

# Strategic commentary

## The future of leadership: robots, remote working and real-time reactions

Oliver Watson

### Navigating the changing leadership landscape

It is no secret that the ability to spot and nurture leadership is key to business success. But, as technology continues to revolutionise the way we live, work and lead, are companies fully equipped for what lies ahead?

As an organisation that places some of the world's best talent into leadership positions, PageGroup always has one eye on the future, and it is recently partnered with trends predictor Foresight Factory to look at exactly how leadership might look in five to ten years.

The resulting report focusses on the key challenges impacting senior leadership today, examines the trends shaping the future of leadership and also gets to grips with the tricky transition from people manager to business leader.

Here is a snapshot of what we discovered.

### Internal challenges

Future-proofing your business is critical to success – in fact, the Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM) discovered that more than nine out of ten UK organisations say that a lack of leadership skills is affecting their ability to achieve their goals.

Despite this, the majority of organisations currently struggle to identify future leaders, citing a lack of succession planning, difficulty understanding the core challenges that future business leaders will face and an inability to separate management versus leadership skillsets as key pain points.

### External powers at play

Combined with these internal challenges, a progressively more global and digital world brings with it a whole new set of problems. With workforces increasingly diverse, dispersed and digital, a leaders' ability to adapt to, motivate and mobilise multiculturalism has never been more crucial.

As flexible working impacts traditional working patterns and structures, and leaders contend with competing priorities and growing complexity of processes and systems, even basic leadership tasks can become difficult to perform ([Institute of Leadership and Management, 2014](#)).

Meanwhile, digital is no longer an emerging concept, it is an embedded business practice – requiring companies to identify leaders with the abilities to navigate in an online world – something that is far easier said than done.

Oliver Watson is Executive Board Director for UK and North America, PageGroup, London, UK.

## Looking to the future: 2020 and beyond

When we looked at the key forces influencing current leadership expectations and projected those into the future, four stood out from the others: the rise of robots, constant connectivity, personal branding and *intrapreneurialism*.

### *The rise of robots*

The next decade and beyond will see robotisation reduce the number of jobs available to a human workforce. In an increasingly competitive and volatile job market, employees will have to continuously update their skillsets to stay relevant, with new skills being flexibly learnt, upgraded and discarded as necessary.

This will require an adaptation of leadership styles to successfully combine a human/robot workforce – finding a way to not only juggle but also effectively exploit the benefits of this human/machine intelligence combination.

To avoid widespread redundancies, future leaders will also have to take incremental action to support staff in regularly updating their skillsets through continuous training opportunities and providing flexible career options within their organisation.

### *Mind matters*

In a world of constant connectivity, today's oft-sought work-life balance will soon become outmoded, as full work-life integration becomes the dominant model. With the demands of a fast-paced and constantly connected labour market becoming even greater as a result, workforce health will come under increasing scrutiny.

In an attempt to combat modern pressures, holistic approaches to

health management will need to be expected, accepted and ingrained in the leadership mindset. Individually, leaders will also need to be aware of and adjust to the potential psychological pressures associated with constant work-based connectivity. In this regard, the ability to exhibit and balance extensive emotional sensitivity, control and optimisation will be both an expectation and highly valued skill.

### *Leadership live*

As people demand more authentic, real-time interaction with those they admire, social media sites will become leadership platforms to increase visibility in and out of work. Leaders will develop and engage with smaller interest-focused communities, sparking a world of micro-influence where people are able to find and follow leaders who are experts in a highly specific niche.

To match follower expectations, there will be a growing need for a more casual style of leadership, where interactions have to be (or at least, appear) unscripted and genuine.

### *Entrepreneurial endeavour*

Amongst bigger corporations, we expect to see a growing culture of *intrapreneurialism* flourish. Corporations will support their employees in entrepreneurial activities, providing them with the time, space and independence required to develop creative endeavours.

Accordingly, leadership styles will have to evolve to manage a more creative and independent workforce. Sparked by the desire for greater employee independence and collaboration, we will also see a gradual decline of formal hierarchies

within organisations and leaders having to be seen as part of, not apart from, the group.

## Is your business set up to handle this future?

Though we might be gazing ten years into the future, the time to start preparing is now. Think carefully about the talent pipeline in your organisation and assess how well it actually prepares employees for future management or leadership roles in-line with the future gazing predictions we have just discussed.

Further findings, predictions and business advice from the research are detailed in the full report, which can be downloaded at: [www.michaelpage.co.uk/content/future-of-leadership](http://www.michaelpage.co.uk/content/future-of-leadership)

## Reference

Institute of Leadership and Management (2014), "2020 vision: future trends in leadership and management", available at: [www.i-l-m.com/~media/ILM%20Website/Documents/research-reports/future-trends/ilm-research-reports-future-trends%20pdf.ashx](http://www.i-l-m.com/~media/ILM%20Website/Documents/research-reports/future-trends/ilm-research-reports-future-trends%20pdf.ashx) (accessed 23 December 2016).

## About the author

Oliver Watson joined Michael Page in 1995 as a consultant in London. He was appointed Director of Michael Page UK Sales in 1997 and then Managing Director in 2002. In 2006, he was appointed Regional Managing Director for Michael Page UK Sales, Marketing and Retail. In 2007, he launched Michael Page Middle East and has since developed the office network across the region. In 2009, he became Regional Managing Director for Michael Page UK Finance, Marketing and Sales, Middle East, Scotland and Ireland. He is currently responsible for PageGroup operations in the UK, USA and Canada. Oliver Watson can be contacted at: [pagegroup@we-worldwide.com](mailto:pagegroup@we-worldwide.com)