

How Might we Flow with the Go? Developing a Collective Thrive Model for Next-Gen Real-Time Work

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Introduction

The continuous flows of digital innovations continue to transform our lives and work and we are evermore characterized by mobility, interconnectivity, virtuality, complexity, hybridity, and fluidity (Mousavi Baygi et al., 2021). Thus, we need to re-visit the human, digital and organizing systems that make out the fundamental nature of IS from both a spatial and temporal perspective. The real-time data-pulsing era relies on the temporal flow of relations, actions, and cognitive and emotional processes characterized by indefinite and infinite flows of rhythmic trajectories and intensities. Like Mousavi Baygi et al. (2021), we argue for a shift toward a theorizing that orients us to foreground the ongoing temporal flow of IS phenomena, as they flow.

Actors in this era use real-time adaptation to cope with the speed of the intertwined network of real-time data flows and management and keep up with customers' need for speed, the rapid and continuous flows of data, the increased focus on iteration-based innovation, and the acceleration of the digital transformation by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, fast-paced work and high levels of technology use are linked to dissatisfaction, technostress, turnover, and burnout (Chesley, 2014). Digitalization is associated with a depleted sense of connection, feedback, and social interaction. Technostress (i.e., a type of stress that results from the use of information systems) is also known to decrease subjective well-being, organizational commitment, and productivity (Tarafdar et al., 2019).

Understanding Mindfulness in Real-Time Work Environments: Fast & Flow

Organizational mindfulness (i.e., “a combination of ongoing scrutiny of existing expectations, continuous refinement and differentiation of expectations based on newer experiences, willingness, and capability to invent new expectations that make sense of unprecedented events” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2011, p. 42)) can help companies deal with the stressors that result from turbulent environments. *Less mindful organizations* rely on autonomous responses using familiar routines and experiences. However, the most sustainable way to navigate turbulent environments might be a combination where mindfulness is routinized and routines enacted mindfully (Levinthal & Rerup, 2006).

Another way of viewing mindful/less mindful processes is through the Fast & Flow model (Rydén & El Sawy, 2019). It builds on different perceptions of real-time to suggest managers should identify which situations require them to engage in “fast” or “flow”. In “fast”, managers perceive real-time as utility time to be used as an economic resource to create monetary value. In “flow”, managers perceive real-time as sense time, which is a private resource creating mental value – although when in “flow”, they may not realize they

switched perspective. For real-time management to work, managers must be aware of differentiated perceptions of real-time (Rydén & El Sawy, 2019).

Replenishing Individual Energy

Because “fast” is draining, organizations must re-energize. Energy can come from emotional and physical sources (e.g., through physical activities, mindful work breaks, learning and purpose, goal setting, etc.), as well as social interaction and transformational leadership (Baker, 2019). Technostress may also be energizing – “techno-eustress” describes some positive outcomes of stress (Tarafdar et al., 2019).

Another source of individual energy is job crafting. Workers can craft their jobs at several levels (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 185): *tasks* (i.e., “changing the number scope, and type of job tasks”), *relational* (i.e., “changing either the quality or amount of interaction with others at work, or both”), or *cognitive* (i.e., altering how employees view their job). Energized workers are more likely to build creative and resilient competencies (Müceldili & Erdil, 2015), as well as being more motivated and committed to their organization (e.g., Guan & Frenkel, 2020; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Understanding Mindful Organizing in Real-Time Environments: Flow with the Go

Mindful organizing recently emerged as a way to channel energy from the “bottom” to bubble up to the “top” – while organizational mindfulness can be considered top-down. These approaches might be complementary, each being most appropriate at different levels of the organization. Top managers enact organizational mindfulness by establishing a context that encourages “mindful ways of acting, thinking and organizing” (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2012, p. 724). Middle managers bridge organizational mindfulness and mindful organizing by synchronizing organizational mindfulness across levels, and front-line workers enact it through “extensive and continuous real-time communication and interactions that occur in briefings, meetings, updates, and in teams’ ongoing work” (p. 725). In mindful organizing, managers recognize that workers who are closest to the action are the most capable of detecting early failure and engaging in mitigation where necessary. Such real-time adaptation is known as “improvisation”, which combines planning and executing with no lapse in time (cf. Moorman & Miner, 1998).

Organizational improvisation and Fast & Flow can be bridged by “Flow with the Go”, where “the Go” refers to “the continuity of the high-speed fast-changing environment of digital platform ecosystems”, and “to Flow” describes “a state of being in synch with the continuous flow of changes through the sensing of data pulses and being able to engage oneself and others in the creation and implementation of the changes that follow” (Rydén & El Sawy, 2022, p. 15). When managers “Flow with the Go”, they embrace fast pace, intensification of work, and abundance of data while remaining mindful of their internal pace – this helps them engage in *real-time continuous improvisation*. Managers are thus empowered to respond quickly and effectively as well as survey their inner Flow and react when the discrepancy with the Go becomes too important (Rydén & El Sawy, 2022). Figure 1 shows the harmonious balance and reciprocal influence between the Flow and the Go,

where managers flexibly engage in both while being mindful of each.

Developing a Collective Thrive Model for Next-Gen Real-Time Work

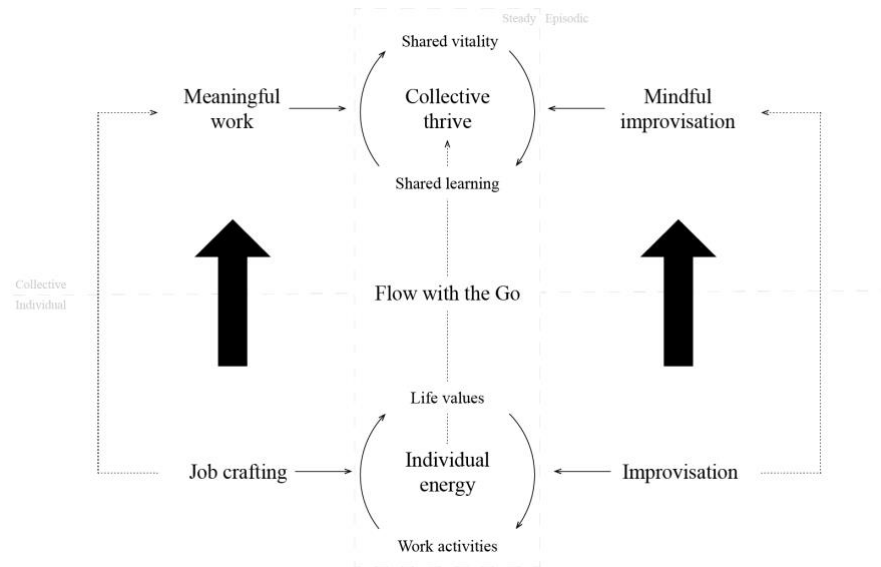


Figure 1: The Collective Thrive Model for Next-Gen Real-Time Work

Real-time continuous improvisation appears to be the only reasonable strategy to navigate today's turbulent markets, so employees and managers must do it in ways that reinforce their individual energy instead of depleting it. We submit that *job crafting* and *improvisation* are key drivers of individual energy and will result in *thriving* workers. Further, *thriving* might be the most sustainable way of navigating today's turbulent environment and approaching real-time adaptation. Thriving individuals “feel energized and alive (vitality) and perceive themselves to be continually improving, particularly regarding knowledge and skills (learning)” (Guan & Frenkel, 2020, p. 935). Because improvisation makes work activities unpredictable, actors should be able to craft their roles in ways that help them create and maintain alignment between their core life values and their day-to-day work activities. As they engage in improvisation, their work may create or reinforce life values – for example, by making them feel more self-efficacious (Berg et al., 2013; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). This harmony generates individual energy that helps sustain these experiences and encourages actors to keep on engaging in these episodic practices (Berg et al., 2013; Guan & Frenkel, 2020). As actors in a network benefit from this energizing alignment, they start evolving in a collective space of meaningful work and mindful improvisation. Engaging in work practices that are consistent with life values helps collectives develop shared goals and experiences. While job crafting has been approached by most scholars as an individual practice, it often takes place alongside collaborative job crafting (Leana et al., 2009). The combination of individual and collaborative job crafting results in a shared experience of meaningful work.

Furthermore, as actors engage in improvisation practices that are increasingly aligned with their own and others' goals and values, they develop a collective ability to engage in mindful improvisation – where there is a shared awareness of one and others' values,

context, and mindset. Collective experiences of meaningful work and mindful improvisation result in what we term “collective thrive” (i.e., a system of collectives who experience shared vitality and learning, driven by meaningful work and mindful improvisation). We emphasize that individual energy and collective thrive are enacted through *episodic* job crafting, improvisation, meaningful work, and mindful improvisation, but individual energy and collective thrive are *steady* features of the network.

Proposed Methodology

We propose two complementary qualitative studies. Study 1 aims to answer the following: how do workers and managers balance job crafting and improvisation practices in turbulent markets? We will select 5 incumbent firms and 10 mature startups and conduct 100 interviews with managers and workers, with a focus on managerial implementations of job crafting and improvisation frameworks, and workers’ practices and experiences. We choose to sample incumbent firms and startups to gather a broader range of perspectives at various levels of organizational maturity. The outcome of this first study will be a revised version of our initial, literature-based Collective Thrive Model for Next-Gen Real-Time Work as well as working assumptions extracted from the analysis of the data.

Study 2 uses Action Research to answer the following: how might the Flow with the Go approach help incumbent firms achieve Collective Thrive? We will collaborate with the IT department of a European higher education institution, which is currently undergoing a major strategic shift to breathe humane values into its educational functioning. There is an opportunity to collaborate with decision-makers to design an intervention – which is crucial for Action Research. The IT team deals with issues due to siloed, unintegrated systems and services. These issues affect educators’ trust in the organization’s ability to support their teaching activities and in their competencies, which in turn affects the students. This case offers a well-defined problem in a limited context, still with rich opportunities for intervention – making it action-research suitable. One of us is also well connected to the IT department. While this double role may introduce biases, we will carefully consider them when analyzing and reporting our findings and believe that benefits of having an insider researcher outweigh potential limitations. Outcomes of the study will be a final iteration of our model and a set of research propositions that will hopefully foster future research.

Expected contributions

We propose a Collective Thrive Model suitable for the Real-Time Digital Age. Specifically, it is a new way of crafting work geared for real-time. It is different because it is not a palliative solution (i.e., something that relieves pain without dealing with the cause) but rather it is a way of removing the root causes of burnout – to essentially deconstruct burnout so it is no longer driven to occur. This new way of practicing job crafting is enacted through improvisation, meaning that the two are entangled and should be considered as a whole.

Biology and physics offer inspirational patterns to further push our model. Jellyfish have characteristics such as self-rejuvenation and unparalleled flexibility; they also don’t have brains – they don’t need a centralized unit because their entire being is a sensing instrument.

Their simple structure facilitates resilience. Organizations can learn from these biological attributes (Wei, 2019). Maglev (or magnetic levitation), a mechanism used to create frictionless energy, provides another inspirational model (Mahmoud, 2018). Maglev trains are powered by two sets of electromagnets, which interact to both push trains upward and forward with no friction. These two examples show how we can take advantage of the natural intelligence of our surroundings to inform our model.

We hope to operationalize our model for workers and managers to leverage it in a variety of organizational settings and look forward to receiving feedback during the CNoW workshop to further our work.

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