

Living and thriving under ambiguity

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When new problems arise in life and do not have clear answers confusion arises. What do we do? Ambiguity is the feeling of being uncertain and being faced with a situation in which an answer could be one of many different possibilities. Which one is the right one? How do we know what to do? In this blog, the idea of living under ambiguity will be discussed with the purpose of providing some advice on how to thrive under ambiguity.

In foundational problem-solving research, ambiguity is a central idea (see Checkland, 1999 – 30-year research program on the topic). Ambiguity is the sense of not knowing and not being able to understand the disruptiveness of a particular situation (Price, 2004) because of the complexity and the lack of available information (Lin, 2022; Orkibi, 2021; Singh Dubey et al., 2022). Ambiguity produces feelings of cognitive dissonance (Simon, 1997). Cognitive dissonance is when somebody holds to believe that once, or, as Simon (1997) states, 'it's when the reality of the situation doesn't matter what you believe.' The difference you not between expectations and reality results in a feeling of confusion of ambiguity leading to the feeling of dissonance that Simon (1997) discusses. It also puts people in situations where they think the answer is obvious, but the complexity of the situation feeds back, making it difficult to navigate through.

Karl Weick (1995; 2012) coined the term disruptive ambiguity. Disruptive ambiguity are situations that happen, which are not expected to disrupt our plans or way of life. It could be the emergence of a new technology or a sudden shift in tactics or market trends. Weick (1995) argued that we can only retrospectively acknowledge disruptive shifts during times of ambiguity because we can only 'make sense' of complex events after the fact.

Ambiguity leaves people a feeling of uncertainty as to what actions to take. As we go through life, disruptions lead to unsettled plans. At first, our plans can be completely changed and re-organised to a different outcome. At worst, we need a new plan because the one we had was already thrown out the window by the disruption.

The number of disruptions caused by technology over the last decade has caused a lot of people to be stressed and be unsure of the actions that they can take. For example, mobile phone technology has created new ways to access data, contacts and even facilitated changes in whole new industries such as the gig economy (i.e. Uber Eats, Ride Sharing platforms and new payment gateways). Entire industries removed, existing ones challenged while new ones created. For example, personal home entertainment in the form of renting VHS tapes and DVDs was replaced by streaming services. The music industry was disrupted by streaming and now there is an emerging trend for Artificial Intelligence which is already disrupting marketing and sales professions.

Weick (1995) talks about these disruptions as being a normal part of our day-to-day management of life. Disruptions are indeed a part of everybody's life, whether they are planned or not. So how do people learn the skills to navigate and thrive through ambiguity?

The need for new skills

Consider for example this recent survey by the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum, 2023). Several of these key skills identified by this survey are not all digital skills. Digging a bit deeper, other reports talk about the need to blend traditional skills in leadership and problem solving with digital skills. Bernard Marr (2022) argues that because of the complex transformation taking place in society, it's now essential for people to combine leadership skills like emotional intelligence and adaptability (for example) with digital so that their ability to work creatively with technology helps them to cope with future disruptions coming from technology. The argument here is that society is trending towards working with digital technology, and therefore requires thoughtful management of the interaction between human and machines. Finally, consider this from the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum, 2023):

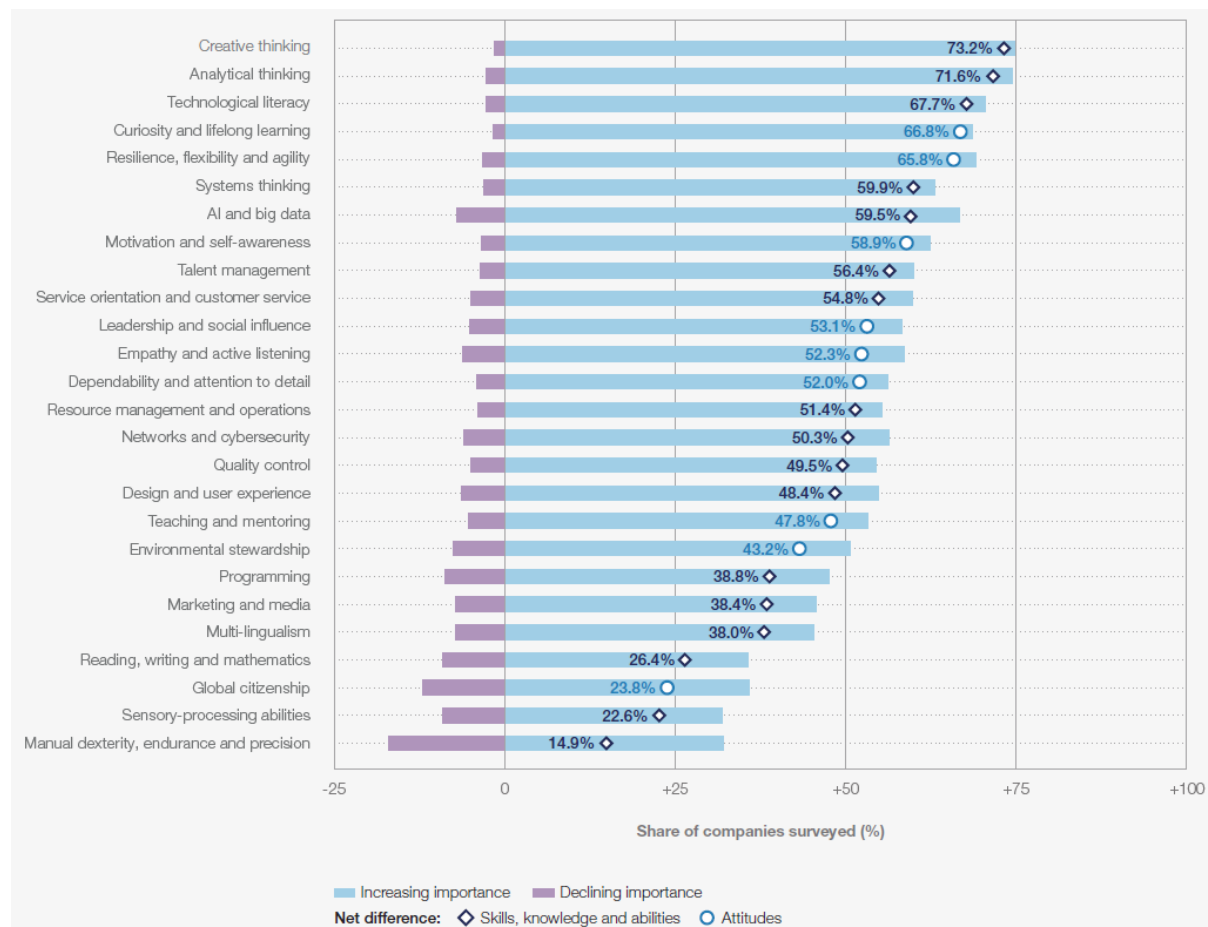


Figure 1. Skills on the rise (World Economic Forum, 2023, p39).

This data comes from a large-scale survey of skills desired by employers conducted by the World Economic Forum's report on skills for 2023. The skills needed to thrive under ambiguity are: analytical thinking and innovation; creativity, originality and initiative; complex problem solving; reasoning, problem solving and ideation skills. The future of work is becoming digital but the skills in demand are not *just* digital. Disruptive technologies have laid a path for the future and often changed it for the better even though in the past, they can also be destructive (e.g. nuclear weapons).

Thriving under ambiguity

Harford (2016) has referred to constructive ambiguity, which refers to the idea that people learn to become comfortable in ambiguity, while the world around continues to be complex with new problems emerging on a daily basis. Progress requires combining the skills from the list above and providing new 'creative' ideas to test solutions.

The broad strategy for dealing with ambiguity

This process begins with first, understanding the current landscape and challenges. Dealing with ambiguity begins with acknowledging what is known and not known about the situation. Grey (2016) calls this 'liminal space', which means the spaces in between. This is an uncomfortable place to be in. It often requires thoughtful reflection on what the obstacles are, what the feelings of discomfort are and then working out ways to respond by thinking of creative ways to engage the problem (Houghton and Stewart, 2017).

It is not the time to get used to be sitting with ambiguity, instead considering what we could construct as a meaningful response out of an ambiguous situation. At the heart of the skills above is the idea of synthesis.

For example, recent developments in the supply chain industry have led to a very strong movement towards ending modern slavery. In this context, modern slavery refers to making sure all members of the supply chain are paid a living wage that is in accordance with fair economic standards. This has been a challenge in many supply chains due to the fact that a lot of people in developing nations have been paid a lot less for their work than others in developed nations across the supply chain. To end modern slavery, every supplier must be transparent and accountable to their stakeholders which is a complex problem in and of itself. The response is to develop strategies to build a network of transparency, so that people know where materials are coming from to begin the process of steadily and slowly ending modern slavery within a generation. The complexity of the problem is the lack of transparency in system. Hence, the challenge is how to make sure everybody is paid fairly which means the company responsible has to be transparent to society about its lack of fair payment in the past which leads to them needing to be accountable for future fair payments. During the journey from the problem to solution is this process of testing new ideas, putting forward new ways of thinking and ultimately making the commitment to try new things instead of living with the status quo. As Gray (2016) suggests that thinking both creates the problem and sustains it, until a new concept emerges that can be tested, learned from and developed. Gray (2016) also suggests that creating in these situations is a process of experimenting and rethinking old mindsets.

Constructing out of ambiguity

Constructing out of ambiguity refers to the process of creating or building something meaningful and creative in situations where there is uncertainty or lack of clarity. It involves experimenting, validating, and moving forward despite the complex and interacting layers of ambiguity. What emerges from this interaction are barriers to change that have emerged over the process of time and space (Houghton and Crump, 2016). That is, previous decisions or ideas have lost their relevance and now need to be challenged.

Ambiguous situations are often challenging because they lack clear answers or defined steps to follow. Instead, they tend to highlight barriers and conflicts that arise from the old ways of doing things. Rather than avoiding these conflicts, the goal is to tackle them head-on by seeking ways to dissolve ambiguity. This can be achieved by experimenting with new ideas, implementing them, and learning from the feedback and iterations. Through this process, new concepts and solutions can emerge, effectively resolving the ambiguity. At its heart, thriving under ambiguity means looking for new ideas that resolve the challenges posed by old ideas.

Considering the current trends of continuous technological change, digital convergence,

conflict and war, it is unlikely that the world will become less ambiguous in the near future. Therefore, future leaders and innovators should not shy away from ambiguity but embrace it with an exploratory mindset. The risk lies in doing nothing and allowing ambiguity to persist, while the investment lies in finding better ways of doing things that allow new ideas to flourish.

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