



How do you stay in the game when the game is changing? In our latest reader survey, a number of CMI members shared concerns about ‘staying relevant’ when many norms are being shattered. So we asked the wider CMI community for their tips and techniques...

9 ways to stay relevant

words / Matthew Jenkin & Matthew Rock

1 KNOW ENOUGH

An understanding of new digital technologies is critical, says Professor Nelson Phillips, an expert in leadership and digital innovation at Imperial College Business School.

You don’t, however, need to become an expert. Managers simply need to be confident enough to have conversations about these innovations with people who are experts, in order to make sensible, informed decisions and allocate resources.

The first challenge, Phillips believes, is overcoming any fear or embarrassment about not understanding. Not many

people know how their email system works, he says, but they are not afraid of it. It’s the same principle with new technologies.

“Figure out what the core idea behind the innovation is, what it can actually do and what the vocabulary is, so you can have a confident conversation about it,” he advises.

There are lots of opportunities for learning about new technology without undergoing formal training, he adds. “A lot of what leaders learn is learnt in the workplace and through experience. Sometimes they need further training – but that can just be watching a TED Talk or reading online resources.”

2 KEEP YOUR L-PLATES ON

“The most important thing is to be interested,” says John-Paul Flintoff, an author and former *Financial Times* correspondent. “Without that, you can only pretend to be relevant. If you’re interested, you’ll talk to a wide range of people, of different ages and backgrounds, and you’ll continue to learn without even trying. This in turn provides you with more and more new ideas of your own – and you can’t stay relevant without new ideas.”

Ian Tickle, senior vice president and general manager of EMEA at software provider Domo, has made

continually educating himself on the latest digital technologies a priority. He listens to podcasts on his daily commute to and from London and regularly reads the latest research online.

Hugh Robertson CCMI, founder of marketing company RPM, says: “Stay curious, remain interested and embrace learning, as we are continually evolving and can never stand still.”

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3 HAVE A BEGINNER'S MINDSET

“Staying relevant starts with having a ‘beginner mindset’, approaching your career, life and situations with a sense of openness and a lack of preconceptions,” says Nicole Lipkin, author, organisational psychologist and CEO of Equilibria Leadership Consulting. “Those people who ‘know it already’ or have ‘been there and seen that’ lose out on learning new things or new ways of approaching situations. The cool thing about being human is that we are constantly forming neural connections, meaning we learn until the day we die. Using that knowledge to embrace a growth mindset keeps us learning more and means we stay open to new possibilities and ways of thinking – the core of staying relevant in any area of our lives.”

Nick Worthington FCMI is a big fan of new influences: “Engage with people outside of your normal work and social circle, either face-to-face through community volunteering or via social media. Listening to and learning from different sources enriches a leader’s perspective.”

4 WATCH STARTUPS

Mhairi McEwan is co-founder of Brand Learning (now part of Accenture), one of the UK’s most exciting marketing consultancies. Her advice is simple: “Get up to speed on the potential solutions that innovative technology offers brands and businesses in your industry.”

Tamara Littleton is an entrepreneur (and TEDx speaker) who keeps a close eye on new trends and technologies. “I always have several business books on the go,” she says. “I read *Harvard Business Review* and put time aside every day to read articles and other viewpoints on social media. I use all the research and advice from my agency, The Social Element, to fine-tune what we’re doing and to create new services for clients.”

5 KEEP REFLECTING ON WHAT YOU’RE DOING

Yvonne Harkness is college student services lead at the University of Glasgow. Her job is to make sure students have a great experience. How does she stay relevant – and thus stay in tune with students’ needs? By reflecting every week on how she’s performing.

She keeps an ‘achievement log’, containing three things she’s learned, three things that have gone well and three things that didn’t go as planned. “It takes about five minutes on a Friday morning,” she says, and it’s a way of “pushing myself towards increased awareness of my practice”.



6 UPSKILL

The current world of work is very different to the one in which many managers cut their teeth. By 2025, tech-savvy millennials are expected to make up 75% of the workforce.

In an important paper, *Retraining and Reskilling Workers in the Age of Automation*, global consultancy McKinsey examined how major employers intend to respond to a new age of automation.

The key finding? Employers understand the importance of keeping their own people relevant. “Executives increasingly see investing in retraining and upskilling existing workers as an urgent business priority – and they also believe that this is an issue where corporations, not governments, must take the lead,” the report concludes.

7 EMBRACE NEW WAYS OF WORKING

Ian Tickle was brought up with very different expectations of employees. Now in his late 40s, he began his career in sales, where the working culture was to come in early, work at your desk and stay late.

Today, younger workers expect flexibility in when, where and how they do their jobs. Anyone with access to a reliable internet connection can close a deal in their pyjamas and tailor their hours to better fit around family life. Tickle says he’s had to learn to adapt to this new world.

“I still have challenges with staff’s desire for far more flexibility than I was used to when starting out,” he says. “I believe we must find a balance between employers’ needs and desires and employees’ desires. I don’t think I’ve found that yet, but I am certainly aware that I need to.”

8 BE CONSCIOUSLY COLLABORATIVE

To stay relevant, leaders need to dump old-school top-down management in favour of a more open, collaborative approach. “It is very much about engagement and the ability to contribute – the ability for people to have their views heard, listened to and respected,” says Tickle.

Everything to do with the Domo business – metrics, processes, projects and data – is managed through the company’s real-time data dashboard. This means Tickle always has advance access to the numbers behind people’s challenges: “I’m up to speed and we can then work on solutions together in person. It also means I stay present and ask the right questions, rather than consuming information that was already available to me.”

9 CROWDSOURCE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Rob Pellow, digital experience director at CRM agency Armadillo, manages a team whose members are on average 15 to 20 years younger than him. Like other leaders we spoke to, he says that listening to your team and understanding what they need from their manager is paramount.

“Staying relevant is a full-time job, but it’s not the job of one person,” he says. “It’s a collaboration, like everything else is when you are part of a team. So I partly crowdsource my knowledge. We have regular share-and-enjoy meetings where everyone brings inspiration and exciting things from all around the marketing

world – sometimes tech, sometimes creative – and we talk about how we would apply them, what we need to learn to do it and how we could sell it as a solution.”

Forget traditional market research. Managers should follow the lead of startups by running fast, cheap experiments, says Phillips. That’s what young people working in organisations expect, he says, and it’s how you do business in an uncertain, volatile world.

Amazon’s Jeff Bezos explains the power of experimentation on the basis of a “truncated outcome distribution”. If you fail while experimenting, there is a capped downside. But the upsides can be enormous.

THE ENDGAME

Ultimately, managers who want to stay relevant need to look at how they got to their current position and be prepared to consider how that would take place in today’s environment. Tickle says people today consume information and educate themselves in different ways and, if we want to build future generations who come into leadership and prove successful, then we need to be prepared to re-evaluate our own learning styles. He adds that the skill sets that got you where you are now might not be the ones that will take you further in your career.

“The workforce now is far more creative and diverse than it was five years ago, and that is fantastic and should be celebrated,” Tickle says.

“Therefore the way we manage, lead, guide and develop has to take that into consideration too, because in leadership we should be setting a vision for everybody, so everybody can come on a journey.”