



REDESIGNING & REIMAGINING EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

Impressions, insights and takeaways from UNICON's Annual Workshop 2021, hosted by the University of St. Gallen's Executive School of Management, Technology and Law (ES-HSG)

In 2020, Professor Mohanbir Sawhney of the Kellogg School of Management projected that in a period of five short years the world of executive education would be transformed. In the first three years, he predicted we would see large-scale reaction and the adoption of ‘pandemic driven modalities’ (in 2020); followed by a massive redesign—specifically digitally-led (in 2021); and in 2022 that the sector would be reimagined—with innovative new business models forging the way.

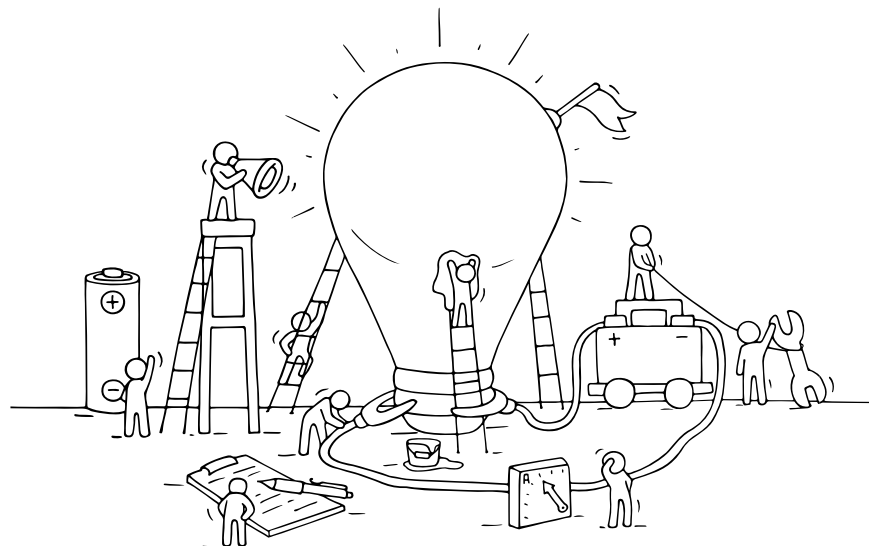
The roadmap Sawhney envisioned has been an influential one for leaders in the business school world, and midway through 2021, it is a vision that continues to become a reality.

In the summer of 2021, at UNICON’s Annual Workshop—run as a virtual event over two days in July and hosted by the University of St. Gallen’s Executive School of Management, Technology and Law in Switzerland—the focus is squarely at the confluence of the *redesigning* and *reimagining* phases of Sawhney’s roadmap, and the transformed, future world of University-based executive education beyond.

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DAY ONE

Day 1 of the Workshop centres on business model innovation—a key mechanism for leveraging the driving forces of market dynamics (technology, demographics, geopolitics, and economics), and channelling it towards future business opportunities and growth



Ahead of the Workshop

participants are set a pre-read—an excerpt from the book, ‘The Business Model Navigator’ by St. Gallen faculty Oliver Gassmann, Karolin Frankenberger, and Michaela Choudury. In a section titled ‘How to Drive Business Model Innovation,’ there is a diagram



The aim of the diagram is to become completely clear about your customer segments, your value proposition, your value chain and your profit mechanism.



The ‘magic triangle’ of business models

showing a ‘magic triangle’ of business models, and this diagram provides a framework for the Workshop, with discursive and creative sessions built around it.

The ‘magic triangle’ diagram illustrates the four dimensions of a business model:

1. **The customer – WHO are our target customers?**
2. **The value proposition – WHAT do we offer to customers?**
3. **The value chain – HOW do we produce our offerings?**
4. **The profit mechanism – why does it generate VALUE?**

“The aim of the diagram is to become completely clear about your customer segments,” the authors explain, “Your value proposition, your value chain and your profit mechanism, which fleshes out your business model and makes it comprehensible, while at the same time laying the foundation for future innovation.”



Prior to kicking-off in earnest, Markus Frank, workshop moderator across the two days and Head of the Custom/Inhouse Team of the Executive School, St. Gallen, offers a reminder of, “The power of collective wisdom and creativity,” noting that the wisdom and creativity convened today stems from, “88 people from 57 Universities and Business Schools,” who have, “accumulated hundreds of years of professional experience,” and who, “represent a wealth of cultural backgrounds.” This is the potential of a workshop such as this, and a demonstration of the benefit of all UNICON’s annual events, organized as they are for the sector as a whole.

To inform and ground the creative sessions to come in real-world data, the first session of the day brings input and insight from customers and clients in the executive education market today. Eric Bergemann, Senior Director of Executive Programs at the MIT Sloan School of Management, and Nora Anderson, Executive Director of Executive Education at the Carlson School of Management (University of Minnesota), both co-Chairs of UNICON’s Benchmarking Committee, summarize major findings from three recent surveys in their presentation, while asking, “What are our customers and clients telling us now?”

A wide variety of survey data is presented, covering questions around:

- ▶ **Key learning themes for 2021 (according to CLOs);**
- ▶ **Importance and availability of skills;**
- ▶ **Key drivers of learning and development in organizations over the past two years;**
- ▶ **Perceived impact of learning and development;**
- ▶ **What makes providers relevant?;**
- ▶ **How do businesses choose a provider to work with?**

Along with a host of other useful plots, graphs, charts and data points—each setting the scene for the business model innovation thinking to follow.

For Markus Frank, three key themes cut through most strongly from the various data presented, “One—that customization is



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Markus Frank, Head of the Custom/Inhouse Team of the Executive School, St.Gallen

key. Two—that people still want synchronization and to meet physically. And three—that there appears to be an overload of what is on the market.” Frank adds that, “There is a big opportunity here [for executive education], for teaching people how to learn, how to make sense—and make sense on different levels—how to access information, how to benefit from the volume that is available, and how to work and lead in the future.”

With the various inputs in place, Chantelle Brandt Larsen and David O’Connor, both of the St. Gallen Corporate Programs team, facilitate a session on business model innovation—concentrating first on the ‘who’ or ‘customer’ corner of the ‘magic triangle’—who will be the future customers of executive education?

Breakout sessions are launched, with groups asked to define this ‘who,’ and in doing so to develop deep insights about the executive education personas of tomorrow. Each group is given a different persona: ‘The Empowered Skilled Employee’, ‘The Underemployed’, ‘The Unemployed’, ‘The Off-Balance Sheet Talent’, ‘The Internal University’, ‘The Board Advisor’, ‘The Executive Leader’, ‘The Under Skilled’, ‘Newly Connected to the Internet’, and ‘The Lifelong Learner.’

Groups are asked to ‘rethink’ each persona for the future, constructing and filling out their persona templates with as much detail as possible, by asking questions such as; what might this person’s goals and responsibilities be? What is their buying role? What frustrations do they have? What are their needs? What are their main sources of information? What objections may they have to executive education?—and finally a ‘moon shot’ question: ‘What would you do if you wanted to deliver x10 the value to that learner (persona)?’

***What is their buying role?
What frustrations do they have? What are their needs?
What are their main sources of information? What objections may they have to executive education?***

Regrouping after the breakouts, participants share the results of their work—encouraged and coaxed by the facilitators, drilling into the abundance of new considerations which arose—such as, what are the different pools of customers appearing on a school’s radar five years from now, and what can we offer these new groups of people?



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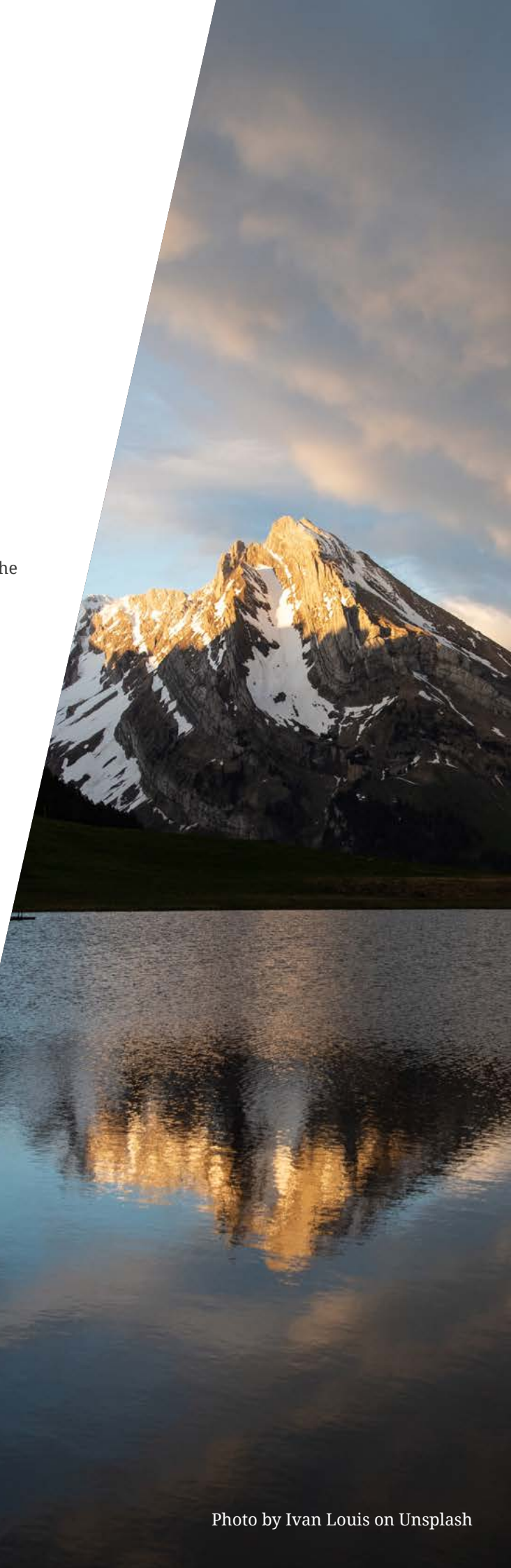
Dorothea Strauss, Head of Societal Engagement at Mobiliar

Rounding out the exercise separate breakout sessions follow on the ‘What’ and ‘How’ corners of the ‘magic triangle’ business model framework. The results of the sessions, each given ample time to unfold and develop, are fascinating, offering a glimpse into the future of executive education.

The final session of Day 1 is, by design, something very different—a conversation with Albert Kriemler, Creative Director of fashion brand Akris, and Dorothea Strauss, Head of Societal Engagement at Mobiliar, exploring the idea of art as a source of inspiration for business.

“It used to be said that ‘art is art and fashion is fashion’, each with their own rules,” Kriemler says—telling the story of Armani’s first show at the Guggenheim—a big scandal of the day, “How dare fashion be displayed as art?” Now, 15 years later, all that has changed, and continues to change, through innovation and changing demographics.

For Strauss, “Art is inspirational, of course. On the other hand, it can also be a training field, to train ourselves to take a different perspective, and to walk in the shoes of other people. This is because art is filled with uncertainty. Artists deal with ambiguity, ambivalence, and differing perspectives. Artists are able to create an environment in which we can try to learn about difference, take different perspectives, and learn something we didn’t know before.”



Strauss prompts conference to think how this applies to business and learning, and the big questions of the day; “Innovation, sustainability, future skills—how do we learn about these things? I think art can be part of the answer.”

St. Gallen are exploring new ways of interacting between these traditionally disparate worlds, as Markus Frank explains, “We are are trying to create new bridges between the fashion world, the world of museums and galleries, and with the business world. We are connecting faculty, researchers, students, and alumni from here at St. Gallen—and the resources of the university—and building bridges between ourselves, companies, and the arts.”

“The art world has realised that connection to another culture enriches,” adds Kriemler, suggesting there is much for business to learn from the world of art. Strauss builds on this, noting, “The way we interact with art can help us perceive things in the business world differently. Art can support changes in perspective and mindset change.”

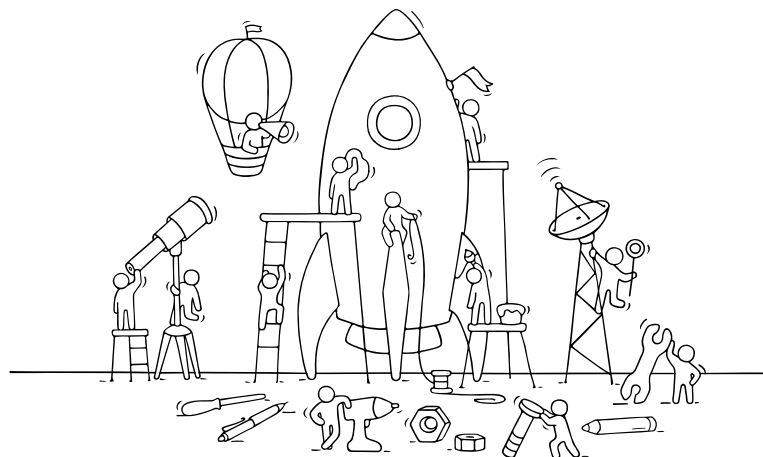


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**Peter Vogel, Professor
of Family Business and
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IMD Business School**

DAY TWO

Day 2 of UNICON’s Annual Workshop adopts a wider lens, concentrating on the driving forces of market dynamics—the three ‘macro disruptors’ of demography, technology, and geopolitics—and how the latest developments and trends will impact on executive education.



As with the first day, a creative session is the focal point—for participants to collaborate, access new thinking, and generate new ideas— and to prime that creative session, again the early part of the day carries expert input, with thought leaders presenting in each of those three macro areas, introduced by Andreas Loehmer of the St. Gallen Custom Team.

First, Peter Vogel, Professor of Family Business and Entrepreneurship at IMD Business School presents on 'Doing well by doing good', with specific attention drawn to the impact of demographic change and a new generation of business owners and leaders who are motivated more and more by purpose.

The context for this shift in demography and the associated attitudinal shift is simple, as Vogel's presentation bluntly states, "We consume more than the earth produces." Or as former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon so famously put it, "There is no plan B, because there is no planet B." This is the backdrop for the rise in purpose-driven business activities, and the entry onto the stage of a new generation of business owners and leaders.

As Vogel notes, "Millennials and Gen Z will make up 75% of the workforce by 2025, and more than 75% of this generation wants to work for a business that has a clearly defined purpose and acts in a socially responsible way—and they are willing to take a cut in salary to work for a purpose-driven company."

"Increasingly it will only be possible to do well economically by doing good socially and environmentally," Vogel states, adding that businesses and organizations of all kinds are already under huge pressure to change. "The pressure to transform will come from both regulation and the court of public opinion. They will run short of talent because people won't want to apply to work for them anymore."



This would be like having a world class university in my pocket, that helps me become a better entrepreneur, boss, or employee on a daily, problem-oriented basis.

Elgar Fleisch, Professor of Information and Technology Management at the ETH, Zurich and the University of St. Gallen

The requirement is there for, "a new paradigm for businesses," says Vogel, adding that, "It is imperative that companies embrace the notion of 'doing well and doing good,'" and transform the way they operate around that new paradigm. There remains the striving towards improved performance and growth—but equally, and in parallel, businesses must make a positive societal impact.

As Vogel says, "Talking about this is one thing, actually making it happen is another."

Executive education of course is already highly active in this area, working closely to transform businesses into purpose-driven organizations. "We hope that by influencing and educating the next generation of business owners and leaders we can have a leveraging effect," Vogel says, and in so doing, effect real action, with businesses 'walking the talk.'

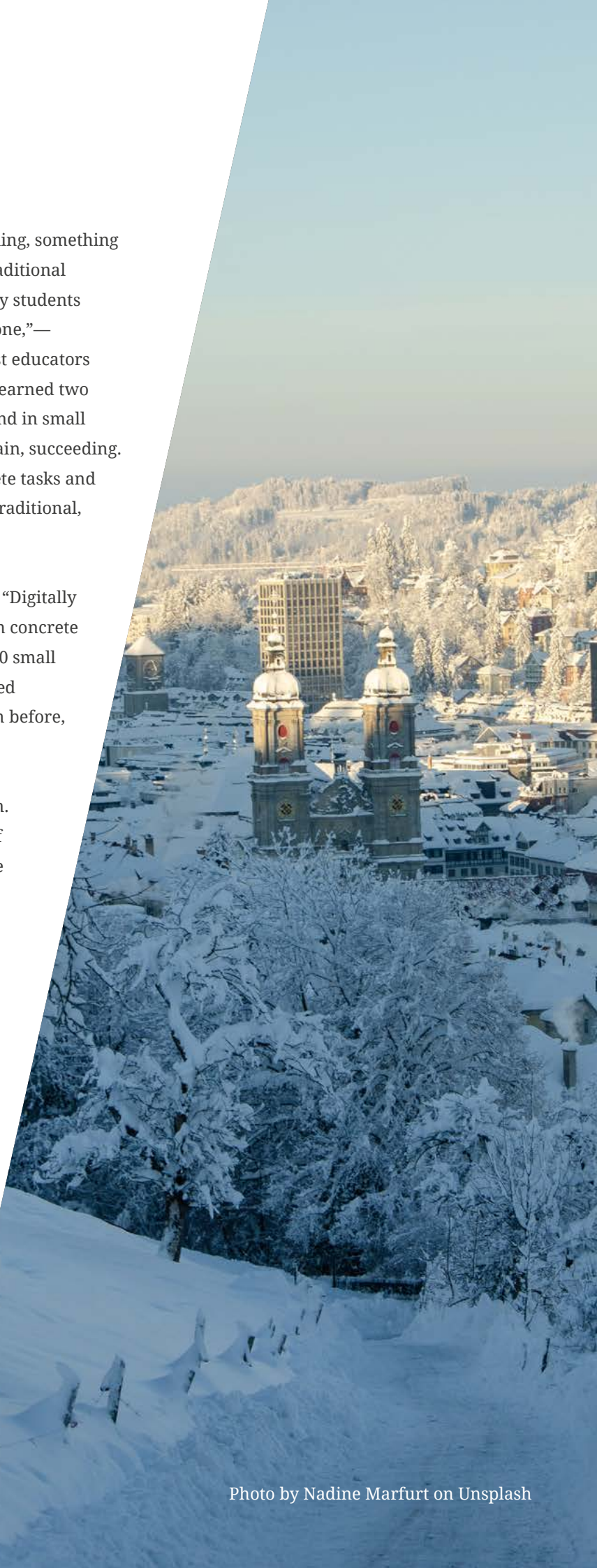
In the second input of the day, Elgar Fleisch, Professor of Information and Technology Management at the ETH, Zurich and the University of St. Gallen, illustrates vividly

how technology is already disrupting delivery of learning, something which he has direct experience of. Disheartened by traditional lecture-style delivery, where, as he explains, “When my students needed the knowledge a few years later, it was long gone,”—Fleisch decided to do something new. “I visited the best educators in Switzerland, Austria, and the USA,” he recounts, “I learned two interesting things. The best way to learn is by doing, and in small cycles. By applying, failing, being explained, trying again, succeeding. The ideal learning setting is therefore based on concrete tasks and takes place in hundreds of small learning cycles. The traditional, physical mass lecture can do neither of these things.”

Fleisch started to transform his lecture into dozens of, “Digitally supported, controlled cycles—with the focus always on concrete tasks.” Eventually he turned one lecture into, “about 50 small and easily digestible units,” to be delivered as self-paced learning. “The students had to work much harder than before, but they learned much more,” he reveals.

This disruption is not limited to the world of education. Fleisch gives the example of the modern prevention of chronic illnesses, where, he says, “Digital therapies are embedding themselves into tomorrow’s healthcare.” Therapeutic and lifestyle coaches are highly effective at combating behaviours which may lead to chronic health conditions (poor diet, lack of exercise etc.), but the ‘flesh and blood’ coaching interactions are expensive, and not scalable. As a result, they are being replicated by ‘digital coaches’, with advice and coaching prescribed and delivered as a ‘digital pill’ by doctors. This is digital disruption with enormous societal upside.

Fleisch invites his executive education audience to apply this example to their own industry, “Replace patients with students or managers,” he guides, “Replace doctor with professor or course instructor, replace digital pill with a digital learning coach, and replace chronic diseases with lifelong learning.”



The disruption Fleisch is asking us to imagine is that of 'digital learning coaches'. "This would be like having a world class university in my pocket, that helps me become a better entrepreneur, boss, or employee on a daily, problem-oriented basis—an extended arm of my training institution, intervening in my daily life whenever I need it."

The third input of the day comes from Simon J. Evenett, Professor of International Trade and Economic Development at the University of St. Gallen—who comments on the current picture of geopolitical rivalry, and its effect on business. Evenett explains how three interacting factors—the rise of China, fallout from the pandemic, and digital innovation—are altering, "how governments look at international business operations and globalization." The result is a, "Loss of faith in business to properly manage supply chains, digital tech, and engagement with China," he shows.

Evenett points out that, in terms of China relations, "Biden's approach builds on Trump's—it does not reverse it. The current trajectory is towards 'selective decoupling'—albeit a selective decoupling that will unfold over time—rather than a dramatic schism."

Evenett also notes that at the recent G7 summit in Cornwall, England, "EU leaders balked at Biden's rhetoric and are less critical of China than the European Commission." The picture is ever-changing. Evenett cautions that, "a flagrant violation of international norms by China," could of course harden the European position, and advises too, to look to Angela Merkel's successor in Germany as another new variable.




These events are extremely pertinent to the executive education classrooms of today and tomorrow

As Evenett shows, these events are extremely pertinent to the executive education classrooms of today and tomorrow. "These developments require executives to shift their mindsets and retool—and we can help them do that," he urges, "Executives need support in assessing political and geopolitical risks as well as in undertaking corporate diplomacy—especially for those firms operating cross-border supply chains."

This, of course, is in addition to the disruption and upheaval inherent in the wake of a global pandemic. "We've talked so much about technological disruption—but that's not the only form of disruption," Evenett concludes.

With inputs in place and percolating in the minds of participants, the pump is primed for a two-hour World Café session, designed to unleash the creative thinking that is so much a part of this annual workshop. Expertly facilitated again by Chantelle Brandt Larsen and David O'Connor of St. Gallen, breakout 'press teams' are charged with thinking and collaborating as fast-paced, creative-minded communications teams—considering each of the three inputs in turn and asking: what is the impact on Executive Education, of each of these macro disruptors—demography, technology, and geopolitics? Finally, press teams are challenged to produce a single 140-character 'tweet' summarizing the impact on executive education, of one or more of the disruptors

Here are a handful of the resulting Press Officer's tweets:

-  *We are stronger together: UNICON sets the stage for a future-ready Exec Ed centered on human experience for sustainable global impact.*
-  *Taking our own medicine: Reconfiguring Executive Education to adapt to technology disruption. Embracing the transition rather than feeling threatened.*
-  *Bridging the gap between generations to reach a common purpose in a more complex world.*
-  *Using tech to complement human touch and increase reach and efficiency for delivering personalized executive education for positive impact.*
-  *Exec-Ed faces opportunities and obstacles from generational integration (we can facilitate!), technology adoption and political uncertainty.*

POSTSCRIPT:

UNICON's Annual Workshop, held superbly this year as a virtual live event by the University of St. Gallen's Executive School of Management, managed to fit an incredible amount of content in to two short days.



'Walking the talk' on short, digestible learning cycles, every presentation across the two days was highly concise, sharp, and to the point—while the emphasis on collaboration and creativity, outside-the-box thinking, and freedom of expression, made fertile ground for new ideas and concepts to germinate.

Against the backdrop of macro disruptors on the global stage, and the more immediate industry landscape—of consulting firms growing as major competitors to business schools, and disruptive non-traditional digital learning competitors emerging and developing—University-based business schools need business model innovation to thrive, grow, and continue to make a positive impact on their students and society as a whole.

Expectations of what executive education can achieve, both in terms of impact to the individual, and impact at a societal level, are changing. The good news is that University-based business schools are extremely well equipped, well placed, and well trained to meet and exceed those expectations, and take executive education to a new level.

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