have reproduced it in books and blog posts. If you know the origin, please let me know so I can give appropriate credit in this report.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Wetmore, *Timely Time Management Tips Newsletter*, at <https://www.balancetime.com/free-newsletter/>

<sup>6</sup> Dan S. Kennedy, *No B.S. Time Management for Entrepreneurs: The Ultimate No Holds Barred Kick Butt Take No Prisoners Guide to Time Productivity and Sanity*, November 2017, at <https://www.amazon.com/B-S-Time-Management-Entrepreneurs-Productivity-ebook/dp/B0753F6GFV/>

<sup>7</sup> James Clear, *10 Years of Silence: How Long It Took Mozart, Picasso and Kobe Bryant to Be Successful*, January 2014, at <https://blog.bufferapp.com/lessons-on-success-and-deliberate-practice-from-mozart-picasso-and-kobe-bryant>