

Let's not lose ourselves in our technological orgasm

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In today's global reality, the modern human being spend more time on technology and media than on anything else. Out of the 31.5 hours of active attention that an average, multitasking Westerner has available a day, we invest 34% of our lives – just shy of eleven hours – on technology. By comparison, we spend just seven hours sleeping and six hours working. And technology's share of our lives will only increase.

Many things have become easier, opportunities have proliferated and the speed has increased. The bank has moved into our phone, we can educate ourselves all over the world from our computers and it now takes only half a day to fly from Copenhagen to Nairobi.

The western world's political and economic elite are clamoring for growth, transformation, disruption, innovation, digitalization. But have the technological and economic quantum leaps we ceaselessly applaud and eagerly invest to achieve been transformed to existential conditions that the modern human being can embrace? Philosophically, it does not make any sense to increase the opportunities and the speed at which we live, if we simultaneously become worse at living the one life we have been given. It would be an absurdity. So how do things stand, if we take the temperature on the quality of people's lives – can we keep up?

Globally, 350 million people live in depression. Anxiety is currently the most widespread mental disease in the western world, while 50% of all working people feel more stressed today than they did five years ago. In other words, the absurdity has become a global reality. Then we have a tendency in Denmark to be under the illusion that we are not representative of the global reality. Oh no, we are a context in ourselves, a very special "ethnicity" and culture and we can therefore always be a safe arm's length from the real reality, including its challenges and decay, because we have a "Danish reality".

But in this otherwise so comfortable Danish reality, the situation is such that one in five of us will suffer from depression at some point in our lives. Anxiety is the disease that keep the highest number of people away from the Danish labor market while the number of Danes that feel stressed has increased by 53% over the past 10 years. Overall, it adds up to just under two million sick days each year. Two million days where we physically and mentally are so out of order that we will not return to ourselves or the labor market any time soon. Converted to lost output, it amounts to 22.5 billion Danish kroner, which our society miss out on on a yearly basis. But more importantly, it is a waste of the one and otherwise so beautiful life, we have been given.

In Denmark, we have praised ourselves for possessing exceptional leadership skills, but the figures above are a token of a managerial catastrophe which – ironically – screams for innovation and a substantial revision of our self-awareness. Not digital or technological innovation, but existential innovation. It is simply not sustainable, the way we lead ourselves through life as modern human beings, nor the way in which we as leaders lead other people.

We simply measure ourselves on the wrong parameters and we are searching for the wrong things. If we double-click on the part of our lives we spend on work, we are leading based on and measuring to create "satisfied" work lives. But if we are to secure the existential foundation beneath the technological and economic growth, we should instead measure whether we as leaders, as organizations and as companies are able to give meaning to life for the people who spend much of their precious time with us. We must develop leaders, organizational structures and strategies that can ensure that we are not just moving forward economically and technologically, but also have an existential bottom-line that is growing.

From the evidence that Voluntas has collected, we know that the people who derive meaning in life from the work they do are up to five times more productive, 30% more innovative, 90% more engaged, are far easier to retain, have fewer sick days and are even willing to work for a lower salary than those who are merely satisfied with the work they perform. In other words, if your ambition is to lower your cost base and improve your efficiency and competitiveness to earn more money faster, meaningfulness is a rather profitable path to pursue. A path, which will also ensure that we create a greater focus on what the purpose of our lives and our companies is. A purpose, which must necessarily

reach far beyond simply surviving or creating profit. If we are living to survive, we are not living, but merely breathing – what we use our oxidized corpus to realize is what really counts.

There is simply nothing more fossilized, meaningless or lost than to meet leaders who even today are frightened of or find it “soft” or unimportant to begin to address that their primary aim in the world is – as long that they want to be leaders and do business – to create a meaningful life for the people who walk in the door every single morning and out again in the afternoon.

There are some fundamental leadership traditions that we must break with if we are to succeed in this transformation. Traditions that have been effective, but are now outdated and must be “disrupted”; if not, they will become an even tighter noose around our necks than they are today. So, before we run off to pursue more and faulty technological orgasms, I humbly request that we simultaneously with the digital transformation recognize the need for an existential transformation. Although the intention is everything but that, the Prime Minister’s newly appointed Disruption Council remains meaningless if it does not embrace the existential dimension and focus on how we in a digital and global age can succeed in (re)discovering the meaning with our one life for the benefit of ourselves as human beings but certainly also for the Danish and global business world.