

THE JOURNAL OF BUSINESS AGILITY

# emergence



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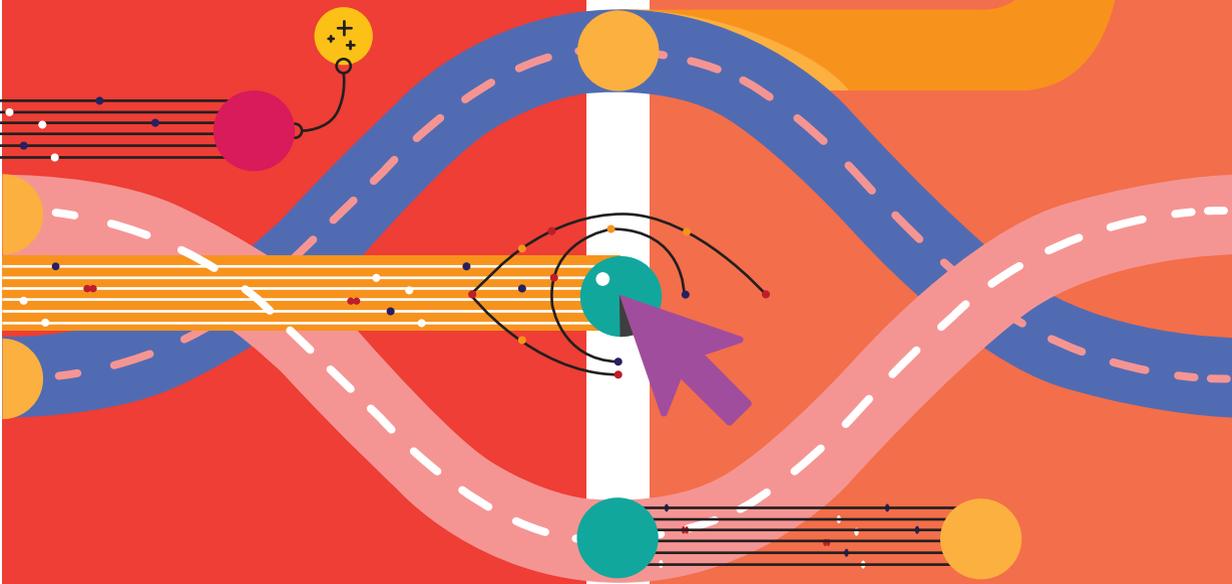
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# Rethinking



**WORK & THE WORKPLACE**

THE JOURNAL OF BUSINESS AGILITY

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an imprint of  
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Emergence is  
published by

**qlevio**

New York, NY 10011

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issue theme

# rethinking work and the workplace

In his book, *The Second Machine Age*, MIT professor Erik Brynjolfsson describes a future in which machines are becoming increasingly capable of performing many tasks that have traditionally been done by human beings. This trend is already well underway, and it is transforming the nature of work and the workplace.

In the past, work was often physical and repetitive, and it could be done by people with little education or training. But as machines have become more sophisticated, they have increasingly replaced humans in performing these tasks. Today, many jobs require higher levels of education and training, and they are often more creative and challenging.

The workplace is also changing. In the past, work was often done in factories or offices, but today it is increasingly being done remotely, through telecommuting and other forms of flexible work arrangements.

These changes have profound implications for individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. They are raising important questions about the future of work and the workplace. What will work be like in the future? What will the workplace of the future look like? How can we best prepare for these changes?

These are just some of the questions that we will be exploring in this issue of *Emergence*. We hope that you will find it to be an interesting and thought-provoking read.

We hope you enjoy this issue of *Emergence*!

Manoj Khanna  
*Managing Editor & Publisher*

emergence

# Before We Reinvent, We Must Heal

Jardena London



**O**rganizations are in pain. Individuals working there are in pain. What's the point of transforming the way we work if it doesn't make our lives any better? Re-imagining the workplace is not possible until we heal the pain that exists *today*.

For years, we've accepted the pain as an unquestionable truth that we should suffer through work in order

to survive. Many people have never even considered the idea that work should be fulfilling and feed not only our soul, but our mind as well.

The pandemic has sparked a change in our willingness to tolerate soulless workplaces. The recent exodus of people leaving their jobs has been dubbed the "Great Resignation". People are willing to live with less in exchange for a less painful existence.

To re-imagine the future of work, we must first heal old wounds and let go of painful elements still hanging around our workplaces.

## What is Organizational Pain?

Organizational pain includes the pain individuals feel, but also ex-

because they have golden handcuffs<sup>1</sup>;

- stressed about going back to the office and are willing to quit over it.

You might also notice that the organization as a whole has pain when:

- Customers aren't happy with the



tends to the pain of the collective—the organization as an entity.

If you look for the most acute pain in an organization, you might find individuals who are:

- working way over capacity and burning out;
- afraid to speak up, they don't feel heard, they feel shut down, etc.;
- feeling stuck in jobs they hate

product or service;

- It's difficult to get products or new features out to customers;
- The market is being disrupted, and the company can't adapt;
- The organization negatively impacts society.

Pain will be attended to whether it's recognized or not. Recognizing pain

<sup>1</sup> Golden handcuffs refers to the practice of trapping people with financial incentives that they'll lose if they leave the company.

is the first step in attending to it in a healthy way.

## The Causes of Organizational Pain

Think about the organization as a living system; let's take the human body as an example. When does the human body feel pain? When it has toxic buildup, when it can't release waste, when a traumatized part impacts the whole, when it feels stuck, and when it can't fulfill its purpose.

Similarly, the same things that cause pain in our bodies create pain in organizations.

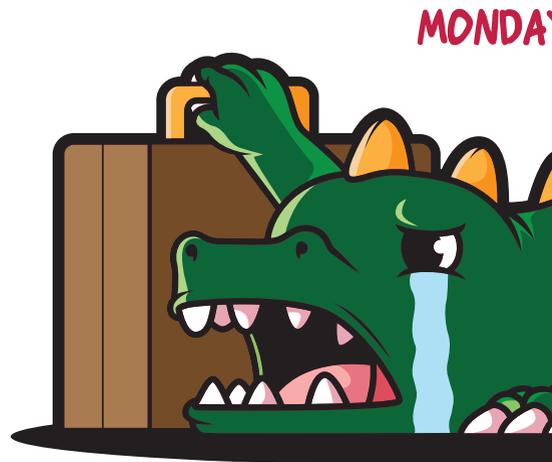
1. **Toxic Buildup:** When the human body has toxic buildup, free radicals chain molecules together, blocking the free flow of energy. Toxic buildup occurs everywhere; in processes, structures, and culture. If the body can't release waste, toxins, or otherwise, the body feels pain. Just like humans, when organizations are not releasing waste, they feel bloated and queasy.

In organizations, you might see processes crop up in response to issues (i.e. approvals), and, over time, they chain together, resulting in a bureaucracy that blocks the energy flow. No one will remove a process for fear that the whole company will collapse like a Jenga tower.

Culture can have toxic buildup too. I've seen organizations afraid to speak up as a result of a leader who has long since left the organization.

They never released the toxin (fear) and healed after the leader left, so it hung around the culture for years afterward.

2. **Trauma to a part:** Whenever I hurt my back, my whole body feels the repercussions. The pain impacts my emotional state; I am more apt to snap at my kids, for example. It's hard to stay positive when you're in pain. The same goes for organizations. I worked with an organization that abruptly eliminated an entire division. First, everyone knew people in that group; second, there was an influx of people looking for jobs inside the company; third, there was fear from the rest of the organization that they would be next. Innovation plummeted because no one wanted to take a risk, and job mobility decreased because no one wanted to be "last hired, first fired" in a new team. The repercussions were enormous.
3. **Feeling stuck (Oscillation):** It can be painful when organizations lurch back and forth between



ends of a spectrum (aka Polarities or Tensions). For example, you may have experienced the swing between centralization to decentralization and then back again. This lurching back and forth, or oscillation, prevents the organization from flourishing, creating the sensation of feeling “stuck” with no where to go.

4. **The Organization can't fulfill its purpose:** When humans don't feel like they're living their true purpose, it puts them in emotional turmoil. It hurts our hearts and our souls. Fulfilling your purpose is so resonant that it's the theme of many Disney films; Moana, Encanto, Brave, Frozen, etc. Organizations are the same way. When an organization “wants” something but is forced to kowtow to shareholders, the organization feels pain. There are many examples of companies going down unethical paths, not because of one person but because of systemic problems affecting their choices. These organizations act out like sulky teenagers because the gap between who they truly are and what they have been forced to become creates conflict. Now ask yourself, what is the biggest pain holding your

Y AGAIN?!



organization back from flourishing? What pain does everyone accept as an unchangeable truth, but would allow the organization to flourish if only it were healed? Think about it.

## Pain Relief vs. Healing Pain

Healing differs from pain relief in that it addresses the root cause of the pain. Pain relief can be a necessary short-term treatment, but there's a cost: pain relief consumes energy. Think about what it's like when you have an injury. You can take a painkiller, but there's the price of the pills, the side effects, and the energy of remembering to take them. As a short-term solution, painkillers are great, but you ultimately want to heal so you can stop taking them.

When we look for opportunities to heal, one place to look is in the places where the organization is administering pain relief. For example, in response to the “Great Resignation,” companies are trying to retain people by using pain killers—perks, raises, and flexible work. Companies design measures to compensate for the fact that people are in pain and want out.

**com-pen-sa-tion** / “kämpən” sãSH(ə)n/  
something, typically money, awarded to someone as a recompense for loss, injury, or suffering<sup>2</sup>.

We've got to stop trying to suppress the pain symptoms and move into true healing. Instead of recovering

<sup>2</sup> Dictionary.com

from burnout, stop burning people out. Instead of incentives to retain staff, create a place where people want to be.

True healing will require organizations to take a long, honest look at their pain.

## Healing Organizational Pain

The pandemic revealed the impact of global trauma on business. Many companies demonstrated the capability to hold space beautifully for healing during these periods of uncertainty and pain. The incident involving the death of George Floyd sparked a movement for companies to open conversations examining their internal systemic racism. While governments were scrambling to handle these crises, companies stepped up and supported their people. Work became the new village. Can we follow this trend to continue healing as we exit these crises?

Once you've identified the pain, it's time to heal it. But you may not know how. That's the moment of truth. Can you stay with it and be the champion, even if you don't know how to solve it? Here are some tips for where to start:

- **Sit with the pain.** Before you do anything else, you need to look that pain squarely in the eye and say, "I see you, and I honor you." Take some time to feel that pain, acknowledge that this was help-

ful to someone at some point, and maybe it still is. Don't think about solving it—at least, not yet. Just sit with it. Have others join you in this quiet reflection.

- **Call on the wisdom of the hive.** Let go of your need to be a hero. You are not going to solve this by yourself. Using techniques like Liberating Structures<sup>3</sup> can allow solutions to emerge. You might even find that the pain you identified was not the most significant. Let the people in pain find answers. Your job is to create the space for solutions and empower ideas.
- **Release things that no longer serve.** In nature, the "adaptive cycle" has four repeating stages as follows:
  1. Birthing: Creating something new
  2. Maturing: Evolving what was created
  3. Releasing: Letting go of what was created to make space for what's next
  4. Reinventing: Using resources to germinate something different

An example of releasing is a forest fire in nature, where trees and brush are killed (aka released). Space is created for sunlight to shine on the forest floor. Similarly, when an organism dies, the elements are fed back into the earth to provide nutrients for the birth of new life.

When Steve Jobs returned to Apple,

he famously slashed hundreds of products from the company lineup, leaving only five in active development. He freed up energy for the iPod and eventually the iPhone to sprout. Would those products have been possible in a company maintaining hundreds of products?

Organizations love birthing new ideas and maturing them. We also love re-inventing. Organizations are generally terrible at the releasing stage. Companies today insist that you must reuse what you have, resulting in Franken-systems patched together into uncontrollable monsters.

When we look at attempts to predict the future of work, they appear to go directly from “maturing” to “re-inventing”. If we are going to reinvent the way we work, we’ll need to take some time to unwind the things that are consuming energy.

## What does your organization need to let go of?

**Explore Tensions (aka Polarities).** A tension refers to two seemingly opposing forces that are interdependent<sup>4</sup>. Poorly managed tensions result in lurching, and lurching is painful. Explore different ways in which the two forces can work together to be generative instead of destructive. In the centralization and decentralization example, instead of oscillating between them, you might look for places where centralization can support more effective decentralization; and vice versa. We see

this at play in companies with a central team building technology that enables teams to operate autonomously and share resources between them.

**Experiment.** Start experimenting! The first idea might not be a winner, but try others until the pain starts to heal. People get discouraged when they take a risk, and it’s not fruitful. Someone needs to keep the effort alive after a downturn. Be tenacious; try something else. When I hear people say, “but nothing has worked,” my answer is, “nothing has worked yet.”

## The False Wisdom of “Easy Wins.”

Have you been told that Organizational Transformation should start with “easy wins”? Conventional wisdom says to grab that “low hanging fruit”. They say we should mobilize the enthusiasts and “go where the energy is”.

If you’ve already tried this approach, you know it can get positive attention. You find an enthusiastic group that’s already forward-thinking, and you work with them to showcase transformation. Ta-da! They show amazing results very quickly. Executives are impressed. You get a promotion! You’re given more responsibility to roll out the transformation at scale. And that’s when it gets difficult. But why?

Because if you really want to make a difference, this approach is dead

<sup>4</sup> Based on the work of Barry Johnson, Polarity Partnerships.

wrong.

If you define success as “implementing an agenda” or “rolling out a change,” early wins will create momentum. When you impose change on people, the momentum created by those quick wins will act as a steamroller, squashing resistance. In turn, that gets buy-ins and helps “sell” the ideas to those less enthusiastic at the start. If your goal is compliance, then easy wins are great.

If you define success as your own career advancement, early wins can make you shine. You will look really good, you’ll get attention, and you might get a promotion. Can you see where I’m going with this? If your ego is at the center of your efforts, then easy wins make a lot of sense because you need to start looking good right away!

The problem is that “easy wins” leave pain festering. When you try to roll out the change at scale, that pain comes back to bite you.

True transformation is not possible until existing pain is healed. Instead of “easy wins”, try stepping into the fire and go where the pain is. Try working with the most difficult, painful problem first.

## **Results may not be immediately apparent.**

Traditional organizations will point to a change that reverts and call it a failure. But is it actually a failure?

When people talk about change reverting, it reminds me of the Taoist parable about the farmer.

The farmer’s stallion wins a prize.

When the neighbor congratulates him on his good luck, he replies:

“Good? Bad? Who knows?”

The next day, thieves steal the farmer’s prize stallion. The neighbor expresses his grief over the farmer’s bad luck. The farmer replies:

“Good? Bad? Who knows?”

And the tale continues back and forth like this<sup>5</sup>. It’s the same when change reverts. It’s hard to know whether it was good or bad, or what impacts it will have days, months, or years down the line.

There was an Agile team I coached in 2010, the early days of Agile. The commitment was only for a pilot, though we all hoped it would sustain. Sure enough, as soon as we completed the work, the team was disbanded.

The team loved the Agile way of working, and they were devastated when they had to go back to the old ways. Many thought this was a bad thing. “Agile didn’t stick! Agile can’t work here!”

Good? Bad? Who knows?

Many of the people on that team were profoundly affected by the experience. It inspired them to seek ways to make these changes in their groups or join the Agile team as a coach. The disbanded team became seedlings that spread throughout the

organization, and created change in a much more effective manner than if they had stayed together.

When change reverts, it's not forever and not a failure. People can see what is possible. Those people will be part of the next wave, trying repeatedly, until it sticks.

## Where does your organization have pain?

Sometimes people and organizations have been in pain so long that they are numb to it. When people tell me that things are working well because they follow a process, even if that process adds no value, I see that they are numb. When someone tells me—"What we're doing makes no sense, but that's just the way it is; I'm just here for the pay check"—I know they are numb to the pain.

The pandemic shone a spotlight on pain that many of us were numb to. Take a fresh look at your organization. Are you making an impact by diving into the area of maximum pain?

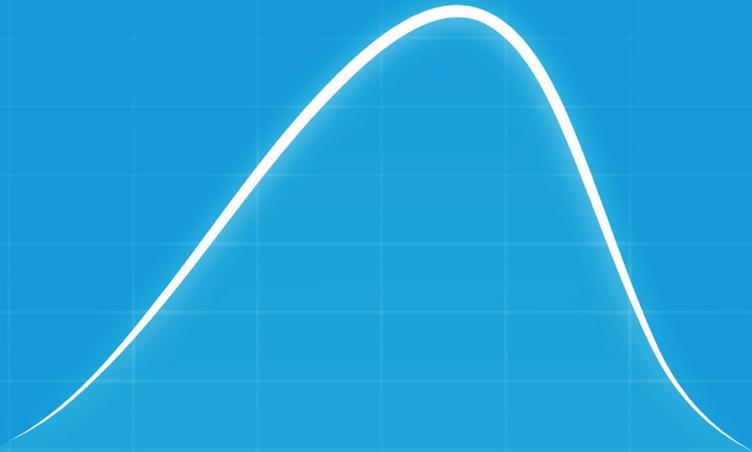
True change is not possible while there is still pain. What pains are people feeling in your organization? What pain is the organization experiencing as a whole?

Where can you direct some energy towards healing that pain? Can you be a catalyst for healing?

A small number of people directing energy toward healing the pain in our workplaces will cause a positive impact to reverberate. Will you be part of that movement?



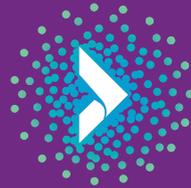
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