

MODULE 2: AGENCY AND TRUST

Module Introduction

Many people, working predominantly with digital tools, have the feeling that they don't have enough time to relax, or for themselves and their family. Some will complain that they can't separate their work time and free time. But is the reason for this situation within them or outside of them and do they have control over it? Most people would assert that these are situations, which are a result of external circumstances and they have no or almost no control over them. If this is the case, this means that the person feels that they have no Agency. What this means is that something is happening to them and they are aware of themselves not as the cause of what is happening, not as the active organizer of the event, but only as a person who is experiencing the influence of external forces.

For example, if you faced problems at work, and you didn't have the sense of Agency, you would believe that you didn't create these problems, someone or something else did (the software you use, or the laptop that the IT department gave you, etc.). When lacking Agency, your general concept is, "I can't change anything here, I'm not responsible for what happens because I didn't create it. There is something or someone that is not performing well, and I cannot do anything."

Agency can be generally defined as a person's capacity for action, the ability to act as an autonomous individual and to make informed and free choices.

Agency is about reacting effectively to immediate situations and planning effectively for our future. When we face digital stress (and also any other stress or burnout) our sense of Agency can be dramatically damaged, we normally lose our objectivity, creativity and resilience.

Lack of Agency can be extremely harmful to our personal and professional success. But if you wonder what it really means, here is a good example to illustrate it:

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and our increased use of digital technologies at work, we see more and more people talk about feeling helpless, overwhelmed and stressed — not capable of dealing with the situation. What are the main reasons for this?

- We are always using technology: mobile phones, smart devices, laptops, TV sets, etc. They dominate our private and business lives. Too much time in front of the screens is associated with anxiety and depression symptoms, including agitation, impatience, and restlessness.
- Online activities assume real time activity monitoring. We have become obsessed with measuring and comparing everything via our smart devices — from the number of emails and other instant messages we receive, to the number of steps taken each day. All of this measurement pushes us consciously and subconsciously to compete

with others on whatever metric we think is important. Constantly comparing ourselves to others is truly harmful. When we focus on comparing our work to our colleagues' performance, we get distracted from the main point – to be productive and this leads to poor quality work.

- Due to multiple lockdowns and work from home office, in-person communication has been heavily decreased in our everyday lives, which causes loss of human connectedness. Increased isolation leads to elevated stress hormones and is correlated with anxiety and depression, both of which diminish Agency.
- We are spending more time at home or indoors, sitting in front of the computer or other big screens, which assumes less time spent in physical activities and in contact with nature. It affects our energy levels and inevitably influences our sense of personal Agency.

And here comes the importance of Agency: our ability to feel that we are in command of our own lives. Quite often it involves our ability to maintain equanimity, focus, and size up the present situation in order to make good decisions. If you think that you lack Agency – here is the good news: Agency is a human capacity that can be learned. While some people appear better at adapting to difficult situations and show more Agency than others, this is because they have learned to do so. Each of us may have greater Agency in some domains of our lives and work than others. The important thing for us is that there are specific and proven practices that can help us to develop Agency no matter what our baseline is.

So we can say that having strong sense of Agency means that we trust in ourselves and in our capabilities to deal with all type of circumstances, even challenging ones.

However, there is another important quality that is key to our performance at work and it is Trust. Building Trust in the workplace is at the core of every professional relationship. Trustworthiness is absolutely necessary in order to establish a network of people who will help you at work.

Trust is the belief that someone or something is reliable, good, honest, effective.¹

People rely on each other in the workplace.

Trust is essential for face-to-face work and remote work. Without it, people are likely to be less motivated and less productive. In fact, employees of the high-trust companies report 74 percent less stress, exhibit 50 percent higher productivity, and experience 40 percent less burnout. (PWC Global CEO Survey 2016)

Further to it and not too surprisingly, digital Trust has become a huge topic during the pandemic.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trust>

Digital Trust is the confidence users have in the ability of people, technology and processes to create a secure digital world. Digital Trust is given to companies who have shown their users they can provide safety, privacy, security, reliability, and data ethics with their online programs or devices.

Working in a digital environment makes some employees feel that there is invasion in their privacy.

In order to deal effectively with violation of the personal rights in digital environment, EU has built a legislation framework to fight the problem. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is the toughest privacy and security law in the world. Though it was drafted and passed by the European Union (EU), it imposes obligations onto organizations anywhere, so long as they target or collect data related to people in the EU.

GDPR Compliance means an organization that falls within the scope of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) meets the requirements for properly handling personal data as defined in the law. GDPR places direct data processing obligations on employers at an EU-wide level.

The right to privacy is part of the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights, which states, “Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.”

Under the GDPR, an employer can only process the personal data of employees under certain conditions. It aims to create more confidence and Trust in the employees that their rights in the digital environment are protected.

Try the activities we have created in this program in order to boost your sense of Agency and Trust in order to prevent digital stress and burnout at work.

You can listen to the material [here](#).

Activity 1

In order to be able to effectively manage stress, including the one provoked by digital work, we must have internal control. What does it mean? However good we organize and plan, there will always be surprises. Some things can't be predicted, because not everything and everyone depend on us. That is why we need to develop internal control, i.e. control over our thoughts and feelings. Important parts of developing internal control are:

- healthy lifestyle (see Module Healthy Workstyle in the Digital Workplace);
- mindfulness practice (see Module Digital Self-Awareness or check in the Video section of the mobile app the practice called “Body Scan”);
- learning emotion regulation techniques.

This activity is about learning to use an effective emotion regulation technique called “Cognitive Reappraisal”. It helps us cope better in situations that create within us stress, anxiety, anger and other unhelpful emotions and feelings. “Cognitive Reappraisal” involves re-interpreting the negative situation so as to feel better about it. Say, you are feeling stressed out about an upcoming online meeting. In this situation, you could tell yourself that, far from feeling anxious, you should feel lucky that your work doesn’t involve meaningless menial labour. Using this technique will also help you boost your sense of agency.

Try the “Cognitive Reappraisal” technique yourself by finding a way to re-interpret a difficult situation from your working day.

Activity 2

Another emotion regulation technique is “Attention Deployment,” which involves directing attention away from the things that trigger the negative feelings and towards things that trigger positive ones. Some ideas about attention deployment tactics:

1. Step away from what you’re doing, which causes you stress. It doesn’t need to be for a long time. Even 5 minutes of walking around, going to the balcony or talking to a family member or a friend (over the phone) might do the trick. Distancing yourself from the task you’re working on is one of the fastest ways to bring stress levels down.
2. Change your place. For some time instead of working in your designated workspace you can go to work in the armchair in the living room. This will help you change the focus of your mind.
3. Move. Movement is a great antidote for stress. Even only 5 minutes of exercise can reduce your stress. This will also have a double benefit of preventing the negative effects of sitting all day in front of the monitor.

Activity 3

Here we offer you a powerful practice which helps to reduce negative thoughts and feelings, and can improve your ability to relax. It is named “Mountain meditation”, which was originally created by prof. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

The purpose of the mountain meditation is to help you feel more stable and confident when faced with stressful and challenging circumstances.

You may try it and use it in a challenging moment that you face in your digital working day.

[Here](#) is a guided Mountain meditation practice.

Activity 4

People with high levels of agency are continually learning new things and expanding their capacity to learn. This requires nurturing your growth mindset.

What is a mindset? It is a set of assumptions, methods, beliefs and attitudes held by someone. The mindset is so powerful that it defines the way that a person thinks, acts, feels, and handles situations. There are two basic mindsets according to prof Carol Dweck from Stanford University- fixed and growth. A Fixed Mindset is where a person comes to believe that their abilities and talents are inherently fixed and cannot change. This person feels little or no control over outcomes. A Growth Mindset, on the other hand, enables a person to believe that their abilities and talents can be developed through dedication and hard work. In a Growth Mindset, a person feels control over the outcome of their efforts.

So, adopt a growth mindset today and make a decision to learn a new digital skill that might be helpful in your work (i.e. digital marketing, php programming, data analytics, etc.). You can start small – making a PowerPoint presentation, recording a podcast or creating and publishing a video on YouTube.

Activity 5

It's impossible not to be affected by those around us—the emotions are contagious, and our brains tend to synch when we communicate with other people. This means that you have to surround yourself with friends, colleagues and communities, which encourage you to reach your full potential, nurture your talents, affirm your values.

Do you remember My Values activity from the Digital Self-Awareness Module? Think of your values that you outlined in that activity and make a list of minimum 3 of your colleagues that have the same values as yours (at least one value coincides with yours). These are the people that can elevate you. Stay close to them and when needed ask them for help or advice. Their support can help you improve your state of mind and physical health - two critical building blocks of agency.

Activity 6

In order to build trust, you may focus on becoming a good listener. It works in both directions. People will trust you more if you listen to them carefully. But also, you will know whom to trust if you listen to them mindfully.

Here are some questions that will help you to find out whether you are a good listener. Please answer honestly and calculate how many “Yes” and how many “No” answers you have.

TEST: ARE YOU A GOOD LISTENER

You are doing it for yourself, so be honest. Don't try to trick the test, that is easy and will bring you nothing. You can download the test from here.

1. Are you 100% focused on the conversation that is going on?
2. Do you listen to and try to understand what everyone is saying?
3. Do you make eye contact?
4. Do you try to figure out the other peoples' feelings, in addition to the facts?
5. Do you try to figure out where their standpoint comes from, their interests?
6. Are you aware of the role, the appearance of a person plays in the way you communicate with them?
7. Are you aware of the other prejudices that shape the way you evaluate what you hear?
8. Do you refrain from interrupting the other person?
9. Do you refrain from stopping to listen when you hear something you disagree with?
10. In discussions, do you leave the last word to the other party?
11. Do you give signals to the other party in the conversation that you are listening (for example by nodding)?
12. Do you ask questions?

Go to the next activity to check your results.

Activity 7

Results:

- If you answered Yes to more than 10 questions - you were not honest with yourself. 😊
- If you got about 6 Yes answers - then you were probably being honest. And if you think about it a little more you will see that even when the answer is YES, this behaviour doesn't happen by itself, but only when you make an effort.
- If you have fewer than 6 Yes answers - then you are probably either too honest or too humble, but there is also the possibility that you wouldn't like communicating with yourself.

In conclusion – listen mindfully to others, which includes: staying at present, avoiding to make judgements and to plan how to answer while they are still talking.

Try to follow the above in all conversations you have today (or tomorrow) at work, and check whether you behave differently while talking face to face and online with your colleagues.

Activity 8

Whatever the results of the test “ARE YOU A GOOD LISTENER” were, this was mainly about self-reflection. If you want to make sure that you listen carefully, here is how you can do it. Whenever you listen to someone saying something important, for example something, related to a task that you have to do, take the time to rephrase what you have heard with your own words and ask the other person if you have understood correctly. You can also do it when your interlocutor speaks of something important to them, even if not so very interesting for you. This will show the other person that you really care and their feedback will give you an idea if you actually manage to listen effectively.

Activity 9

Read some detailed info about GDPR.

Once you become more familiar with this topic, based on the info above, answer the following questions:

- Does this information make you feel more protected at your digital workplace?
- Are you willing to be proactive and address any open issues and uncertainties with the company IT experts and / or company management?

Activity 10

Having good connections is key to our well-being. In order to build strong positive connections at work, we can practice showing appreciation.

The means of digital communication are quick and easy to provide appreciation and gratitude at work in real time. You may show recognition by sending thank you messages or praise to people who deserve it.

Take it as a task for yourself to send to different people from your circle of colleagues, partners, clients at work, at least one “Thank you” message per day this week, connected to any work task or favour.

Activity 11

Sakichi Toyoda, the Japanese industrialist, inventor, and founder of Toyota Industries, developed the 5 Whys technique in the 1930s. It became popular in the 1970s, and Toyota still uses it to solve problems today.

You can use 5 Whys for troubleshooting, quality improvement, and problem solving. It may not be suitable if you need to tackle a complex or critical problem, but it is really effective

when used to resolve simple or moderately difficult problems (like many of the problem we face in our work with digital technologies).

The 5 Whys strategy is a simple, effective tool for uncovering the root of a problem. Developing your problem-solving skills will effectively improve your Agency.

Start with a problem you face with any type of digital technology and ask why it is occurring. Make sure that your answer is grounded in fact, and then ask the question again, but in relation to your answer of the previous question. Continue the process until you reach the root cause of the problem, and you can identify a counter-measure that will prevent it from recurring.

Activity 12

Congratulations, you have successfully completed the Agency and Trust module of the Stress-less program! Here is what you have learned:

- What is agency and how to build it?
- Two effective techniques for emotion regulation: Cognitive reappraisal and Attention deployment.
- What is Trust at work, including Digital trust and why it is important?
- A powerful practice to maintain equanimity called “Mountain meditation”.
- How GDPR Law protects your data privacy.
- 5 Whys technique to reach the root cause of the problem, so that you can identify a counter-measure that will prevent it from recurring.

If you want to continue the journey towards reducing digital stress, choose another module of this programme.

Suggested Further Readings and Bibliography

1. **Stephen Covey (2008), Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything**
2. **Paul Napper Phd, Anthony Rao, Phd (2019), The Power of Agency**
3. **Info about GDPR Law: <https://gdpr.eu/what-is-gdpr>**
4. **Carol Dweck (2007) Mindset, the new psychology of success**