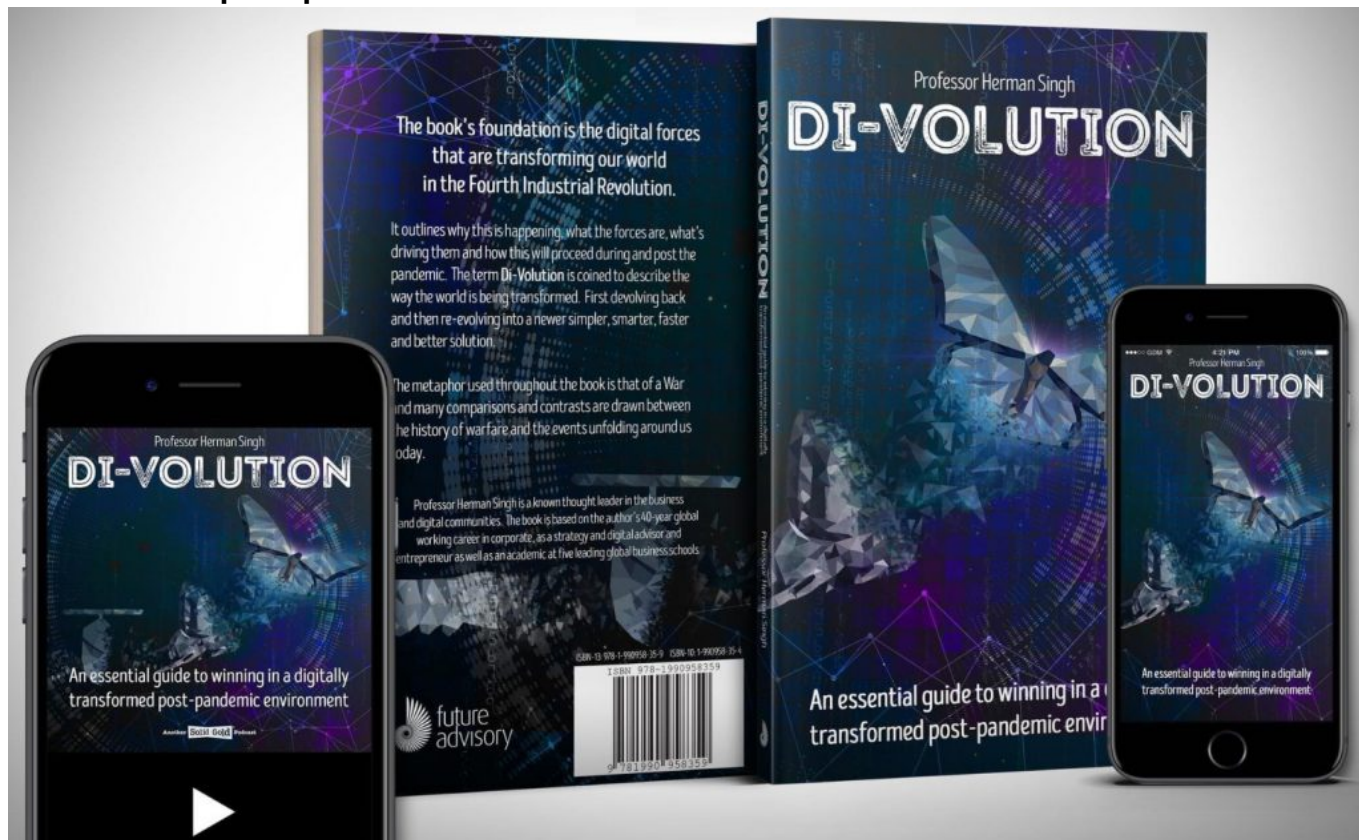


Book review of “Di-Volution: An essential guide to winning in a digitally transformed post-pandemic environment”



We all have been dazzled and, at the same time, are left fear-stricken by ‘digital prophets’ at the many conferences, webinars, and launches we attend. And we have met many a self-proclaimed ‘digital evangelists’ and ‘early adopters’ who castigate and typecast us – the ‘analogues’, ‘luddites’, or ‘laggards’ – in traditional print and digital mediums (particularly in social media from Twitter to LinkedIn). We are left to feel like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a future rushing straight for us. We are paralysed, perplexed by their rhetoric of the future, doomed to ‘chasing our own tails’ in the here-and-now, and helplessly await their benevolence and rescue.

These tropes and performances of digital prophecy and evangelism are seductive and are sung by some upstart, digitally literate consultants. Professor Herman Singh in his book “Di-Volution”, though, does not have patience for this and forewarns us that our “challenge as always will be ensuring that those that make the decision *stay to see through its execution*” (italics added, 2020, p133):

“Hence my aversion to listening to consultants or highly mobile employees in this matter” (italics added, 2020, p133).

Before we cast stones, consider that we may all be guilty to some extent of this as well in our respective organisations. Perhaps you fall in one of the ‘four flavours’ of ‘digital advisors’ that Professor Singh identifies. Thus, we need to heed his critical reflections and the clarion call that he sounds for our own agency in designing and realising our futures and what we value. To be agents of our own Di-Volution – to pivot from our existing paths, to digitally evolve, to breakdown and transform ourselves and our world for the future (*divergence and evolution*).

Professor Singh cuts through the smoke screens, wizardry, and mystification that we all get caught up in. He brings to bear his experience and expertise from his diverse academic and practitioner roles, and distils the “convergence of digital capability, exponential organisations, a raging profit incentive, and an ever-demanding and growing consumer base” (p6). He weaves together, contextualises, and narrates key concepts to illustrate the convergence from the frontlines. It is visceral and he taps into his experiences and journeys in many corporates and positions to make real what the convergence entails. This is not a pure academic text (which, by the way, Professor Singh authors on operations management), nor selections and reminisces from a personal journal. For someone new to the concepts – such as a young student or new entrant in the world of work – may I suggest that they do in parallel with reading Di-Volution some research and deep dives into the literature on, for example, strategy, ambidextrous organisations, disruptive innovation, singularity, exponential change, and abundance[1].

Throughout the book the metaphor of war is used to relate to the reader the urgency, criticality, and impact of the convergence and the disruptions, rate of change, and combinatorial digital forces entailed. The ‘digital war’ is not coming or impending. It is here and at play, warns Professor Singh. We need to understand the battlefield, the weapons, the nature of the conflict, and the strategies and tactics. The book, therefore, is divided into five sections:

- the nature of the conflict and how the COVID pandemic fuels it
- the protagonists, from insurgent start-ups, legacy incumbent firms to SMEs
- the rules and strategies of engagement
- the battlefield and advantages and challenges of ambidextrous organisations
- and the end game

“The rule book for warfare was written by military analysts who had observed and studied historical engagements and had drawn conclusions based on the winners and losers and their strategic choices. They assumed that the truth extracted from these assessments were eternal and never changing. And the same was true for business strategy gurus. The two big questions in strategy is where to play and how to win. The digital invasion forces approach these two questions in a whole new manner” (italics added, p96).

Professor Singh unpacks how these two questions are approached by the digital protagonists. He then draws out the importance of leadership and execution in legacy, incumbent firms for a re-architecting of the business and implementation of a two-speed digital strategy. This is not a simple feat and he provides reality checks on the promises of consultants and highly mobile employees. It is difficult to build *both* the performance and innovation engines within a firm. And if you think ‘lean methodology’ is the new, simple answer, he provides another dose of reality.

“The answer is lean, what was the question? This seems to be how a lot of consulting works these days” (p189).

He reminds us of Toyota and their production system where ‘lean’ became systematised and an art. At another point he also reminds us of ‘legacy unicorns’ such as Apple, which is over forty years old and

constantly reinvents itself. This means, critically, that Amazon, Facebook, and Google, for example, are not our only reference points and standard. However, Professor Singh does point out how the future of work, organisations and employees are evolving. He points out the implications for HR and presents a challenge to HR on how it reinvents itself. Here, Yeung and Ulrich's book on "Reinventing the Organization" may help think through these shifts and the role and identity of HR.

Fittingly, Professor Singh ends the book thus: "NOT The End - just a new beginning" (capitalisation in original, p 227). Another reminder of our agency. HR is not a silent observer or victim of the digital war. It can be and is a key protagonist. And it should guard against not 'seeing the wood for the trees' and being side-tracked by red herrings when engaging with calls such as the one that Professor Singh makes. For example, one could nit-pick on his use of Maslow's hierarchy given the recent critical, historical reviews of the research and assumptions that informed the hierarchy. That would miss the specific point of the argument there on value and what drives us as human beings; and the broader argument on Di-Volution. The key question for us is: what do we value as HR and what is our Di-Volution?

[1] Walter Kiechel's "The Lords of Strategy" and Pankaj Ghemawat's "Strategy and the Business Landscape" may be helpful, particularly on the BCG, McKinsey and other portfolio models. The Singularity University's 6Ds framework (from digitisation to dematerialisation and demonetisation) and argument for abundance could also be helpful. See the factsheet on HR's place in the fourth industrial revolution.

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