HOT TOPICS: 5 top themes* and questions posed to a diverse range of businesses and organisations
- summary of responses to the 5 top theme questions collated by Halina Jaroszewska PCC

These 5 top themes / questions were asked before the UK Referendum campaign and consequently before the UK Referendum vote resulting in a choice by 51.9%, of the 72.2% who voted, to leave the EU. We now know Brexit means Brexit. Would the responses of those who were asked to comment on the 5 top themes / questions have been different if asked post the UK Referendum? Good question! And of course, this research was pre COVID-19 pandemic. Would the responses have been different if asked now? Another good question! We'll have to find out.

The responses came from corporates, SME's and small businesses; from MDs, Directors, top-level leaders; from retail, high tech, recruitment, leisure industry, media with 62.5% women and 37.5% men. Certainly, a diverse pond dip across a wide spectrum to discover if there were commonalities, where the differences were, what highlighted the differences, where commonalities occurred how did they play out. How to be curious and discover what questions to ask the next cohort of respondees?

What were the 5 top themes / questions? How were they selected? The selection came from conversations with leaders who, when asked to put in order the 5 Top Themes* challenging them at the moment, said:

1. The hot issue

2. The BIG challenge

3. Systemic understanding

 4. Future proofing

5. Accessing wisdom

Thinking points were given to catalyse the process with the clear direction that they were there simply to get thinking going. [see below for the 5 top themes / questions and their thinking points *]

Those who took part chose whether to answer the '5' themselves or take them to a team meeting for a discussion.

The responses to the 5 top themes / questions will be delved into one by one and then brought together for high end insights as well as surfacing underlying issues that may be common to all and / or spotlighting the diversity which may be evident due to the different organisations involved. And there will no doubt be more questions.

Your HOT issue: Money, communications, squeezing the impossible into the work day, changing mind-sets, buy-in at all levels and aspects, standards, full pipeline and 'order book', being agile to respond ahead of the market curve and underlying all of these issues are the people. How to find and retain the right people? Who are the right people? What is needed to maintain their interest and commitment to making the business work to its highest potential therefore to their highest potential? How to be in that leadership role that enables everyone to feel valued and wanting to produce consistent high-quality work? What is the investment needed? What is the shift in culture essential to sustainability of growth? Who could be tasked with instigating the miniscule change that will alter the landscape of the organisation's system enabling fresh perspectives, solutions, and commitment to right action to be applied to The Hot Issue? How as a leader, do I need to adjust or even change the lens through which I think I see what is happening?

The BIG challenge: Technology, the right people [this theme appears again], pipeline, creating time to think and plan and prepare, changing mindsets, exploiting technology to make systems / processes easier thus freeing up valuable time are all BIG issues that resonate for sure. Being ahead of the curve, no time to rest on laurels in an uncertain world, how to be the tallest poppy in a field of tall poppies whilst remembering that work is a jealous mistress
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demanding every hour of the day; that balance is essential to maintain health in all senses. How to prioritise? Deciding what are the priorities. How to differentiate? What needs to change to be sustainable and thrive rather than simply survive in a fast-paced world?

The sense of working smarter, being more agile and certainly responsive before a response was even a thought, are some of what underlies dealing with the 'it'. Asking the impossible? Doing one's best? Remembering the why that started it all [Simon Sinek considers this to be essential]? Connecting or re-connecting with the excitement, the passion, the sheer joy of that first moment when the business was set up or first day of the new job? Imagine from this moment starting a 'first 90 days' what would you do differently knowing what you know now?

Systemic understanding: A wealth of data which enables questions to pop, insights to emerge, curiosity to be piqued, resonance to happen and the inevitable really, surely not as we forget that the metaphorical pointed finger always has three pointing back at ourselves!

One question that pops up is this: does culture actually exist? In the same way that we refer to the organisation or company forgetting that it is the people who make the company/organisation/ culture. It is the people who make the culture, collude with the culture, accept the culture, develop the culture, ensure the culture is maintained. Being curious does everyone subscribe to the culture, understand it, translate it which begs the question what gets lost in translation? On that premise do we impose a culture on the people and make them fit it? Or could we engage the people to design a culture that reflects their values as well as the values that as a company or organisation is aspiring towards. It's the old chestnut 'buy-in'. How can the culture of an organisation / company flex yet stay true as people join and leave?

As our skin renews itself is it possible for the culture of a company or organisation to stay fresh, current, relevant and a living process rather than simply sitting smugly in a handbook assuming that it is imbued in every person once they sign on the bottom line of a contract and then walk through the door? Questions simply enable information to emerge which remains as information until emotions get attached and positions become entrenched resulting in the 'but that's the way we do it / it's always done that way / it's our foundation.

The perfect time to start questioning everything is in that very moment of complete certainty.

Future proofing: Being nimble in a quickly changing market – agility is key; knowing what the organisation / company needs; always asking what profile is needed; succession planning; planning for the business's development stages; team development in order to use effectively skills, attributes, qualities, potential; all employees to understand how the business works, how they can help it work even better, how to bring innovation into the mix, understand how a piece of work arrives on their 'desk'; tuned in to the fast pace of technological change; predicting what clients / customers might want ahead of the competition and the clients / customers!; ensure that everyone truly knows that they are key players in shaping the direction of the company and the work - all played a part in what was considered necessary for future proofing. What is the part that reputation at all levels and in all senses in our Social Media savvy world? How can managing reputation play a part in future proofing? What strategies are in place for both organisation and employees regarding reputation?

At the same time the challenge is how to create, maintain a solid strategy that propagates right down to operations; how to maintain balance, manage the risky while strategic work is done before it disseminates down through the organisation; holding the space for the don't know' to have time to be explored; to have that technology-watch identify and capitalise on what's next before it has been thought of; how to have a plan for emergencies flexible enough to manage the unforeseen; how to predict and then employ those who have the future skills. As was commented, it is important that we become a learning, developing, agile organisation that can adapt and thrive as things change around us.

While considering that whilst future trends can be anticipated, it's difficult to say if they can be future proofed. Things change and move on quickly, so a business needs to be nimble enough to react to these, or working far out enough, to look like they are reacting to these quickly. Together with a healthy dose of realisation that we cannot fully predict the future or can we? Maybe being a magician might help.

Accessing wisdom: Success strategies …. I'd love to know what they are. Wisdom is IP! New technology and IP are the life blood of a company. A secret weapon …. A mentor, someone to talk to who has been there has experience, knowledge and is a sounding board. Top tip: a lack of mentoring and knowledge sharing holds an organisation / company / business back. Companies that manage to unlock their staff creativity and demonstrate trust and appreciation of their full talents. This is wisdom I'd like to access! Leaders remember … not to get caught up in doing operational work and then struggle to take themselves away from it enough to work strategically.

Top tips: Reflect on learnings, re-cap on learnings, mistake once is forgiven twice unacceptable; embrace change and innovation, change is scary but you have to in order to thrive rather than just survive; manage the hugely challenging reality that clients/customers expect now 'experiences' rather than the traditional sales and marketing route; basic things like getting the process and back-end sorted giving a more slick on-boarding process competitors would die for. I would wave a magic wand and have a 3-year rolling funded agreement with partners. That would do it giving me and us breathing space.

Essentially it is about restoring dignity, humanity and balance to companies and organisations that are concurrently under substantial budget pressure is valuable wisdom shared. And we need to start with applying this to ourselves first.

In summary: the key ingredients for thriving rather than simply surviving seem to be people, the right ones working at their potential; the right technology which is way ahead of the curve; the right mix of being agile, being trusted, being alert so that the bottom line can be healthy, growth-orientated and sustainable.

What would you have answered then and what would you answer now? Would there be much that is different? How has the entrance upon the scene of COVID-19 thrown a curve ball into the equation? Do share your thoughts.

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1. **Your hot issue:** [*Thinking points:* What is the common cause of frustration in your company? If it could be solved, what do you believe would skyrocket/revolutionise/ transform your company's performance? Just before you close your eyes at bedtime or as you wake in the morning what is the challenge that 'won't-go-away' one that pops up bright-eyed demanding to be dealt with? And the one you consistently ignore? What would you give to have that sorted?]

2. **The BIG challenge:** [*Thinking Points:* If you could click your fingers and 'it' would be solved/changed/transformed/dispensed with /go away, what would you invest to make that happen? What is that 'it'?]

3. **Systemic understanding:** [*Thinking Points:* What parts of your company's culture work well? Which parts could work even better? How do you think/feel/see your company's culture developing fit for the next decade? Who of your people know what the culture is, how it works, what are the outdated habits/must do's, what could make it work healthier for the whole? Learning from when things go wrong rather than finger pointing – where does your company's culture sit re this? Is it fact or fiction?]

4. **Future proofing:** [*Thinking Points:* how do you know where the gaps are in skillsets/abilities/thinking/leadership? Who has responsibility for looking ahead, forecasting what might be the next trend, the next 'out of left field'? What needs to be invested now to pay dividends going forward? What needs to be let go of / brake taken off regarding / thinking changed to enable your organisation to be fit for the next decade?]

5. **Accessing wisdom:** [**Thinking points:** What issues do you think other companies have and keep quiet about? Which of their success strategies, if you could find out about them, would work for you? Which wouldn't? And why?]