# *Facilitating robots*

## *How will OD facilitation change in the emerging digital future?*

## Paul Levy

*This paper distils ideas that I shared at an ODiN meeting in November 2018. This was based on initial research into how OD practice is currently changing and how it might further change, as digital technology becomes increasingly embedded in organisational practice. It combines a mix of forecasting, futuring and reflective (and projective) practice in the field of OD facilitation. Here, I pose and explore some challenging questions. Is the advent of digital ways of working changing the agenda for OD? How does increasing use of mobile digital technology impact upon OD facilitation, facilitated meetings and leadership conversations? What new possibilities and challenges does digital technology open up for OD practitioners? How will OD work in situations where robots are employees and leaders? And where Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) become the norm?*

### Keywords

## Introduction

### Some questions

Are all these projections welcome? Is it all bad? Can we avoid it? Is there an important role, and perhaps new need, for tech-free, "acoustic" facilitation? My purpose in making these speculations is to open up further inquiry and conversations on this theme.

I have written this paper as an act of informed imagination, drawing upon over ten years of my own research (see my book Digital Inferno, which is rooted in speculative fiction), a literary genre that explores alternative, often future scenarios and realities. Although my propositions are conjectural, they seem to chime with those of other forecasters and futurists who are preoccupied with developments in the digital realm. As such, I argue that the issues I raise here are worth consideration by other OD practitioners.

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In late 2018, I led a session for members of the ODiN network in London, UK, entitled "OD in the age of Artificial Intelligence, Robots and Cyborgs: The Future is Here." It was billed as "a collective inquiry into the future - a set of conversations around realistic scenarios of the future (10, 20 and 30 years from now) and the practical challenges and implications of these for OD practitioners."

It ran for about three hours and, by the end, the conversation was only just beginning to open up. We were left with more questions than answers. Some in the room were pessimistic about the role of OD in an automated, AI-based society; others saw it as a positive opportunity. Some admitted to being technophobic, others (a minority in the room) viewed themselves as technophilic. In simplistic terms, if technophobia is a fear and avoidance of technology, technophilia is an attraction to, and an enthusiastic embracing of it.

I wondered if the new role for OD practitioners would be one of being technosophic (drawing upon wisdom, creativity and art rather than a narrower focus on evidence-based, rational action and decision-making alone). We took as our starting point the concept of the "Technological Singularity", a futuristic scenario posited by Ray Kurzweil (Kurzweil 2005), where, transposed to OD practice, a tipping point has been reached. Now that over 50% of our practice is digital, we have reached a point *"at which machine intelligence and humans would merge."*

Reflecting aloud, I began to imagine the future of my own practice and developed the following scenarios, couched in the style of speculative fiction. My purpose was to open an inquiry into how I personally may choose or need to change as this anticipated digital future might become reality.

## Scenario 1 is already here

*facilitating online, facilitating in a room with parallel online activity, new skills for facilitating in a gadget world*

As I survey the room of fifteen people, managers from various middle levels in a manufacturing company, I notice three people are looking at their smartphones. This is a session exploring issues of communication. Looking back from the ODiN session now, I remember several participants who made it very clear that they ask participants in their workshops to turn off their mobile phones at the start, and to use them only in break times. I notice I never do that in my sessions. There is a legacy irritation, though, as I watch one participant in the previous session that I cited get up and leave the room to take a call. The other two participants are texting. One also checks their Facebook app before returning their attention to the room.

When Jaron Lanier wrote the book, *You are Not a Gadget* (Lanier 2010), we were reminded that it is very easy for a human being to become a "gadget" for corporations offering digital services such as social media platforms (which currently require us to be constantly available to advertisers). Why a gadget? Because the corporations need us to be always-connected, responding in predictable ways that maximise their revenue. So we are switched to "on", even when we are "off" (i.e. physically giving our attention to those in a physical room with us). It is assumed that a digital notification or alert takes our attention into the digital realm and away from our physical presence in the workshop session.

OD facilitators (and, indeed other facilitators) will invariably view their duty and professionalism to be about maximising the attention of participants in the physical room where development is taking place. They assume that digital activity such as real-time, smartphone-based, social-media engagement diminishes participants' attention, and therefore reduces the quality of their work with clients.

## Generation Z OD facilitators

Possibly, this assumption is grounded in the 'chronological age' of many OD facilitators. Certainly, there is evidence that Generation Z trainers and facilitators (generally people born roughly between 1995-2010, and regarded as the first 'truly digital' cohort) tend to be more lenient with participants' use of smartphones and tablets in their sessions.

The digital age has certainly arrived in some OD sessions, where participants are invited to "tweet" their responses and ideas and invite synchronous input from those not physically present.

Almost instant access to information and knowledge via Google, at the press of a few buttons, is seen by some to enhance OD interventions. Moreover, divided attention may suit some people's working styles. Demanding the switching-off of digital activity then becomes a form of imposed (and possibly inappropriate) command-and-control restriction on behaviour, rather than a universally valid quality standard for OD practice, but …

## When did the digital age begin?

In 2019, I also notice the impact of the digital world in a different way. I had noticed it in terms of its empowerment of individuals, and communities through "horizontal trust" (Levy 2015) but also on my own practice in a more worrying way (Levy 2018). At the ODIN session I asked participants to discuss when they thought the Digital Age actually began. It was a provocative question, designed more to get conversation going than anything else, but it certainly did engage the room in conversation! Responses varied from the advent of the first smartphones; to the dawn of personal computing, to further back in time, referencing the first computers developed to code break during the Second World War; to the Babbage Machine; and further back still, to communication by Morse code, binary language.  It was even suggested that the term could be applied to the codes inherent in language as far back as the first cave paintings.  (After all, a finger is a digit!).

## Language as code

The definition by some in the discussion (and, in fact, my own personal definition) is that language is code. Being code, it is essentially digital. What has happened in recent years is that fingertip typing on smartphone screens, the use of a few smileys, and the advent of language suggestion (where your device automatically suggests easy words to complete your sentences for you) has reduced our active vocabulary to responses such as "cool" and "OK". In the practice of workshop and dialogue-based OD, I notice the tendency for issues of complexity to become diluted in terms of descriptive language.

The impact of the digital world on OD practice means that those who are physically in the room bring a smaller and simpler repertoire of language to discussion.  This can be a benefit in terms of quicker and easier

interaction, but it can also mean that more complex ideas simply become harder or even impossible to articulate. One perception of this is that the dialogue becomes dumbed down. Also, the binary nature of much of the medium - either-or, "like" or don't like", "yes or no" - creates unnecessary polarising of idea-sharing, debate and even decision-making. You are either 'on' or 'off'. Yet much OD theory is concerned with subtlety and nuance, and with the spaces in between on and off, one and zero, yes and no.

### OD practice in an age of distraction?

As we approach 2020, the digital realm is impacting upon OD practice in terms of digital distraction and attention-splitting by the presence of the digital gadgets themselves. Less easy to prove, and provide evidence for, are the emerging behaviour-sets of clients and meeting participants, as they become more influenced and determined by the binary nature of those digital tools.

### Personal impressions

Today, in 2019, I am about to turn 52. I am an OD practitioner. I believe that the digital age has impacted upon, and changed, my practice ever since I began, because I subscribe to the view expressed earlier that language itself is code. However, as language has become more influential via radio, television, books, and the urge to hurry what we say through faster rates of change, these impacts have become significantly greater and more intrusive. They have been magnified hugely by the sheer processing power and binary nature of digital gadgets, such as smartphones, tablets and computers. These tools influence physical world conversations more and more. On a positive note, these enable instant access to information and connection with wider audiences beyond the limits of the physical location. At the same time, these also split attention, reduce language complexity and resolve what should be complex "maybes" into simplistic yes/no, right/wrong choices.

Given all this, I feel a little excited, very curious, but also concerned - and even frightened - for how this might impact on my work. My apprehension was echoed by many others at the ODIN meeting. Most confessed to using control and rules to keep digital tools out of today's OD-based workshops and group meetings.

### A problem of message replication?

I notice that more of my client 'conversations' today are typed ones. I have moved away from email to chats via platforms such as WhatsApp and LinkedIn. We meet via video conference. Physical, face-to-face client meetings have become the exception rather than the rule. My carbon footprint has reduced, but I also notice a phenomenon called "Message Replication." We make decisions collaboratively online but these aren't yet quite as trusted as they were when we used to meet face to face, or when we spoke with our human voices on the phone. I notice that I tend to email and restate actions that have already been agreed when they originated in our 'typed conversations'.

I also call to confirm the points agreed during a Zoom video conference (where actions were captured on a virtual whiteboard). As things stand, then, this transition to newer, digital tools involves a certain amount of

distrust and caution. The older methods, such as face-to-face, phone and email exchanges, seem to have a sturdiness about them; and I notice that both myself and many of my clients replicate what we agree online by phone and even on paper! Is this a transitional phase? Or is there something timeless and trustworthy about those slower, older methods? Either way, I currently seem to be communicating more rather than less – with much of this serving no other purpose than repetition, 'just to be sure'.

## Scenario 2a: 10 years from now: a digitally-enhanced zone:

*the opportunities, the dark and light side of artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented reality and internet of things in OD facilitation and practice*



The ghost in the machine: Source: Paul Levy

It is 2029. I am 61. I am still an OD practitioner. I still find myself facilitating conversations in the form of face-to-face and virtual group meetings, workshops, conferences, and some coaching and mentoring sessions. It is much rarer for these to take place in a physical room.

We can film our meetings instantly, and watch them via holographic television. Telepresence has become the norm and most people attend with a high degree of physical reality and believability, without actually being

physically there. They are holographic; there is eye contact, people can move around and even wear different clothes to the ones that they are actually wearing. This is no gimmick. It has become the norm.  I put on my VR spectacles or contact lenses, and my hardly noticeable body suit, before facilitating a meeting in London from my home in Manchester, or Oslo. Or wherever.

PowerPoint 2028 is holographic, and graphics and content are mediated via artificial intelligence. Presentations are responsive in real time to the emerging dialogue in the room. These capture, eloquently and effectively, the ideas that a participant wishes to communicate. Sometimes artificial intelligence literally puts words in the mouth of a client; capturing the essence of what they want to say, and communicating this in a better way than the person could have done themselves. Information is presented organically and adaptively - at times, different people in the room see different things presented, as AI adapts to each unique cognitive standpoint.

As decisions are made, messages arrive with agreed actions in real time back into the organisation and action takes place much closer to the time that the decision was made. Devices in the room (much more sophisticated versions of today's Amazon Alexa), allocate resources, book flights and so on. Beyond this, though, these also question the logic of what we are saying, bringing-in contradictory or confirmatory evidence. AI becomes both an aid and a participant in the dialogue. The OD facilitator uses these tools as much as they used to use those quaint flipcharts, pens and handouts of yesteryear.

## Scenario 2b: 10 years on: a digital-free zone

On the fringes of this, a bit like an acoustic guitar-playing busker, a niche practice has emerged in the world of OD facilitation which involves the digital realm being banished from the room. A sort of 'OD unplugged', so to speak.



The primeval value of paper? Source: Paul Levy

These facilitators still offer purely physical human interaction. They believe that there is something archetypically vital and essential about physical presence, without the assistance or influence of the digital world. Workshops still take place in the flesh, by the flesh. By way of analogy, the belief here is that there is a fundamental difference between a physical painting and a digital copy. Although the latter, is so pixilated that you can't tell the difference when you look at it, it embodies none of the intrinsically human skill, ingenuity, and emotional content that is bound-up in the original.

The argument for this is similar to those set forth by the likes of Robert Pirsig (1974) where real OD lies as much in both-and as it does in the binary either-or. It is all about the quality of quality. Here, as we approach 2030, most OD practice is highly digitally designed, defined and influenced. But not everywhere.

Back in 2019, at the OD session in London, many OD practitioners imagined themselves in this smaller niche, playing their not-plugged-in-anywhere acoustic OD guitars. But not everyone.

So now jump forward to 2029, as people with small digital implants under their left forefingers touch in and out of the building …

## Scenario 3: 20 years on

*Robot employees, AI-based organisation design, designing and transitioning to the digital workplace. Virtual offices and organisations*

I am 71. I am fit and sprightly. A digital implant in my brain, combined with some digitally targeted medicine, ensures that the early signs of dementia have been acted upon and further damage prevented. As a facilitator, I am fighting fit.

Yes, there still are human beings working in organisations! Yes, there are leaders, teams and problems of organisational structure, culture, values, purpose, direction, design and dynamics. I am still contacted to help organisations develop. We even meet in physical rooms from time to time, as research has shown that physical presence leads to more creative interaction and trust is still an issue for some people online. Although more digitally connected than ever, people of Generation A (by now in their early twenties), still don't fully trust the online world.

There are also robots in the room, not humanoid androids. There are boxes that can speak, and in some cases, there are avatars and holograms that look like real people. The robots speak naturally, just as humans do. They are members of the team, some with leadership roles. They have built-in lie detectors and high scores for emotional intelligence. They are skilled at problem diagnosis and solution. Human and robot are there in the room and my role is to facilitate their interactions. I am there to help the conversation; to facilitate a flow that is still nuanced, difficult, unpredictable and dynamic.

The names of the people in front of me, together with their backgrounds, are stored in my digitally assisted memory. I can recall instantly anything that has been said. The flesh part of me is still vitally in the room, though, for its intuitive, improvisational ability.
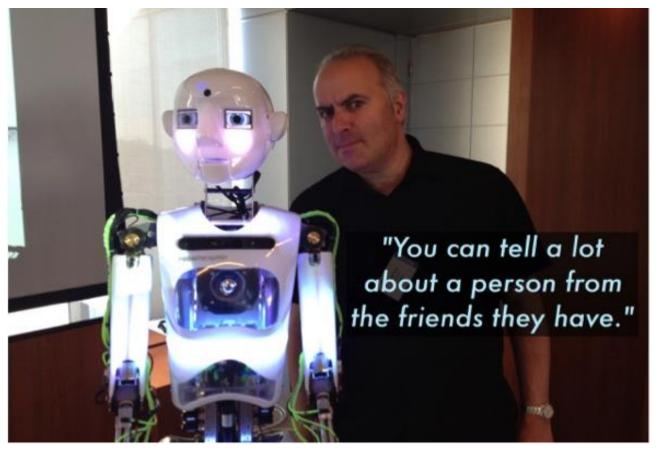
Now here is another version of me. A different version of the future. There are still robots in the room with the humans but I am now called on to facilitate entirely new organisational challenges and problems that have arisen solely from the characteristics of the human and machine interface and interactions. The digital realm has brought the benefits of artificial intelligence, big data, and the internet of things and place, but new problems have arisen from the digitally mediated and influenced dynamics that are now in play: problems of language, sense-making, communication misunderstanding, depression, fear, uncertainty, and a sense of distrust between people. We were warned. Organisation Development is as much about subtle emotion as about logic. Problems are not only linear but reside in fields of uncertainty and possibility. As an OD practitioner I am there to help those involved sort out these new messes. And, to do so, I insist on the availability of a paper flipchart and an ink pen!

## Scenario 4: 30 years on:

*Facilitating cyborgs, implanted employees and meeting inside the matrix - robotic leaders*

I am 81, and thinking about the final twenty years of my career as an OD practitioner. I am contacted by a robot, who is the CEO of a large corporation. The final 100 human (?) employees, known as Legacy Leaders are being managed towards exit from the organisation. These days I mostly do one-to-one coaching and mentoring and I have an opportunity for some quality time with some of these people.



"You can tell a lot about a person from the friends they have."

Rise of the robots. Source: Paul Levy

Several have decided to have some of their employee implants removed and will need strategies for letting-go of a career spanning fifty years, A high number still register the need for high human social contact; and so group sessions are a possibility. A number of others will need to be off-boarded with debrief methods and processes as well as planning for retirement.

Corporate forgetting involves the purging of memories that contain confidential corporate content. For many this can represent a huge amount of memory and emotional patterning. Debriefing is still left to beings of flesh and blood like me. If I take the job, this content will be temporarily uploaded into the relevant chips in my own brain.

There is also, of course, the issue that some of the close colleagues and friends of these departing staff are robots and cyborgs.

I decide it might finally be time to jack it all in. I have a friend, another facilitator who would willingly take on this work.

## Re-view: looking back on the future of OD practice

As I write this (March 2019), typing into a laptop, with notes from a physical notebook open beside me, I am left with some questions in relation to my OD practice now, and envisioning an older version of me …



Entering the Matrix. Source: Paul Levy

**Some questions ...**

The issues illustrated in the preceding scenarios suggest some important questions about future directions in OD facilitation. These include:

- How would we respond as OD practitioners to these imagined futures?

- How are we readying ourselves sufficiently well now?

- Are there viable non-tech-based alternatives; that is, what contemporary methods might continue to serve us well?

- Are some OD methods timeless?

- Would we be right to adopt an unquestioning belief in the positive benefits of advancing technology or, as OD practitioners, should we be at the forefront of efforts to ensure that the morality and ethics of the adoption and deployment of such technologies enhances – and doesn't downgrade – the nature and quality of human being?

- Can we, as OD practitioners, encourage and enable people to explore the space in between technophobia and technophilia – and find their way through the challenges and opportunities that ever-advancing technology brings?

Some participants at the ODIN session in 2018 were very clear. They would not change themselves (much) and would probably continue largely as "acoustic" facilitators; with the digital world, at best, serving their work from, so to speak, outside the workshop room. Their anthropocentric view represented the majority at that meeting (in which the average age was over 35 at least). A significant minority were challenged by the vision of the future that I have been imagining, but were willing – if not yet fully ready - to engage with it. It seems possible that the OD community might split four ways into 'traditionalists' who are considering exiting the field altogether (rather than plugging-in or accepting implantation); those who will embrace the digital realm wholeheartedly; those who are already working in it, and are prepared to adapt and adjust to emerging changes; and, possibly, some who might actively attempt to use the digital realm against itself.

How might you respond to such questions? And can you suggest any others?

As for me? Here in 2019, at the age of 51? I truly do not know.

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