MANAGING YOURSELF

Three Skills Every 21st-Century Manager Needs

by Andrew L. Molinsky, Thomas H. Davenport, Bala Iyer, and Cathy Davidson

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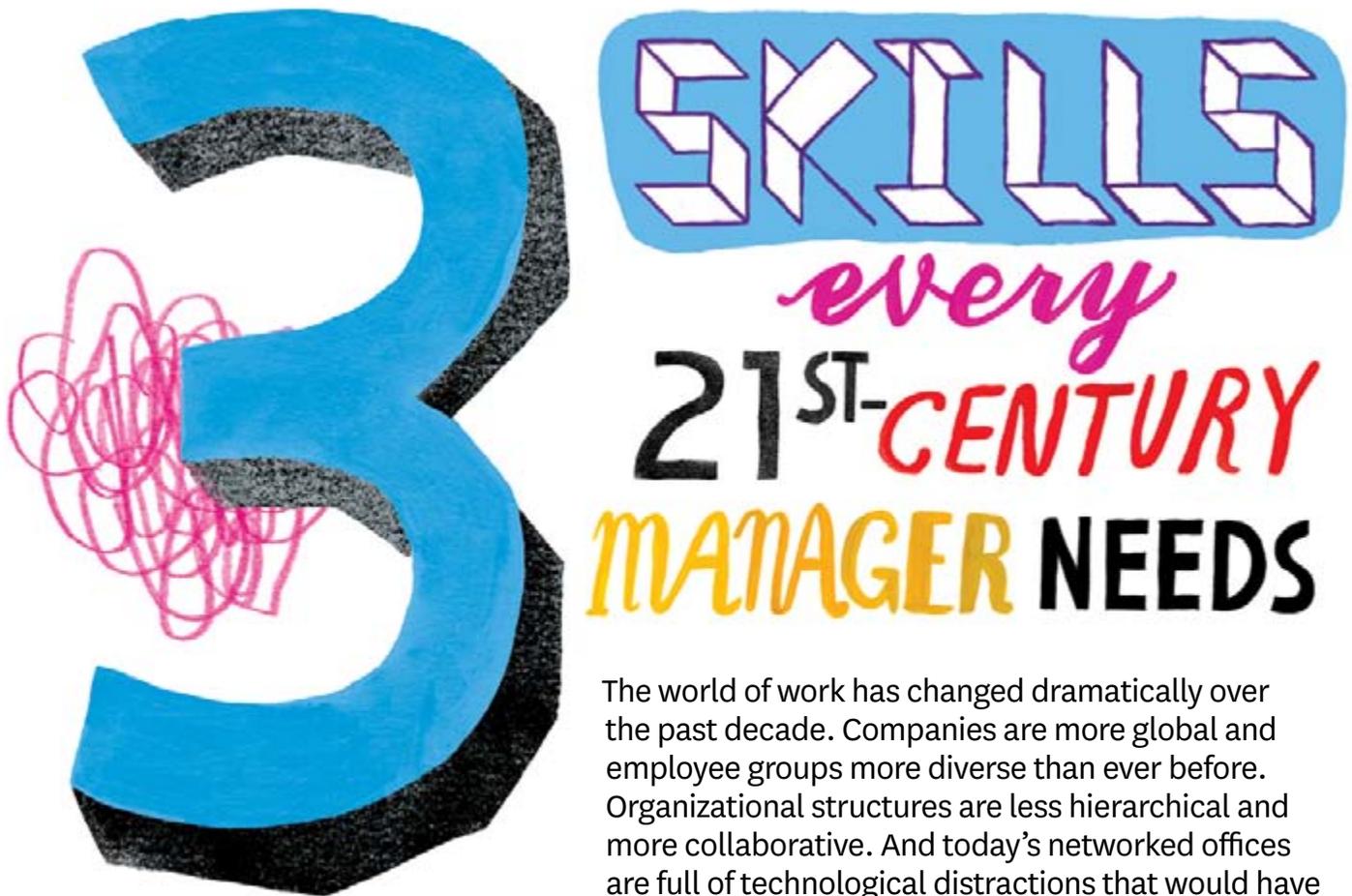
The world of work has changed dramatically over the past decade. Companies are more global and employee groups more diverse than ever before. Organizational structures are less hierarchical and more collaborative. And today's networked offices are full of technological distractions that would have been unimaginable to the 20th-century manager.

We asked experts in cross-cultural communication, information networks, and the science of attention what specific skills executives should cultivate to tackle these new challenges. Here are their answers.

Code Switching Between Cultures

To work well with foreign colleagues, you may have to risk feeling inauthentic and incompetent.

by Andrew L. Molinsky

MARCO, THE ITALIAN COO of a technology company in Mumbai, can't motivate his Indian employees. Anat, an Israeli management consultant working in the United States, struggles to give "American style" feedback. Seungwoo, the CEO of a Korean software firm with a new Shanghai office, has trouble retaining Chinese staffers. All three of these executives should be successful in their respective cross-cultural contexts. They all have what Mansour Javidan, of the Thunderbird School of Global Management, calls a "global mind-set": They are seasoned managers who appreciate diversity and have international work experience. They also have specific cultural intelligence: Marco knows that Indian workers are accustomed to leaders who are more authoritarian than those in Italy; Anat knows that most Americans prefer criticism couched in kindness over the blunt feedback she might ordinarily give; and Seungwoo knows that Chinese bosses tend to be more paternalistic than Korean ones. These three leaders are motivated to use this knowledge; in fact, their professional success depends on it.
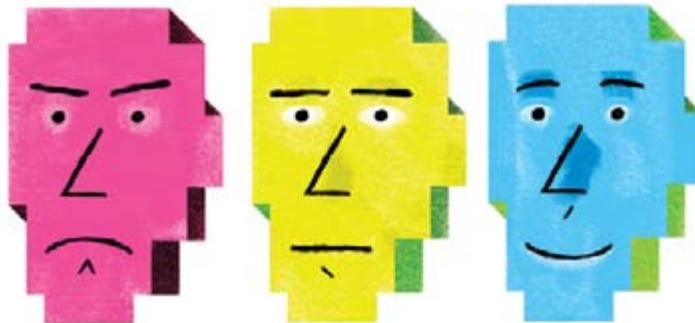
So what's holding them back? I've spent the past 10 years studying hundreds of savvy business professionals who were thrust into unfamiliar cultures or who work with foreign colleagues, and I believe that what Marco, Anat, and Seungwoo lack is a very specific skill I call "cultural code-switching"—the ability to modify behavior in specific situations to accommodate varying cultural norms. Code-switching requires far more than the right mind-set, information, and motivation. It requires a capacity to manage the psychological challenges that arise when someone tries to translate cultural knowledge into action.

Executives often feel inauthentic when their behavior conflicts with their ingrained values and beliefs, and doubly uncomfortable when others assume that it is a true reflection of who they are. They may also feel incompetent—anxious and embarrassed about acting in a way so far

outside their comfort zone. Deeper down, they may feel frustrated and angry that they had to make changes in the first place. After all, managers don't usually have to adapt their behavior to the needs of their subordinates; most often it's the other way around. Together, these feelings can prevent executives from making a successful code switch, thus imperiling their careers and their companies' success.

The good news is that it's possible to overcome this problem. The first step is to diagnose the challenges you face. In Marco's case, a deep belief in empowering subordinates was preventing him from

embracing the top-down, often harsh leadership style that his Mumbai team seemed to need in order to meet deadlines. Whenever progress was so poor that he had to yell out directives, he felt guilty ("I shouldn't treat employees this way!") and ineffective ("I sound ridiculous!").

The second step is to adapt your behavior to reduce your distress. That means making small but meaningful adjustments that are both appropriate in the new setting and true to your own values. It may mean electing behavior that blends elements of both cultures. Marco was able to find a middle ground between his participative European management style and the more authoritarian kind expected in India. He could be significantly more hands-on and assertive without yelling. Anat was able to give feedback better tailored to an American audience while retaining some of her direct, demanding Israeli style.

The third step is to fully appreciate the value of code-switching. One way is to focus on how the desired outcome aligns with your personal goals and values, even if the behaviors themselves do not. Marco knew that adapting his style in India would help him become a more effective global manager, which was very important to him. Seungwoo was able to ease up on his Chinese employees when he reminded himself how important the Shanghai operation was to future growth.

Another way is to view your code-switching from the perspective of the other culture, rather than exclusively through your own lens. Once Marco came to see that his employees actually valued his new management style, it became far easier to practice. Similarly, when Anat learned to appreciate the reasons for giving American-style feedback—her colleagues were hurt and demotivated by criticism delivered without praise—she could more easily change her approach.

Being culturally fluent means being able to enter a new context, master the norms, and feel comfortable doing so. In situations where executives perceive a serious threat to their competence and identity, they often show a strong psychological resistance to appropriate behavior. Learning to be effective at cultural code-switching is the key to becoming a truly global leader.

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Wielding Digital Influence

As companies become less hierarchical, the effective use of online networks will be crucial to success.

by Thomas H. Davenport and Bala Iyer

DHARMESH SHAH, THE FOUNDER and chief technology officer of HubSpot, a web marketing company, has an impressive online network: He runs a 216,000-member LinkedIn group for entrepreneurs, hosts a Q&A community for start-ups on Stack Overflow, and has more than 98,000 Twitter followers. But even more enviable than the size of Shah's network is how he uses it. During a recent hiring push at HubSpot, he tweeted about the company's need for talented engineers and quickly received referrals for hundreds of candidates, several of whom he hired. On another occasion, while wrestling with an error-prone program for a new product, he asked his online followers for help. Within hours he received many suggestions, and one person provided instructions for debugging the program.

Most managers today understand how to use online tools to build and expand their networks. It's easy to reach out to industry contacts and colleagues through LinkedIn and Facebook, to follow and be followed on Twitter, and to actively participate in corporate social media initiatives. Less well understood is how managers can use these networks to gather information and wield influence in an increasingly interconnected, collaborative, and less-hierarchical workplace. Shah provides a perfect case study, offering lessons that will help even executives outside the technology industry.

To build an effective online network, you need to focus, as Shah does, on three things: reputation, specialization, and network position. As in the real world, reputation is currency—it's how you get people you've never met to seek you out, give you information, and collaborate with you. In the virtual world you build your reputation by offering interesting content, drawing attention to your web presence, and motivating others to circulate and act on your ideas. Reputation can be assessed using services such as Klout, Identified, PeerIndex, and Empire Avenue, which score you on the basis of how many people you influence, how much influence you wield, and how influential your contacts are. Shah has a Klout score of 80 (on a scale of 1 to 100).

He and other successful online operatives enhance their reputations and expand their networks by focusing on key areas of expertise. Shah's are technology and entrepreneurship—topics that are central to each of his web ventures. Yours might be sales or HR or nonprofit management. Take Barry MacQuarrie, an accountant who set up a community on LinkedIn with the goal of understanding how social media could be used in his profession. It now has 1,800 users, who advise MacQuarrie on that subject. And prospective clients have found him and his firm through the group. Specialization involves demonstrating deep knowledge, establishing links with other experts both inside and outside your organization, committing to learn from them, and being willing to offer relevant information and referrals to others. Google+ and similar tools allow users to create "circles" or communities with shared interests; LinkedIn is fragmenting into specialist groups as well.

Although focus is important, the best online networkers also position themselves as bridges between otherwise unconnected groups. This can increase your influence, because it gives you a chance to identify potential collaborations or conflicts and to accumulate superior information. Shah, who graduated from the MIT Sloan Fellows Program, has access to MIT's student and alumni networks as well as his start-up network. He can act as a broker between student ventures and VCs or between start-ups and talent, and can even find his own angel investment opportunities. LinkedIn Maps and TouchGraph enable users to visually examine their networks for connections, clusters, density, and redundancy.

Good networkers use their contacts as a source of quick feedback on—and even solutions to—work challenges of all sorts. We know a manager at an IT company who took advantage of internal social-networking technology to crowdsource reviews of a contractor he was considering. He discovered that the man had done sloppy work on a few recent projects and so chose not to hire him. If your network is strong, you are connected to well-

placed colleagues, suppliers, customers, and fellow executives in your field—a host of experts who can help you at a moment's notice.

Shah's debugging challenge is one example. Consider also Michelle Lavoie, an enterprise community manager at the IT services company EMC, who used her internal blog to tackle an even bigger problem: how to cut costs during the 2008 financial crisis. "Constructive Ideas to Save Money," her 430th post to the network, requested a moratorium on complaints about a controversial change in the vacation policy, offered five positive suggestions, and encouraged colleagues to contribute their own. A year and a half later the post had gotten more than 26,000 views and had generated 364 responses with cost-saving ideas, many of which were implemented. Lavoie gained visibility at every level of the company and ensured that getting EMC through the crisis was an all-hands initiative rather than a top-down edict.

You can also use your network to test proposals and strategies, inside and outside your organization. Float an idea and see how many "likes" it gets. Or direct certain groups of people to an online survey. The feedback might help you persuade a reluctant boss or client to come around to your point of view. These methods of exploiting strong virtual networks are only the beginning. Newer techniques, such as engaging your online contacts in work "games" so that they happily take action in your or your company's behalf, are now coming to the fore.

Soon, we expect, organizations will begin to seek out employees with demonstrably strong online connections and a track record of wielding influence through them. The best networkers will become even more highly valued.

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SKILL 3

Dividing Attention Deliberately

Instead of battling distraction, embrace your brain's proclivity for it.
by Cathy Davidson

SEVEN IBM EMPLOYEES, each in a different location, are on a conference call. As two of them talk over the telephone line, two others chat about the conversation via text messages; another accesses a spreadsheet, trying to answer a question posed earlier in the call; still another Googles a potential competitor; and the last taps out an e-mail to a colleague who is not on the call. Are these employees distracted by 21st-century technology? Or has 21st-century technology empowered them to pay attention in a new, perhaps more natural, creative, and productive way?

We all know the story of contemporary distractions. In the past decade the world has gone from a total of 12 billion e-mails a day to 247 billion, from 400,000 text messages to 4.5 billion, from an individual average of 2.7 hours a week online to 18 hours. We may still sit in offices or cubicles designed to shut out the external world, but the center of our work life is a computer that keeps us connected to that world—to colleagues, customers, clients, family, community, entertainment, and hobbies; to everything we know we should be doing and everything we know we shouldn't.

Gloria Mark, a professor at the University of California, Irvine, has shown that modern workers switch tasks an average of once every three minutes. Once their focus on a given task has been interrupted, it takes an average of 25 minutes to return

to it. Some say we should try to eliminate those distractions. But I think today's managers are capable of coping with and sometimes even thriving on them.

Mark's research also shows that 44% of the switches cited above are caused by "internal" rather than "external" sources of distraction—meaning that our minds simply wander. We can't blame technology for our failure to focus, because our brains are built to multitask. Close your eyes for five minutes and notice how your thoughts stray, jump, zigzag, and double back. Success in 20th-century factories and offices may have required paying strict attention to systematic tasks and taking those tasks to completion, but that is not a natural way for humans to operate. Perhaps our 21st-century connectedness gives us the freedom to acknowledge this.

Why should we make undivided attention an ideal and cling to it in an environment where it is so hard for us? Why not "unlearn" that skill, as the futurist Alvin Toffler puts it, in order to let our brains work the way they do naturally? In my research on attention, I've come across many tools that help managers eliminate distraction. A productivity application called Freedom lets you block the internet for a specified period, and Concentrate is a service that makes available only those programs you need for a specific task. The former Apple executive Linda Stone, who coined the term "continuous partial attention" to describe our habit of constantly scanning the horizon and never fully focusing on a given task, suggests simply turning technology off.

Such controls on information streams do help some people in some situations feel more focused and productive. But it's not clear that their feelings reflect reality. A study of 300 workers conducted at the University of Melbourne shows that although people who use the internet at work for personal reasons assume it makes them less productive, it actually increases their productivity by 9%. That isn't true for internet "addicts" who use social media to excess. But for those whose

minds simply wander between work and play, a break to surf the web can provide a cognitive refresher that improves their performance when they return to the task at hand. This even has its own acronym: WILB, for "workplace internet leisure browsing." Maybe managers will learn to embrace it as a positive distraction that relieves stress and boosts creativity.

Another productivity-enhancing strategy is to deliberately divide attention and harness it, just as those IBM employees did on their conference call. Charles Hamilton, an e-learning strategy leader at IBM, explains that his managers are more engaged in their virtual meetings because of the simultaneous text messaging (which they call "back chatting") that has become standard practice; in fact, when the feature isn't turned on, they start to worry that someone isn't being heard. By encouraging these multiple conversations, managers marshal wandering minds. They also promote more-equitable participation in group calls—people can respond without interrupting—and ensure that the entire conversation flows in an interactive and productive way. Attention is "distributed" more evenly and fluidly, rather than being dominated by one or two loquacious participants who leave everyone else disengaged and distracted.

At the individual level, a good example is the software developer Aza Raskin, formerly of Mozilla and now the CEO of the start-up Massive Health. Raskin knows he can't spend all day, every day focused on only the most important tasks. But he sets limits on his divided attention by using two computers at his workstation and another down the hall. The work he must accomplish is loaded onto the first, most prominent device, with no internet connection. Off to the side is a machine that offers access to e-mail and the web. The third, a short walk away, is linked to Twitter and his blog, with a flashing reminder of the "real" work he needs to do back at his desk. His strategy is to make procrastination difficult but not impossible, because complete focus is beyond his reach—and not necessarily even desirable in today's workplace. Raskin's three computers help him program interruption and mind-wandering into his day.

Not everyone has the same style or requirements for attention, so a good 21st-century manager needs to figure out how to let multimedia work to everyone's advantage. Gazing aimlessly out the window is as important to creativity as logging on to Facebook to view the latest photo of your young nephew and then returning to work in a better, lighter, more productive mood. Research shows that accident, disruption, distraction, and difference increase our motivation to learn and to solve problems, both individually and collectively. The key is to embrace and even create positive interruptions.

In the future, continuous partial attention will perhaps be seen not as a problem but as a critical new skill. And maybe we won't call it multitasking—we'll call it multi-inspiring. ▱

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Cathy Davidson is the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Duke University. Her latest book is *Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn* (Viking, 2011).

"Hey, buddy, can you spare some paperwork?"