



THE FUTURE OF WORK

Saturation & Success

OLIVIA

A PARADIGM FOR OUR TIMES

These past two years have taught us to redefine the values that guide our private and professional lives. Goals we believed fixed in stone were suddenly shaken up by global events that turned our routines upside down. In this series of articles, collected under the title of *The Future of Work* by OLIVIA, we invite you to reflect upon how our present moment is challenging people, leaders, and organizations. Together, we hope to rethink work, rest, and — ultimately — success in this new context, marked by a slow return to the office after our time among screens.



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CHAPTER I

KRYPTONITE BEHIND EVERY CLICK

The way we work is changing — and this has redefined organizations' area of influence. As leaders, we must stand beside our teams as they deal with the stress of change. And the antidote might be as simple as it is ancient.

Superman wouldn't be Superman without a weakness: kryptonite. This green crystal is the only thing in the universe that can take away his powers. Yet it's also kryptonite that makes Superman the archetypal superhero: a human being who becomes stronger by overcoming his weaknesses. These days, we're all a bit like superheroes, appearing everywhere, at any time. We respond to text messages while attending conference calls, participate in meetings while preparing our children's lunch, and walk our pets while chatting with our bosses. During weekends, we reply to emails while watching a movie with our partner. And at the supermarket, we wait at the checkout line while drafting a PowerPoint presentation.

As never before, our professional lives are intermingled with our private lives. And in hoping to fulfill our obligations to both worlds, we condemn ourselves to a state of incessant production, assimilating and processing information all day long. The result? Tiredness, listlessness, and indifference: what neuroscience defines as "cognitive saturation," which — in the worst of cases — can lead to chronic anxiety and depression. In short, cognitive saturation is humanity's kryptonite. And lately, it's closer to us than it ever has been.

71%

of knowledge workers experienced burnout during the past year, according to an Asana survey with 13,000 respondents from 8 countries.

40%

of the global labor force is looking to switch jobs this year, according to a Microsoft survey with 30,000 respondents from 31 countries.

LEARN FROM EINSTEIN

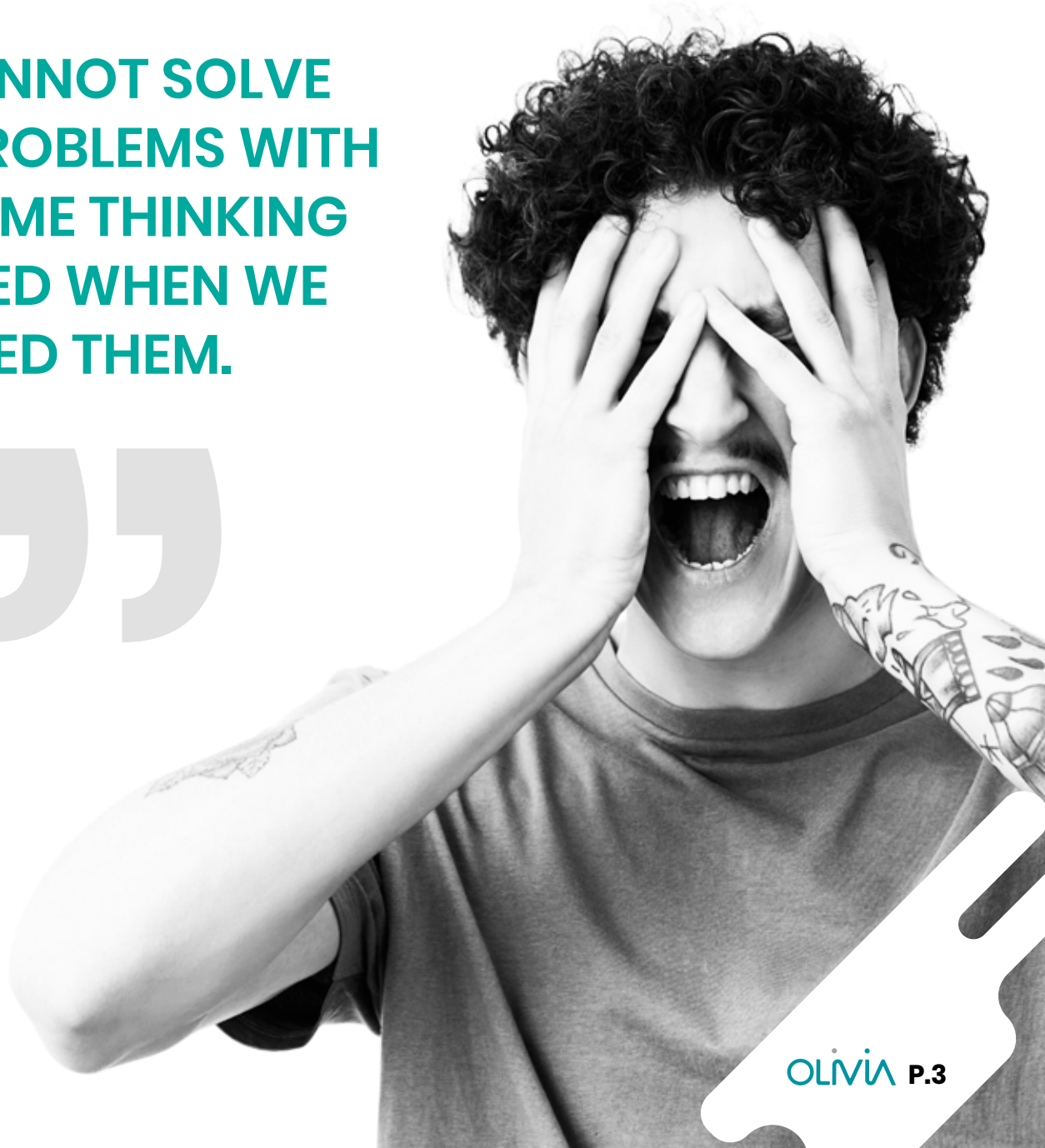
How harmful is this human kryptonite? Well, to know the answer to that, first we have to understand what cognitive saturation does to us: it zaps away our energy. While machines can process data over and over again without sacrificing efficiency, human beings aren't built to do that. The more information we want to process, the more energy we have to expend.

Our brains can run only so many neural processes. When they reach their limit, they start to shut down — and they need time to get their power back up. If we don't give our brains space to disconnect, we'll live our days in perpetual urgency.

As Albert Einstein put it:

**WE CANNOT SOLVE
OUR PROBLEMS WITH
THE SAME THINKING
WE USED WHEN WE
CREATED THEM.**

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To cite just one recent example, Simone Biles, one of the best gymnasts in the world, stepped down from all team events at the Tokyo Olympics. In explaining her decision, she said:

WE HAVE TO PROTECT OUR BODY AND OUR MIND.

When she made her decision — and turned her back on the chance to set new records at the world’s most celebrated sporting event —, many people jumped to express their support. This, in turn, revealed how widespread mental health issues are among athletes. As the Spanish basketball player said, “The brain is a muscle. It needs to be cared for.”

Today, our organizations are likewise experiencing this mix of urgency and indifference. Of course, emotions like uncertainty are nothing new in the workplace. But the pandemic has transformed how we work, exaggerating the rift between mental health and our 21st century context. As the entomologist and biologist Edward O. Wilson phrased it, “The real problem of humanity is the following: we have Paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and god-like technology.” As leaders in our organizations, we have to help our teams navigate their day-to-day, as they deal with work dynamics that continuously push them towards cognitive saturation. The good news is that, in order to cope, we have a powerful and ancient tool at our disposal.

LESS BUSYWORK, MORE SHOWERS

In their paper, “The Aha! Moment: The Cognitive Neuroscience of Insight,” researchers John Kounios and Mark Beeman remind us that, as humans, we use two mechanisms to solve problems: analysis, which is conscious and methodical; and insight, which is sudden and unexpected. Empowering the latter mechanism might allow us to be more productive, innovative, and happier. Some call it insight. Others, an “Eureka moment” or even “innovation in the shower.”

Whatever the case, for an insight to happen, four conditions must be met:

Mental calm

Insights are often forgotten memories or a combination of memories. They involve a relatively small number of neurons conversing with each other. That's why insights tend to surface when mental activity is low. They pop up when we're engaged in a repetitive activity or when we're relaxed.

Introspective gaze

Insights are likelier when we're deep in thought and unconcerned with the outside world. Let your mind wander, as if you were daydreaming.

Contentment

According to Mark Beeman's studies, when we're happy, we're able to absorb more information; and when we're anxious, we tend to suffer tunnel-vision. For our brains to arrive at insights, we should feel open, curious, and interested in the topic at hand.

Distance from the problem

If we want insights, we have to stop thinking about the problem. The psychologist Stellan Ohlsson has developed a theory of inhibition: we need to inhibit the wrong solutions in order to identify the correct ones. That's why we tend to reach insights while doing unrelated activities, like walking, showering, or driving. As it turns out, our unconscious thought processes are more powerful than our conscious processes.

As leaders, we should make these conditions part of our everyday lives. They're key to letting our brains wind down and recharge. This will, in turn, increase the enthusiasm and wellbeing of our teams — especially in these times of change, uncertainty, and instability. Because the value of insights is that they provide us with solutions that fall outside linear rationality. And this quality means they offer longer-lasting lessons. At the same time, they also feed our commitment and wellbeing by helping us come up with our own ideas. Insights let us bring about the change

we want, rather than being victims of change.

In other words, effective energy management — in terms of our physical and mental energy — allows us to avoid the kryptonite that is our brave 21st century world. But such effectiveness depends on a crucial factor, which we'll analyze in the second chapter. Because in order to truly take advantage of insights, everyone in an organization has to work together. Because only together can we become who we truly are: superheroes.



CHAPTER 2

SUCCESS AND REMORSE NO LONGER GO HAND-IN-HAND

The things that used to motivate us have changed. More and more people are questioning what they want out of life. And as leaders, we need to keep abreast of such shifts if we want to continue being relevant to our organizations.


“I don't know why, but for the first time in my life I'm not scared to leave my job and search for other options.” That's what a friend of mine told me a few weeks ago. She had just quit her job at one of the largest media groups in Latin America, where she had been employed for over 15 years. She was known to be one of the most reliable professionals at her company — and yet, as far as she was concerned, her time had come to take the leap and say goodbye, despite the pandemic and everything it's brought about. What's interesting is that my friend isn't alone. In fact, she's part of a global movement.

As we shared in the opening chapter, a recent Microsoft study found that, among 30 thousand respondents in 31 countries, 40% are thinking of leaving their current jobs.



53%

of American workers say that, if they had the chance to start over, they'd learn a new trade in a different industry, according to a representative survey by Prudential.

A silhouette of a person lying in a hammock, suspended between two points. Behind the person is a large, stylized teal graphic of a hand with fingers spread, as if supporting or holding the person. The background is white.

If you want to confirm these findings, all you need to do is log into LinkedIn. Read through your feed and you're bound to find posts like: "Yesterday, after nine years, I decided to quit my job, take a break, and rest. The moment's come to invest time and energy into my family and myself." That's not a low-level employee bidding adieu to a small company or start-up; it's a Facebook executive's farewell. And many others have followed suit, packing up and departing from big-name places like General Electric and Google. Whether they're leaving small, medium, or large companies, the global workforce is redefining its future.

A NEW ECONOMY AWAKENS

We might call this trend "The Great Awakening," in reference to the 18th and 19th century movement in the United States and Europe, which also had millions questioning the status quo of the era. Its followers, moved by philosophical and religious arguments, rejected the idea that life was only about generating wealth, power, and prestige. Instead, they championed values that encouraged coexistence and compassion, with piety as their main pillar. In its most classic sense, piety is about respect for family life and humility.

Fast-forward to last year and you'll find similar — albeit more secular — ideas germinating among today's workforce. A new economic and professional model has grown in popularity, summarized in the well-known acronym YOLO, or "You Only Live Once." Look at the banking and pharmaceutical sectors: long accustomed to retaining talent through generous benefit packages, companies in these industries are now being challenged by the promise of "new beginnings" away from

them. Many people have also been emboldened by the savings they've amassed after almost two years of enforced stay-at-home thriftiness. As The New York Times reported in a recent edition: "For a growing number of people with the economic wherewithal and in-demand skills, last year's anxiety and anguish have been replaced by a new kind of professional boldness."

Of course, burnout is not a new phenomenon, as we pointed out in the first part of our Future of Work series. It has been a feature of our professional lives for decades. Yet in our post-pandemic world, as remote calls and virtual meetings stretch into an uncertain horizon, burnout has only gotten worse. As Anthony Klotz, Associate Professor of Management at Mays Business School, said during an interview with the BBC:

WORK TAKES UP A HUGE PART OF WHO WE ARE. DURING THE PANDEMIC, IDENTITIES CHANGED.

"People spent more time with their families. Some might've thought more about entrepreneurial ventures, side hustles, or other pastimes away from their day job," continued Klotz. "It's quite possible that many people no longer define themselves as much through their jobs as they used to. That means they are less emotionally attached to their employer."

As vaccination rates increase and the world looks further into the future, our desire to rebuild our lives can become a tangible reality. And this can bring about a paradigm shift, one that organizational leaders cannot ignore: the redefinition of success.

WHAT IS "SUCCESS"?

The Great Awakening of the 21st century calls into question the very meaning of success and what we're willing to sacrifice for it. With the pandemic, many parts of our lives were disconnected from the outside world. In the process, we also stepped away from the world's definition of success. As even a cursory glance at LinkedIn can reveal, more people are discovering that defining themselves — and success — through their resumés, money, and status is simply unsustainable.

These past years have encouraged people to seek alternative definitions of success and its importance. And it's become clear that this eventual redefinition will give greater weight to — if not outright prioritize — health,

freedom, and wellbeing (which encompasses resilience, inner peace, and enjoyment). The goal, then, is for success to acquire intrinsic, sustainable meaning.

In all this, the future of our companies is at stake. In this 21st century economy, talent — far more than capital — is what makes the difference. And with the pandemic, we have learned (as people and as companies) that being physically present at an office is not required for productivity. The Great Awakening demands that we allow our talent to seek their new definitions of success. Not just to retain them, but in fact to boost their productivity.

That's because the cornerstone of this "New Success" is rest. This era will be defined by companies' ideas, by their freshness, novelty, and commitment. And to nurture such ideas, companies have to incorporate practices that promote wellbeing and restfulness in our private and professional lives. By this, I don't mean simply opening up more recreational spaces in office buildings. The solution isn't to add more ping pong tables, more after hours drinks, and more meditation classes. We have to rethink rest itself, previously viewed as a consolation prize after exhausting, draining hard work.

THIS NEW SUCCESS IS ABOUT BEING ABLE TO ORGANICALLY AND CONSISTENTLY RECHARGE — SO WE CAN SHOW OFF THE BEST, MOST PRODUCTIVE AND CREATIVE VERSION OF OURSELVES.

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More importantly, New Success means helping our teams (and ourselves) eliminate “remorse” from the equation. The idea that burnout is the necessary price of success is a lie. We’re waking up to the possibility of reconnecting with ourselves, of finding balance and resilience. We’re waking up to the realization that success depends on thinking about ourselves beyond the next click. And as leaders, we have a responsibility to see what exactly lies ahead.



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