

Kūna'ole



- HOW TO -

RETHINK WORK:

FORGET THE NAME
OF THE THING SEEN



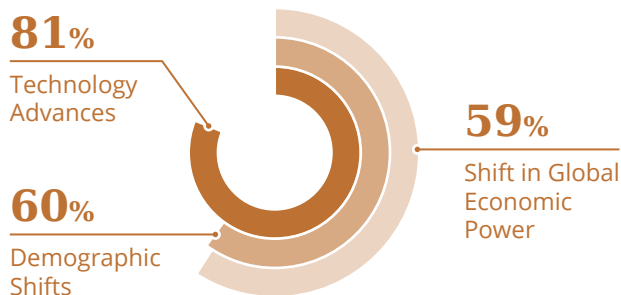
BY JEFF PARKS

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ABSTRACT

There is a shift in thinking, along with a genuine interest in questioning how we approach work, that needs to take place today. The focus on a tangible product has shifted towards superior service and customer interactions.

Businesses need to move towards a broader perspective, forcing corporate leaders out of learned and consistent zones of focus about process to include the dynamic and ever-changing unknown of customer expectations, not to mention the need to stay up-to-date on global trends in technological advances as well as shifts in demographic and global economic powers.¹



We are far too eager to take a process and hold it up as a beacon for others to follow with an almost religious vigour in the pursuit of multiple — and often unrelated — goals or undefined successes. However, in many cases, the goal or end-state is assumed and not discussed leading to:

- misunderstandings
- arguments over semantics; and ultimately,
- failure of the business to deliver for the customer.

The net result is that we are functioning as a collective of critics who lower expectations rather than an inspired team or community that raise expectations.

As artist Robert Irwin once noted, we need to slow down and “forget the name of the thing seen.”² Collectively we have to give up control of regimented processes and instead work towards a unified goal of inspiring a corporate culture that views uncertainty as a challenge to be savoured, resulting in customers who believe we can deliver unlimited possibility through world-class service.

What I’m suggesting is hard. What I’m offering is an opportunity for the reader to slow down and think. To consider how you can guide people from arguing over semantics to focusing on the reality that there are no more secrets, only information you don’t yet have.

In a world of never-ending opinions, forgetting the name of the thing seen, once experienced, is extraordinarily difficult. This is why it is so important to ensure that we set aside what is no longer working and embrace change. Change that is not viewed as an individual or team that is of less value to the whole, but rather out of a desire to raise the expectations of ourselves, our peers, and most importantly our customers.

¹ Global CEO Survey asked the question: “Which of the following global trends do you believe will transform your business over the next 5 years (into 2019)?”

<http://www.pwc.com/ca/en/ceo-survey/index.jhtml>

² Robert Irwin Maxim “Managing As Designing”

LEARNING

— TO —

FORGET

“

We confuse the world as talked about, described and measured with the world which actually is. We are sick with a fascination for the useful tools of names and numbers, of symbols, signs, conceptions and ideas.”

— ALAN WATTS

The artist Robert Irwin believed that in order to rethink any object or space in the physical world, people needed to “forget the name of the thing seen”. In other words, we have to remove our associations and experiences with that object in order to consider other possibilities. This is the foundation of curiosity and creativity — developing the ability to look at ideas conceived from a new and completely different perspective.

Irwin developed six stages through which we move from our initial perception to formalizing the idea or object as irrefutable. At each step in this sequence, which Irwin described as the process of “compounding abstractions”, details get negated and alternative ways of seeing possibilities are eliminated.

As you read through and understand each stage outlined below, consider a recent project you completed. Try to associate each stage from the kick-off meeting to the final deliverable and identify successes and failures from Perception to Formalization.

Along each stage, where could you have taken the opportunity to slow down, pull back to consider other possibilities, and become comfortable with the notion of uncertainty?

Perception is the first stage that Irwin describes as “Synesthesia” or the minds’ way of combining different sensations to start to make sense of the world and the objects within which it is interacting.

We perceive the physical environment of the corporation, the body language of others in the room, questions asked and how they are answered. It is in this multitude of interactions where we begin to “piece together” potential in others and ideas shared.

In time these undifferentiated perceptions begin to take on meaning, leading to the second stage, **Conception**. This is where people start to isolate unnamed zones of focus and is the first step in bringing a new idea to fruition.

We begin to understand who is leading (by example or by title) and we start to learn by questioning for clarity or, to the other extreme, questioning the value of others’ perceptions.

At this point, the unnamed zones are given labels to provide us with context or what Irwin calls, **Forming**. This is why we need to be careful about how we assign labels as absolute when discussing possibilities with teams. Because up to this point, ideas are still fluid and the ability to pull back and rethink can be suggested with little conflict or defensiveness. In short, people are still open to the concepts being shared as no one has any personal stake or assigned responsibilities in the matter at hand.

At the fourth stage, or **Formful** stage, the individual begins to “architect” or structure the ideas shared relationally to one another throughout the thought process. This assigned structure provides deeper context to the path being taken and what it will ultimately lead to — literally, a formal view of the service being developed.

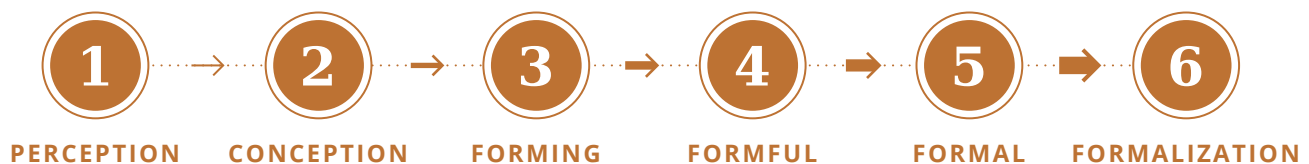
It is generally at this stage where new ideas begin to emerge and contradict long-held beliefs by the organization and the leadership team. This is also when research from the Customer Experience teams is brought to the table demonstrating:

- How customers are actually interacting with technologies
- How the customer would organize and label information (usually in stark contradiction to the organization’s vocabulary); and,
- An organized view of how the customer would like to interact with omni-channel services.

Opinions start to dominate the ideas presented rather than focusing on the purpose (e.g. to provide a superior service for customers) and facts (such as the true interests and motivations of the customer.)

Once reached, this stage isn’t based on an organization’s inability to change. Rather it is for many (both employees and senior leaders) a dramatic shift from the long held belief that the efficiencies and speed of the Industrial Revolution² are still paramount for success in business.

Finally in the sixth stage, **Formalization**, people ultimately stop questioning what has been created and view the object or idea as absolute or irrefutable. In traditional manufacturing models this is not seen as an obstacle but rather the peak of operational efficiency.



For the first time, Irwin’s famous maxim becomes apparent as stakeholders demonstrate an inability to forget the name of the thing seen; contradicting their beliefs of what constitutes value and best practices.

This is generally where projects end up grinding to a halt and milestones get missed or pushed. Abstractions begin to contradict long-held beliefs and compound in the minds of those who have found repeated success in traditional “process focused” business models. Facts start to poke holes in varying forms of data and call into question what the statistics are actually telling decision-makers.

In the fifth stage, which Irwin calls **Formal**, relational patterns such as up vs down begin to emerge into the more formal relationship of good vs bad, superior vs inferior. When this stage appears, people usually begin to resist change. They develop a kind of motion blindness¹ where the form of the idea takes on a rigour that is very difficult to evolve.

Whether it is the creation of another automobile rolling off the assembly line or the production of the latest mobile device, the presentation of the physical object has become formalized not only in the eyes and minds of the organization, but more importantly, to its success or failure in the minds and actions of the customer.

Again, at each of these stages abstract notions begin to compound (or solidify) and become the reason why a corporate culture of openness and encouragement to question ideas is critical to the successful delivery of any service. We need to work together at reversing the compounding of abstractions and determine when and where this is necessary since the universal assembly line approach to delivering great services no longer exists.

¹ Motion Blindness or Akinetopsia occurs in individuals who cannot perceive motion in their visual field, despite being able to see stationary objects without issue. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akinetopsia>

² Cubed - A Secret History of the Workplace by Nikil Saval 2014

PERSEVERATING

— ON THE —

PAST

“History repeats itself because no one was listening the first time.”

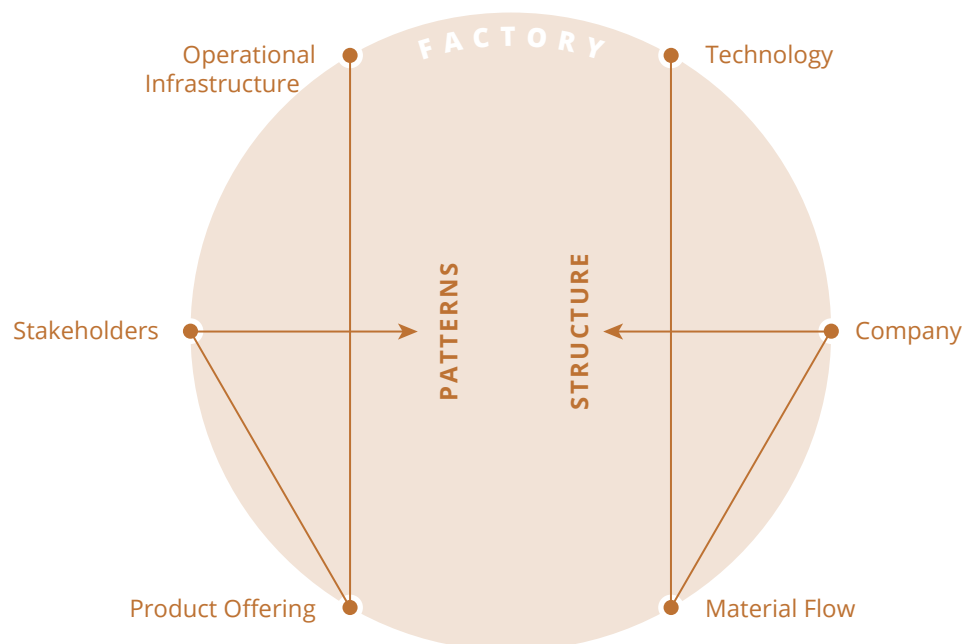
— ANONYMOUS

During the height of the Industrial Revolution, business leaders focused their attention on the capacity to develop and align the organization using irrefutable concepts that helped to advance its effectiveness through improved efficiencies that developed potential in the output of products through people and technology.

Exact and controlling processes drove everything, including an understanding of what was working and what was not. The development of products — either in whole or in part — and their subsequent success, was easily measured both in terms of cost and result.

INDUSTRIAL PERSPECTIVE

(INTERNAL)



For example, in the creation of the Model T automobile, Henry Ford understood that everything was attributed to a fixed amount. He knew exactly how much each part cost, the salaries expected by assembly line workers to put together each part, and the upkeep or overhead of running the factory as a whole. As a result the output was set — each car that came off the assembly line was exactly the same in every instance. Change was unnecessary unless there was proof that would irrefutably improve the product offering through Irwin's measured patterns as perceived by key stakeholders.

The automobile, then, was a formalized concept in the minds of the customer and of the Ford company itself. When change was required it was easily implemented and demonstrated little

risk as the patterns of success could be clearly measured, adjusted, and replicated without issue.

Within the factory itself, technology created the flow of materials that defined the company's environment and its corporate culture. The structure of the company only evolved unless patterns demanded its evolution either in whole or in part.

This view was largely internal and did not require an external or customer-centric philosophy of malleability around how the company operated and delivered its products.

The Information Age has changed all of that! It has shifted the need to focus solely on the product to a broader Service Perspective, literally rocking the foundation of the myopic Industrial Perspective.

“iWATCH”

WHAT THE ‘EXPERTS’ ARE SAYING...

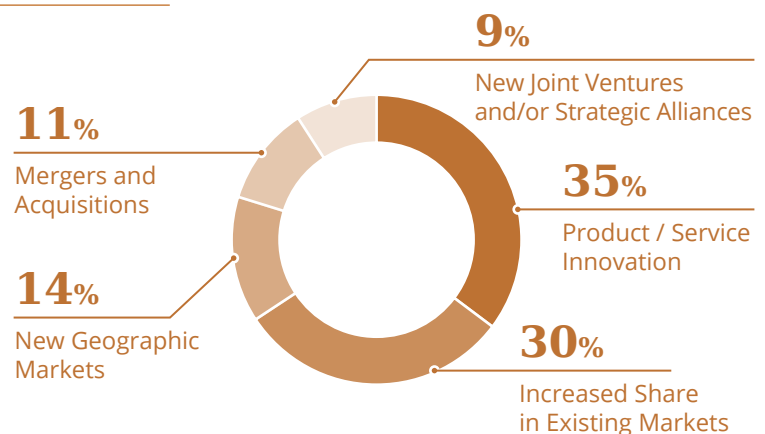
— IN DISBELIEF! —

“*All of us are smarter than any one of us!*”

— DOUGLAS MERRILL

Today the experience of delivering outstanding service is a company's key differentiating value proposition. Where once there were only a few options for customers there are now literally thousands. As such, the mere promise of outstanding service is no longer sufficient to compete in a global market - delivery is essential!

For 2015, Global CEOs ranked what their number one priority was for staying competitive and profitable in the coming year¹. These were:



¹ Global CEO Survey:
<http://www.pwc.com/ca/en/ceo-survey/index.jhtml>

Their responses show an inclination towards improving upon both product and service while at the same time demonstrating a conservative approach to growth.

None of this data should come as a surprise. We are overwhelmed with choices, drowning in data, and reacting before even experiencing new products and services.

When Apple announced its intent to dive into the wearables market with the iWatch, within one hour of the announcement technical experts were providing their opinion on whether the iWatch would succeed or not. Most reviews initially were negative, which is confusing. How can anyone provide an informed judgement of a new product when it hasn't even come on the market yet?

This is opinion-based design. They are literally demonstrating Irwin's Formal stage, judging the object as good vs. bad based on previously Formalized concepts of what constitutes a good design or experience with technology, and this is problematic. This real-world example demonstrates how we (Designers, Business Leaders, Project Managers, etc), as noted earlier, "... are acting as a collection of critics that lower expectations rather than an inspired team or community that raise expectations."

Why is this happening? What is it about the time in which we are living that is causing such behaviour?

On the one hand we have the traditional business model, enforcing and controlling processes¹ based on titles and long-held experiences of what works and what doesn't in an era that no longer exists.

On the other hand, we have a collection of critics who know about the essential need to give up such controls yet seem unaware that their own behaviour is modelling the insistence of a new kind of control, one of a lack thereof.

In the past, the philosophy of the Internally-focused company was in the capability of developing and aligning the organization to irrefutable concepts that advanced its effectiveness and developed its potential in regards to the outcome of specific tasks or work.

Today both our mindsets and our behaviour requires a dramatic shift away from the familiarity of the past. We need to develop the capacity to avoid thinking in terms of absolutes and communicate with others in creating a corporate culture that rewards ideas and is comfortable with a constant infusion of uncertainty when evolving and improving services for the customer.

¹ Cubed - A Secret History of the Workplace by Nikil Saval 2014, p. 50
Quote from Frederick Taylor in 1910: "It is only through *enforced* standardization of methods, *enforced* adoption of the best implements and working conditions, and *enforced* cooperation that that this faster work can be assured. And the duty of enforcing the adoption of standards and enforcing this cooperation rests with the *management* alone."

VISUALIZING BOTH SIDES — OF THE — LOOKING GLASS



The universal and the unique are entwined aspects of existence”

— VERA JOHN-STEINER

We live and work in an exciting time! But it's also confusing and, by extension, exhausting as well. We need to rethink how we work and communicate. We need to slow down to provide greater services and increase, not lower, the expectations of our customers. This in theory seems impossible, but it's not. It simply takes a new perspective based on how companies achieved success up to this point in history, and a shift in conversations that expand beyond debates solely centred around the adoption of technology.

The Industrial economy treated people as interchangeable parts. The Information economy threatens to treat them as more or less interchangeable consumers. Attending to knowledge, by contrast, returns the attention back on the people — what they know, how they come to know it and how they differ.

This idea was proposed by John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid in the year 2000¹, and the analogy ultimately reinforced the need for improved service delivery as a hallmark for the whole of success in business today and in the future.

The Service Perspective is one that demands both an internal and external view for the development and integration of new ideas. By contrast to the internally-focused Industrial framework, a Service framework demands that companies increase possibilities in the eyes of the consumer while creating a corporate culture that is consistently infused with, while inspired by, uncertainty.

Futurist Richard Seymour emphasized the need to move the conversations from what we could be doing to what we *should be doing*². This premise reverses the compounding of abstractions within a company. There isn't anything that cannot be done today. If you can imagine it, someone can build it. Issues arise when we get caught up in the Formal stage of discussion and become lost in the myriad of options and possibilities, which makes choosing feel like an overwhelming, even gut-wrenching challenge.

¹ The Social Life of Information by John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid 2000

² The Imagination Challenge by Richard Seymour: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpkJUM52Q7s>

THINKING

— BEYOND THE —

FACTORY

“ *It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards!*”

— THE QUEEN, “THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS”

Today the Internally-focused approach to working is no longer sufficient to meet the global demands of the customer. Businesses need to broaden their perspective to include the realities of their successes and failures after launch; constantly evaluating the corporate culture while simultaneously respecting and valuing the perspective and needs of the customer.

One of the greatest barriers to achieving success (financial or otherwise) is in the inability of any one individual from anywhere within the corporate hierarchy to guide conversations that help forget the name of the thing seen, and contextualize an understanding of the unknown.

Drawing on the field of science for example, Niels Bohr, the Nobel prize winning Danish physicist who led the development of understanding of the atomic structure and quantum theory, had many debates as a student with Werner Heisenberg about the paradigm change from Newtonian to Nuclear physics. Heisenberg recalls Bohr trying to explain to him some of the conceptual difficulties that he and his generation faced:

“We intend to say something about the structure of the atom but we lack the language in which we can make ourselves understood. We are in much the same position as a sailor marooned on a remote island where conditions differ radically from anything he has ever known, and where to make matters worse, the natives speak a completely alien language.”¹

This is not unlike the feelings of senior leaders, junior designers, and the customers all trying to articulate their needs and beliefs at the same time. Throw into the “equation” the uncertain global economy, diverse cultural values, and the disappearance of the irrefutable and easily measured investment choices of the Industrial revolution, and the shared infusion of uncertainty becomes apparent.

Knowing this, how do we begin to rethink work? If the strict adherence to a specific process no longer drives innovation and, by extension revenues, where do we go from here?

¹ Notebooks of the Mind by Vera John-Steiner 1997, p. 194

BECOME COMFORTABLE WITH
UNCERTAINTY
 — TO —
INCREASE
POSSIBILITY

“

Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins? Distinctly we see the difference of the colours, but where exactly does the one first blindingly enter into the other...”

— HERMAN MELVILLE

One universal reality is that every corporate culture is unique! The ability to share ideas, question approaches, and consider other concepts is paramount for any company to innovate, regardless of the industry.

As noted in the Abstract of this report, process needs to stop being seen as providing absolute answers to problems or questions. For example, Lean UX, Agile, Waterfall are processes in the design, engineering, and project management spaces with intentions of leading people to greater insights and accountability within projects. To believe such processes will automatically provide irrefutable answers is a common misconception.

This is not to suggest there aren't strengths in such approaches but not every corporation has the will or capacity to enter into a two week “sprint” via Agile, for example.

Shifting from a corporate culture that defines itself by a comfortable routine of the irrefutable to one of rapid and constant change usually results in justifying the dismissal of such approaches before even being attempted. The result is one where the leader of the process and

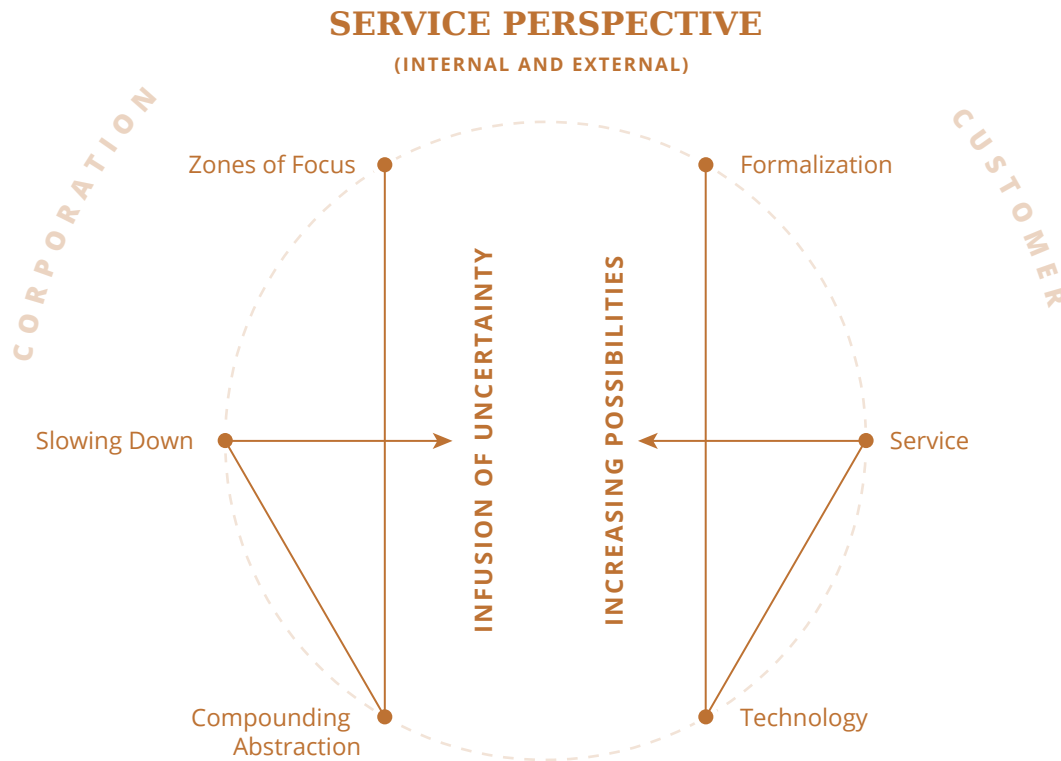
the process itself is blamed for the failure of the resulting work. The formalization of the belief of what constitutes value and success in the minds of employees - and that which is rewarded by the company and its leaders - prevents the attempting of new ideas and an inability to forget the name of the thing seen.

This is where the Service Perspective framework starts to diverge dramatically from the Internal Industrial framework. In the Information Age the corporation needs to recognize their various zones of focus - as suggested by Irwin - and acknowledge at which of the six stages they begin to compound the abstraction to the point of no return.

There is a simple solution to the madness of the never-ending wind sprint in chasing down the latest fad or the need to instantly monopolize on a trending topic —

Slow. Down.

Leaders must openly acknowledge the constant infusion of uncertainty people are expressing through the conflict being felt and discussed. By calling out the “elephant in the room” such feelings become normalized.



This normalization allows for the reversing of the compounding of abstractions so that people can feel confident in expressing their ideas in a group setting. Much in the same way that as a student Niels Bohr exhibited leadership by expressing his concerns around trying to articulate his perspective.

As with most theories this appears to be a simple idea and one that is easy to implement. It's not. It is incredibly difficult, as we all must earn the trust and respect of our colleagues. This comes by working to understand their values and to ensure they feel valued in all of the work they are asked to undertake. Working towards the goal of creating a feeling of Flow¹ moves the leader/manager out of the spotlight and shifts the energy of the team towards a larger purpose — the development of solutions that will eventually delight and engage the customer.

People develop ideas. It is the ensemble of people, called teams, that develop the services through products (virtual or physical). Once launched, the service provided is formalized in the minds and eyes of the customer.

If that experience or service is perceived to be of little value, the opportunity to earn the trust and respect of the customer is lost. A dizzying array of options are merely a tap or swipe away with the potential to lose hundreds or even thousands of customers if they no longer see the company or service as one with unlimited possibility, but rather one of little to no value.

Should leaders provide teams with the opportunity to slow down and reverse the compounding of abstractions, labels can then be taken less seriously and allow the creative process to shape ideas.

In many cases, those who enter this state and who have historically stood behind their titles and the corporate hierarchy, begin to demonstrate leadership by forgetting the name of the thing seen as defined by their own titles. Labels become irrelevant, trust and respect are fostered with the team as a whole, reinforcing the ideal that collectively, 'all of us are smarter than any one of us'.

The development of this corporate culture also leads to a genuine interest in understanding the

¹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: Flow, the secret to happiness
http://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_on_flow

customer. Learning from their perception of what is currently formalized and how to improve upon it adds to the creative insights unseen or never thought of by the Internal company.

The Formalized product or service (usually in the form of technology today) once launched provides fewer options and a greater experience right from inception - something that is critical as attention spans diminish and people's capacity to focus wanes.

By following Irwin's example and learning at which stage your own team and company operates to reify the abstract will demonstrate to you where processes are broken, where communication patterns break down, and how you can start to build a corporate culture based on trust and respect that embraces the unknown and regards uncertainty as opportunity.

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