



# WE CHANGE, THEREFORE WE ARE

EMMANUEL OLIVIER – CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

*"Everything flows, nothing stands still,"* so declared Heraclitus 500 years before our time. Thus, to talk of change is hardly anything new. From the beginning of time, the world and the universe have been in constant transformation, in movement that has never ceased, nor will it ever. We may sometimes be inclined to believe that things stay the same, but that is false – it is only an illusion. We change, therefore we are.

## RESISTANCE TO CHANGE IS NOTHING NEW

It is a fact that over the course of history there have been moments when change has been patently obvious. Such moments have marked new stages, new eras. From the invention of fire and the wheel to the Renaissance, to the first Industrial Revolution and the fourth in which we find ourselves today – such moments stand out because they have been disruptive to us personally, for they have intruded directly into our comfort zones. As author Mario Benedetti wrote: *"Just when we thought that we had all the answers, all the questions changed."* During such times in history, our reaction to the questions has been a kind of deep misgiving and we have felt cast about, disoriented.

This is what we have come to call resistance to change, which – as the saying goes – is more painful than change itself. When the alphabet was invented, there were people who regarded it as dangerous because they feared it would cause memory loss. The invention of the railroad gave rise to predictions that the high speed would provoke respiratory problems and retinal damage and the bumpy ride would cause women to miscarry. The advent of electrical lighting fostered fears that it would make women and children more vulnerable to predators roaming the streets. And more recently, in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were forecasts that no one would use the Internet because it was invented by the U.S. Army.

## CHANGE OR BECOME OBSOLETE

Resistance to change is the human tendency to think that if things are fine as they are, why rock the boat and risk trouble? However, sometimes we are unaware that we need to make changes in how we approach matters, how we act and how we think. When we finally do see the need, it's too late.

In the corporate world, we can cite endless instances of successful companies that, self-satisfied with their leadership standing and their public image as visionary, were incapable of detecting trends in their market environment, so they failed to grasp that it was time to begin doing things another way. They ultimately ended up going under.

If the world and we who live in it exist in a constant state of change, and if those changes are coming increasingly faster, perhaps now is when we should see them more clearly than ever. We are witnessing a profound transformation that is affecting markets, companies, our work and our own personal lives. One of the drivers of historic change has been inventions, and if technology derives from those inventions then, today, we have a convergence of technologies, some mature and others emergent, which are causing a sea of change in everything we do. Artificial intelligence (AI), deep learning, robotics and the Internet of Things (IoT) are already affecting the way we live and do business, and to a far greater extent than we may realize. It is said, and for good reason, that nothing will be like it is now. Watching this landscape can sometimes lead to vertigo. **And when we're feeling dizzy, the last thing we want to do is take a wild leap.**

However, we have to accept, first of all, that we have no other choice. Then, and this is much more encouraging, we have to see that opportunity awaits us. **It is inaction that renders technological change a threat.** It is essential that we understand that machines are not here to replace us and they will not take over the world, much less wipe us off the face of it, as apocalyptically foretold by Stephen Hawking. On the contrary, they are here to help us, to relieve us of enormous, repetitive tasks, to leave us more room for creativity and, ultimately, to make our lives easier and more productive. The matter is one of understanding change well. In the corporate environment, this means knowing how to implement change and, above all, how to communicate it.

## NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN BUSINESS

Nowadays, when we talk about new processes, with respect to productivity one term is key: **automation**. If we add the qualifier “*intelligent*,” we introduce a more human element. At Esker, **we understand intelligent automation as the combination of AI and human intellect – the melding of the best the two have to offer.** Already, the integration of AI and machine learning with big data allows us to analyze millions of complex data points and react based on that information. This makes us more efficient, helps us to appreciate the value of sustainability and be observant of cycles, and allows us to develop our emotional intelligence more deeply.

According to recent studies, this technology will significantly affect 88% of businesspersons, streamlining processes, fostering innovation and new product development, and reducing errors.<sup>1</sup> Other reports note that demand for automation technology specialists will drive a 50% increase in overall demand for industry professionals, and that demand for automation technology will be highest in the pharmaceutical, automotive, and food and beverage industries.<sup>2</sup> So are they here to replace us or are they here to empower us?

For most companies, intelligent automation will be the only efficiency measure they can adopt to maintain sustainable growth. But adopting AI isn't only the concern of the IT director or even the managing director. It is the concern of everyone without exception, because it is an opportunity for everyone. That is why **undertaking change means involving the entire organization**, communicating every step effectively, and addressing every obstacle, barrier and fear.

This requires stepping into the world that administrative departments inhabit, into the back office of areas such as customer service. Indeed, the back office is usually left out and remains manually intensive when companies limit themselves to automating their customer-facing front office operations only.

## ATTITUDE TOWARD CHANGE IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Sometimes it is precisely the people who work in administration, those who spend a great deal of time doing the same work in the same way, who are most reluctant to change. The solution then is not to impose change on them for their own good, but to **make them participants and architects of transformation** so that they might be the first to benefit. In our experience with companies, frequently it is the employees who have been with the company the longest – that is, those who supposedly should be hardest to persuade – who are quick to become early adopters of the new solution and, as a result, its primary defenders and advocates.

It is true that there remains much yet to be done. Recently, Esker Spain concluded a study with the consultancy Penteo. Results show that 2 out of 3 Spanish firms consider themselves to still be in the early stages of transformation, and only 1 in 10 reports being completely automated in key areas of customer service, such as order entry and billing collections management. **The good news is we still have time.**

The wave we call the digital tsunami is not as fearsome as the name suggests, for it approaches neither so suddenly nor without warning. On the contrary, it approaches offering adequate clues which invite our response. The only fatal error we can make is to disregard the signs.

Charles Kettering said “*The world hates change, yet it is the only thing that has brought progress.*” This moment in history requires a positive and open attitude toward change and that we set aside our preconceptions. **We must embrace these new technologies as a springboard to growth and to advancement – for us as businesspersons and as companies – well beyond anything we ever** could have imagined. We have to realize that it is no longer simply enough to study for a career or profession that we will pursue throughout our working lives. Our lives depend on learning constantly and on changing. We change, therefore we are.

<sup>1</sup> Adecco e Instituto Cuatrecasas

<sup>2</sup> Michael Page