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Managing risk and building resilient organisations in a riskier world

Building
resilient
organisations

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Abstract

Purpose – There has been increasing attention given to the need to bring risk thinking into the field of HRM. The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of risk in a rapidly changing context, examines the responses being made and indicates the characteristics of resilient and adaptive organisations.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper presents a categorisation of risk. It uses the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous metaphor to lay out the likely shape of imminent business risks, and the concept of adaptation to present a case that there is scope for effective responses.

Findings – The paper argues we are at inflexion point that will force businesses to re-examine how they do business in ways that will impact customer expectations, product enhancement, collaborative innovation and ultimately organisational forms. In order to manage and mitigate risk organisations need to understand corporate cultures, operating models and organisational constructs, leadership and governance, as well as the more traditional talent management practices and processes.

Practical implications – Key to achieving resilience will be a focus on behaviour and culture. These issues have to be brought to the heart of strategy and the business model of every organisation. Organisation cultures need to be developed based on trust and respect and the need to avoid risk blindness. We need to challenge the mindset that people can only be trusted within narrow confines of rules, or limits of authority.

Social implications – As we continue to develop more heterogeneous employment models – flexi-working, contractors, self-employed consultants, secondees, agency staff, interns and volunteers, outsourcing, partnering and even crowdsourcing – attention needs to be given to the implications for skills, learning and development and the challenges of aligning behaviours.

Originality/value – The paper brings together a range of imminent business risks to build the case that these risks of course have potentially profound impacts on people management, but that their solution also brings HRM thinking to the heart of strategies, cultures and business models.

Keywords Resilience, Risk, HRM, Organization culture

Paper type Research paper

Risk is everywhere and for any business to survive and thrive, being able to understand and sense risk, to mitigate and ultimately to take advantage of risk and change are critical components of success. Businesses exist to create returns, to provide services and products that others need and they cannot do that without taking risk. But we live in very changeable and uncertain times, so we have to create organisations that can manage risk effectively, that can be resilient not in the sense of resisting, but rather in how to adapt, respond and take advantage as unforeseen changes happen.

These are vital agendas for the HR function and require understanding of corporate cultures, operating models and organisational constructs, leadership and governance, as well as the more traditional talent management practices and processes. This paper explores the nature of risk in a rapidly changing context that is challenging so many businesses today, and then goes on to discuss responses and the characteristics of resilient and adaptive organisations.



Understanding risk

Vital to every organisation and their long term viability, is their ability to understand and mitigate risk. But of course risk has many facets, some of which are within an organisations ability to manage or control, often described as internal risks, vs external risks which are largely beyond an organisations ability to control.

At the largest scale are the existential risks to humanity from disease to conflict, and even to the advance of the robots and artificial intelligence which has been quoted by Stephen Hawking amongst others as the greatest risk to mankind. These are important for us all to understand, and business collectively has a major role to play in understanding and mitigating risks of this nature. Sustainability in all its guises, as well as corporate social responsibility, alongside the core purpose of many businesses such as in the pharmaceutical or healthcare sectors demonstrate just how much business has a responsibility in these biggest risks of all.

A discussion of risk therefore often starts with trying to understand the different categories of risk. A simple framework might include:

- strategic – external risks, changes in markets, new competitors etc. think Porters Five Forces model;
- operational – executional risks arising from services delivered or activities carried out;
- financial – funding, cash flow, profitability, investments etc.;
- people – finding, acquiring, retaining, developing, managing, aligning, maintaining well-being;
- regulatory – legislative frameworks, expectations, reporting requirements, policy change; and
- governance – decision making, management, leadership.

Categorising risks provide a framework to approach risk management in a reasonably structured way, but there is not necessarily a one size fits all. Some organisations choose to look at risk from their common sources, or areas of business they may impact, but without some broad view of risk we are in danger of missing key areas of risk for our businesses.

It is all about the people

In the end, businesses are made up of people and people are the primary source of risk, from the decisions they make, the behaviours they exhibit, to the skills and experience they possess.

A report by Cass Business School on behalf of Airmic, the Association for Risk and Insurance Management Professionals (Atkins *et al.*, 2011), examined over 20 of the largest corporate failures in the previous decade to understand their origins and the impact of these failures, from frauds, product and supply chain failures, major accidents, to large scale IT failures. They identified the common points of failure as almost all down to people – governance and risk oversight at board level, poor leadership on culture and ethos, poor communications, risks arising from excessive complexity, inappropriate incentives and hierarchical management that prevents speaking truth unto power.

However, whilst many of the failures that the Cass report examined pointed to the internal risks and failures, there are many risks in today's world that are external and

part of a changing context for all organisations large and small. These require a response of creating businesses that are resilient and adaptive and therefore able to withstand what may be unexpected external shifts and changes, and not only survive but thrive.

The changing context – a riskier world

For a while now, many commentators have characterised the world we live in as increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, a phrase first coined by the US military in describing the new geopolitical context post the fall of the Berlin Wall.

It is an apposite phrase, when so many of the things we may have taken for granted in the past are being challenged. The decision by the voters in the UK to leave the EU and the political fallout that has followed is the latest example of the unexpected and the subsequent turbulence and uncertainty that occurs.

The 2016 Global Risks report by the insurers ZFS (World Economic Forum, 2016) highlighted how business leaders are viewing the world today. There are multiple short term instabilities, alongside longer term structural uncertainties. In recent years, societal, geopolitical and environmental risks have even supplanted economic risks as of greatest concern. Top of the list have been issues of uncontrolled or involuntary migration, societal instability, energy price shocks and poor response to climate change, but in the shorter term the expected risks are to do with structural unemployment or fiscal crises, particular as viewed from Europe.

Technology as the key driver of change

Technology is a huge enabler of positive change, but it is also potentially a significant threat and area of risk to all businesses, from being left behind and becoming obsolete, to finding or developing the kinds of skills needed to shape and understand the future, to the growing threat of cyber security and data risk.

Computers and technology have been with us for some time, but many observers can see we are at an inflection point with the more recent developments of AI, of the internet of things (estimated by McKinsey to be on the way to creating multiple trillions of business value per year) nano-technology, virtual reality, driverless vehicles and so on (Manyika *et al.*, 2013). These technological trends are already increasingly impacting how we consume, how we work, how products and goods get distributed, what services we need, how we travel, how we learn and how we all interact. The technology is already largely here – it is becoming more and more a question of how we apply it.

Klaus Schwab (2016) (founder of WEF) has described the shifts we are now seeing as the fourth industrial revolution – building on the third or digital revolution that has been going on since the middle of the twentieth century, but now bringing together physical, digital and biological developments. He argues this will increasingly force businesses to significantly re-examine how they do business, and that the impacts will be in customer expectations, on product enhancement, on collaborative innovation and on organisational forms.

These then are significant external risks, and organisations and leaders have to respond through adaptation and innovation. It brings to mind Darwin's perspective of evolution that it is not the strongest that survive, but the most adaptable.

The internal challenges that technology create in this context are more about jobs and skills. Developments in technology, and in particular robotisation and AI, are increasingly being seen as having a potentially seismic impact on jobs and

organisations for the future. “Computerisation could replace up to 47 per cent of jobs in the US”, or “Half of all British jobs (15 million) will go to robots within 20 years” (Haldane, 2015) are the kinds of headlines that have got many people thinking much more about the future of their organisations.

Part of this shift will also be in response to the need to improve productivity. A growing concern everywhere if we are to advance economic growth and be able to sustain wages growth. Recently the British Retail Consortium (2016) estimated that as many as one in three jobs in the retail sector could disappear in the next ten years as retailers use automation to become more cost effective and productive, in part driven by higher labour costs. There is no doubt that rising costs of labour, in this case triggered by the increase in the minimum wage is seen as a significant risk for the sector, and long term workforce planning to include more automation is a major part of the response.

Cyber security – the biggest risk for the future?

With technology has come the growth and reliance on data. Data for any organisation are one of its most critical assets, but it also has to be protected, whether it be information about people, products, markets or anything else. Not every organisation is yet seeing data security as the critical risk issue that it is. In the ZFS survey of risks (British Retail Consortium, 2016), it was placed much higher in the USA than in Europe. However, the risks created when data are lost or inappropriately accessed or copied is huge, and recent cases in the UK such as high profile security breaches at Talk Talk, Wetherspoons and Sony and post Snowden and Wikileaks, are bringing the issues much more to the fore. Other growing threats come from the hacking and shutting down of online services on which business has become so dependent. What is known as ransomware and denial of service attacks.

Recent UK Government research (PwC and Infosecurity Europe, 2015) showed that up to 90 per cent of large organisations had suffered an information security breach, and 74 per cent of SMEs. Most attacks go unreported, often because they are simply too embarrassing and would compromise reputation and trust and therefore risk further damage. The likelihood is for others to follow the USA lead and require organisations to be more open – all stakeholders of organisations will need to be more aware of the risks created from cyber security breaches. The estimated costs associated with the most severe online breaches for big business now start at £1.46 million, up from £600,000 in 2014. For SMEs, the costs from the most severe breaches can now reach as high as £310,800, up from £115,000 in 2014 (PwC and Infosecurity Europe, 2015; also Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015).

The research also showed that most of the breaches come from intended or unintended actions of employees, increasingly although not always helpfully referred to as the “insider threat”. Many of these breaches occur through ignorance or lack of awareness such as employees becoming victims of phishing attacks or simply taking data out of the secure physical or virtual environment and then “losing” it, or letting unauthorised people in to secure workplaces by trying to be helpful.

Again, these sorts of risks can only really be addressed by looking at the challenge holistically and recognising the biggest issues are to do with people just as much as technology (which can never be totally perfect or secure). That says we have to look at everything from culture and behaviours to skills and capabilities in addressing, making all employees aware of the risks and their responsibilities in protecting the data and digital assets of the organisations they work for.

Finding the skills we need – changing employment models

Accessing and retaining the skills and talent any organisation needs has long been one of the most obvious risk areas for HR to address and is primary to their role. But in the changing nature of work and jobs, the rapid growth of new skill needs, and the growing mobility of people, this becomes more challenging.

Not only are jobs changing at a faster rate, but how and where people work is also changing. The fastest growing parts of most economies are the self-employed or micro businesses. Many people are choosing to work more for themselves, or work in small enterprises where they have more say and more flexibility in how they work. Exact numbers are hard to come by as not all the variations of work arrangements are accurately captured, but most estimates show that around 15 per cent of the workforce today are self-employed and up to 30 per cent are working in micro enterprises of less than ten people (see e.g. UK ONS bulletins). The number of people who work in more flexible and self-employed working relationships is set to grow with the emergence of models like Uber and the growth of what has been described as the gig economy.

This means that increasingly the workforce of the future for larger organisations will be more fluid as access to the needed skills and talent is not just through traditional employment models. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2016) latest Employer Skills Survey shows that almost one-fifth of job vacancies remain unfilled – most extreme are in the skilled trades occupations where almost 40 per cent of vacancies are caused by skill shortages, but 30 per cent in professional areas and not far off that in caring, leisure and other services. STEM skills shortages have been much discussed – a recent study (Harrison, 2012) estimated the UK would need an additional 40-50,000 STEM skilled graduates per year to keep pace with demand, and Adecco the recruitment and employment agency estimated that for every two STEM job vacancies in the USA there is only one qualified unemployed individual, and this would increase in the future (Adecco, 2016).

So in addressing the risks of not having the available skills we need, we will be responding with these more heterogeneous employment models – flexi-working, contractors, self-employed consultants, secondees, agency staff, interns and volunteers, outsourcing, partnering and even crowdsourcing. They all need to be seen as part of the workforce and therefore the employee risk profile. Aligning behaviours, cultural norms and understanding who has access to what information are a lot harder but must be responded to as the realities of the modern workforce emerge.

Learning and development also has to become more agile and responsive to help upskill and reskill employees, and should also be looked at as part of the strategic investments organisations have to make to address the skills changes and risks.

From risk to response – empowered organisational cultures

So the things that worry corporate leaders, and indeed many of their employees, are increasingly the large scale external threats and uncertainties. Whilst it is clear these are real, they cannot be a reason for inactivity or on the other hand for panic and knee-jerk reactions. A bunker mentality is not how to make progress. It may seem to avert risk in the short term, but in the long term we have to respond to greater risk and uncertainty by developing greater resilience, adaptability and agility.

Research by Cranfield School of Management in a report titled Roads to Resilience (Franken *et al.*, 2014) as a follow up to the Roads to Ruin report, looked at the way leading organisations were building their ability to withstand both expected and

unexpected risks. Researchers found that key to achieving resilience is to focus on behaviour and culture and achieving resilience should be at the heart of strategy and the business model of every organisation. In order to achieve resilience companies should establish a culture based on trust and respect that also avoids risk blindness. The result is a no blame culture which ensures all in the company are committed to a common purpose, vision and values.

As always with culture and strategy, it has to start from the top. Leaders need to engender calm and be able to communicate vision and response to unfolding events as well as to connect and listen. Everyone needs to find some stability and anchors of reassurance, and for most organisations that means reaffirming their purpose, their beliefs, their values – those long term attributes of what makes them what they are. These are also the critical guidelines for corporate culture.

Resilient organisations have more open corporate cultures, where people are properly empowered and able to speak up. In that way, everyone can act as a sensor for change, recognising risks early on, calling out the inappropriate behaviours or concerns on decisions being made, finding solutions from the bottom up as much as from the top down.

That means that one of the most important elements of creating more resilient businesses is the element of trust, as the report also noted. And all the evidence is that trust has been declining over recent years – trust in the “establishment”, leaders, big business, the media etc. In Edelman’s 2015 Trust Barometer (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2016)[1] in more than 60 per cent of countries surveyed the trust levels of the mass population are below 50 per cent. A key reason why many voters are reacting as they are to support non- or anti-establishment figures or views. This is the backdrop or context that all businesses operate in, so we have to work harder than ever to maintain or recover trust in our organisations.

People need to trust their leaders or they will not follow them, and change becomes very hard to make happen, but also leaders need to more demonstrably trust their own employees. We have known through decades of behavioural science research, probably starting with the Milgram studies on obedience in the 1960s (Milgram, 1963) that we cannot create the right behaviours simply by writing more rules. Yet that has been the norm of organisational thinking for a long time – write rules and policies, incent people with financial rewards and drive them to deliver results. In other words, a mindset that people can only be trusted within narrow confines of rules, or limits of authority.

Much business and HR thinking today is starting rightly to challenge this paradigm, and to recognise that engaging people, and aligning them to values, giving them a wider understanding of their accountabilities all the way through to the external stakeholders of the enterprise not only is likely to get more out of them, but to create healthier working environments and cultures and better outcomes. Dan Pink’s popular book *Drive, or the Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (Pink, 2011) went over much history of behavioural science to remind us all of the three main drivers of engagement – clarity and alignment to purpose, mastery and the need and opportunity to improve and develop, and autonomy or the sense of giving me responsibility and empowerment.

It is impossible for management to monitor and control everything, but letting go and trusting and empowering employees is harder to do when we are becoming a lot more aware of the risks that our people can create. But empowered people with the right sense of accountabilities and responsibilities are fundamental to resilient organisations, and the art of modern leadership is more about this idea than ever before.

Looking after our employees – resilience at the individual level

Within the ideas of resilient and adaptive cultures, we also need to help individuals to be more resilient. When under stress, fearful of the future or challenged by so much uncertainty, risks grow significantly for people not performing well or making poor decisions, as well as being more likely to leave or to take periods of absence. From CIPD research, stress is now the highest reason for long term absence from work and is a major contributory factor the growing concerns of mental health across the population.

With all the progress of technology and the access it creates, has also come a speeding up of the business time clock and a sense for many of being “always on”. The Skills and Employment Survey (Felstead *et al.*, 2013) found that the proportion of employees in strong agreement that “my job requires that I work very hard” had increased from 32 per cent in 1992 to 45 per cent by 2012. The CIPD Employee Outlook survey (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and Halogen Software, 2016) asks employees whether they feel under “excessive pressure” at work. In total, 88 per cent said they feel under excessive pressure some of the time, just over 40 per cent experienced this at least once a week, and 13 per cent said they felt under excessive pressure every day.

Managing risk today is therefore just as much about how we support our employees, help to understand and manage stress and promote broader programmes of well-being, as it is about the more traditional people management practices.

Employee risk management

Of course, in support of all the wider aspects of building resilient organisations and managing risk, are the core people management practices. People risk historically has usually been rather limited to areas like retention of key talent, time to hire and filling skills gaps. These are often what have appeared on risk registers. As has been discussed, we now need to see the much wider agenda in responding to risk, from strategic workforce planning and organisational strategy, to leadership development and organisational cultures.

We need therefore also to ensure we have the right people and organisational measures to understand how we are managing and responding to risk. These will be both quantitative, such as the make up of our workforce or recruitment and retention stats, but also qualitative such as engagement and well-being measures. Assessing culture and behavioural alignment is harder and typically require a range of measures to understand, but are much needed to maintain focus and understanding. Risk governance and oversight is an essential role and responsibility from the board to top management, and metrics and data to provide insight is a critical part of the process.

The CIPD collaborating with CIMA as the professional body for management accounting, the Chartered Management Institute, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and together with the research input from Lancaster University have been working on a common framework, metrics and definitions to help organisations measure these things in an initiative called Valuing your Talent. It is time we all agreed some consistent ways of measuring and understanding human capital, both for understanding risk, but also for understanding the creation of value.

Last but not least, we need to reflect our understanding of risk and building more resilient organisations through all the people management processes from how we source, recruit, develop, retain, performance manage, reward, promote and exit people. All of these processes need to have the values and behaviours we want to promote embedded within them – assessing behaviours and cultural fit through

recruitment, reflecting these desired behaviours in how we assess performance, and rewarding in ways that encourage these rather than just focusing on financial outcomes. It is not just what people do, it is how they do it.

Conclusion

Organisational effectiveness is as much about managing risk as it is creating value. The two are really the two sides of the same coin. The responses to risk in building more resilient and adaptive organisations, are also the drivers of value and sustainability. If we see them as complimentary, then we resist the potential conflict that many may see as inherent in ideas of empowerment at a time when people and behavioural risks are now so much more visible.

This goes also for the debates with the regulators and other stakeholders including investors, who also play a major role in the oversight of risk. Happily it seems that the discussion with regulators about how to address failures such as those within the banking sector that led to the global financial crisis, are no longer just about how to write more rules or close loopholes. They are also now fundamentally about corporate cultures. It will be up to our profession as much as any to help educate, respond and keep the focus on these wider truths.

Note

1. www.edelman.com/insights/intellectual-property/2015-edelman-trust-barometer (accessed 29 July 2016).

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