A new era of the resilient teleworker?

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The way work is organised has been shaken to the core by the Covid-19 pandemic. During the lockdown, the extent to which companies and their employees managed to adapt to the experience of enforced teleworking was cause for celebration. But now that teleworking has been extended, it is becoming obvious how far, in terms of exhaustion, not to say mental distress,[1] working from home is from being synonymous with wellbeing.[2] As a cure, many companies are now offering training in "resilience". But what does this all-pervading yet undefined concept actually mean? What powers would a resilient worker be given, and should we welcome this new development?

1. Ehrenberg A. (2021) Fatigue nerveuse: covid, santé mentale, individualisme, *Telos*, 11 January 2021. https://www.telos-eu.com/fr/societe/fatigue-nerveuse-covid-sante-mentale-individualism.html
2. Marquis N. (2021) Fatigués mais actifs: la résilience par temps de pandémies, *Esprit*, 2021/6, p. 87.
3. https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en
4. Tisseron S. (2017) *La résilience*, Paris, PUF, pp. 7-9.
5. Ionescu S. and Jourdan-Ionescu C. (2010) Entre enthousiasme et rejet: l'ambivalence suscitée par le concept de résilience, *Bulletin de Psychologie*, 510 (6), p. 401.

Since March 2020, remote working has become the norm for a sizable percentage of European workers. The pandemic not only confers an aura of virtue on this concept of resilience, it has set it up as an end-goal. We now look forward to resilient nations, economies and health systems, and talk of both climatic resilience and cyber resilience. The centrepiece of the European Union's recovery plan, NextGenerationEU, actually goes by the title of the Recovery and Resilience Facility.[3]

The origins of a multi-layered buzzword

The word "resilience" derives etymologically from the Latin *resilire*, which harnesses the verb *salire*, to jump, to the prefix *re*, indicating a backward movement. While medieval French spawned the concept of *"résiliation"*, denoting the act of retracting – of withdrawing from a contract by stepping back from it – the English language latched onto the present participle of the Latin word *resilire*, which is *resiliens*, and associated it with the idea of rebound, or, to put it another way, a movement of returning to a state of equilibrium.[4] As early as the 17th century, the concept gained popularity in English, notably in the writing of Sir Francis Bacon (1627). In the first half of the 19th century, "resilience" began to appear in scientific parlance, in relation to the physics of materials, where it was used to describe the elasticity and resistance of wood and metals when subjected to shocks.[5] Materials described as "resilient" were those capable of absorbing the shock and returning to their original state.

From the second half of the 20th century onwards, the concept of resilience spread to many other disciplines, including psychology, ecology and the management sciences. In psychology, for example, there was an urge to understand how some children, when exposed to trauma (such as war, bereavement or abuse), managed to "triumph over their misfortune" and become fully developed adults, while others went on being afflicted by their ordeal for the rest of their lives. The capacity for resilience in the former cases was advanced as an explanation

of outcomes that defy the workings of fate by managing "to develop positively, in a socially acceptable way, despite stress or misfortune which would normally entail a serious risk of a negative outcome".[6] In ecology, Holling (1973) carried the concept of resilience over into the study of systems subjected to disruption and, breaking in this respect with accepted usage deriving from the physics of materials, suggested that resilient systems do not return to equilibrium in the strict sense but, to be more precise, adapt their structure to change so that they can continue to function in the new circumstances. Later on, from the 1980s onwards, the management sciences, somewhat along the same lines, defined the resilience of organisations as the ability to react and adapt to an unexpected situation or a crisis.[7]

This brief digression into the roots and some of the scientific usages of the concept gives us an opportunity to draw out three special features of it. Firstly, the concept of resilience is, by definition, inseparable from the existence of a disruption, since it is following the occurrence of the latter that the former is likely to emerge. The keen interest taken in the idea of resilience in the current context of a public-health-related and economic crisis is therefore no great surprise. Secondly, the concept of resilience remains vague, with a nebulous, almost magical aura surrounding it. It is a rebound, of course, but on what timescale and in what conditions? In what direction, how far and at what cost? And finally, the concept of resilience still leaves unanswered the mystery of what determines its appearance (i.e. whether it is innate as opposed to learned). Is it possible or even desirable to identify, from the outset, those individuals and systems most likely to save themselves by rebounding, when it looks as if, by definition, resilience can only reveal itself after the event, in other words after exposure to a crisis or a disruption?

More recently, the proponents of "personal development" have liberated resilience from the realm of the innate to establish it in the field of things learned. For these champions of working on the self and positive thinking, even though there is no denying that some people seem by nature to be better at it than others, resilience can still be learned through effort. This means it would no longer be the prerogative of a select few but, provided they put in the effort, would be a saving skill which ordinary mortals and therefore, of course, workers could access.

Workers, be resilient! The call to adaptability

In the management sciences and management speak, people tend to describe the world in which businesses currently evolve by applying the acronym VUCA[8], which pinpoints its principal features: volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. In this view, the crisis caused by Covid-19 is a major VUCA event. In management schools, it is very likely to be used for a long time as a way of preaching the mantra of agility, adaptability and reactivity as the organisational and individual virtues businesses must possess if they are to survive in an ever-changing world – a world which is, at one and the same time, unstable, unpredictable and even sometimes threatening.

Against this background, at a time when fatigue and demotivation have been lying in wait for many teleworkers run down by successive lockdowns, businesses have been irresistibly attracted by the burgeoning supply of training courses in resilience, a "soft skill" tailor-made for periods of crisis. Personal development consultants in businesses have therefore taken it upon themselves to help workers "learn", "improve" or indeed "cultivate" resilience at work as a way of better adjusting to an environment that is constantly changing or proclaimed to be likely to do so.

At first sight, this approach might seem to involve a form of genuinely worthwhile pragmatism. What could be wrong with bolstering workers' resilience, helping them bounce back after a setback, a failure, a shock, a pandemic? In reality, now it has been put through the personal development mill and adopted into managerial newspeak,[9] resilience in its "corporate" version has lost its benign sheen and needs to be looked at with a greater degree of caution. A dip into the content of these kinds of training courses will be enough to prove the point.

Bending without breaking: the ethos of the reed

By way of introduction to workplace resilience training courses, the fable of *The Oak and the Reed* by Jean de la Fontaine is often cited. An oak tree which prides itself on standing up to a storm pities the fate of a reed, which is forced to bow down at the least breath of wind. Irritated by the oak's compassion, the reed tells the tree it would rather "bend without breaking" than "resist without bowing its head". A north wind suddenly starts to blow and decides the outcome of this duel by uprooting the oak. The moral of the tale sets the tone for the training course: to bow in the face of adversity, to accept your fate without complaint, to adapt

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6. Vanistendael S. quoted by Cyrulnik B. (1999) *Un merveilleux malheur*, Paris, O. Jacob, p. 8.
7. Peyron J.-L. (2017) *Le concept de résilience: quel apport pour la gestion des écosystèmes forestiers*, Ecofor.
8. The acronym comes from American military vocabulary.
9. Vandevelde-Rougale A. (2017) *La novlangue managériale: Emprise et résistance*, Paris, Érès.

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in the face of all opposition, is represented as the only stance that is sustainable in the long run. In the end, it is claimed, resilience is just a matter of survival.

Such courses then generally sound out the experience of teleworkers, in the form of a short poll in which they are asked to say how they felt during the health emergency. The results as regards being locked down are mixed, suggesting that some actually managed to reach a favourable accommodation with the situation in the short term. When it comes to the long ensuing period, on the other hand, the feelings most often mentioned are of frustration, anxiety, anger, lassitude, sadness and stress – proof, in fact, if any were needed, that the training is not superfluous and that the people who take it deserve help in "finding the strength to bounce back, to be resilient, to grow as a result of this crisis". It is also an opportunity for hammering home the never-ending message, written by Nietzsche of course, that "What does not kill me, strengthens me."

When asked to pinpoint the sources of these negative responses and the stress they feel, teleworkers mainly put it down to the workload, the lack of control, the spirit of "everything for the business", the sense of isolation, the future organisation of work and the effect on the health of their business. It is hardly an encouraging picture, but that still does not make it a lost cause, since to be resilient all that is needed are "the right tools". The first step along that path, it is claimed, is to reset the "locus of control",[10] that dashboard which dictates how to assign blame for the events which arise in our lives, and to opt for a more positive attitude towards adversity, an attitude which would supposedly, in exchange, be

beneficial for our wellbeing. The central idea is this: the fact that individuals react negatively to what happens to them – resist it, in other words – is what causes their malaise, rather than the actual nature of the situations or events they are faced with.

To persuade participants of this, applicants for resilience are put through a new opinion poll that asks them to say what they think about the harmful nature of stress. The answers are categorical: all of them, without exception, endorse the view that stress has adverse health effects. They are then presented with the results of a piece of research described as scientific and carried out in the United States, according to which it had supposedly been possible to prove that, of individuals exposed to stress, only those who thought it was harmful died prematurely. Therefore, it is not stress that kills us but our resistance to it and our anxiety about it. The same reasoning is then applied to one of the stress factors teleworkers mention: excessive workload. Invoking the "locus of control" as support for the argument, it is then decreed that that stress factor has to be seen as "external" and, in particular, as "uncontrollable", thereby negating the very principle of primary prevention, which is to target the causes of risks. To resist it, the theory goes, would not just be in vain but could only lead to unpleasant internal states (e.g. anger, frustration and so on) which would give rise to a "negative spiral" (e.g. complaints or a poor working environment). Conversely, in such circumstances, a resilient attitude would consist of welcoming the feelings caused by excessive workload "without judgement", accepting them, and then devising gentle little readjustments, on an individual scale, just for

ourselves. The training then continues with lessons in meditation with full alertness, in other words breathing exercises, the object of which is supposedly to act on the parasympathetic system and the amygdala, the part of the emotional brain responsible for reacting to stress.

Do these short company training courses have any real effect on the level of resilience and wellbeing of the workers who take them? Let us take leave to doubt it and to wonder whether, when it comes down to it, the main point of them might not be found elsewhere. At all events, the incursion of the notion of resilience into the business world is part and parcel of a "psychologising of labour relations"[11] which individualises and depoliticises the issues associated with working conditions by reducing them to individual strategies of adaptation. Resilience also establishes a loosened, not to say more relaxed, relationship with the principles of prevention, as what it does is adapt the individual to the work, including in his or her emotional experience, rather than the reverse, even though that is what the 1989 Framework Directive on health and safety at work requires. Lastly, the call to be resilient means discrediting any form of resistance[12], any questioning of how work is organised. So we can feel only concern, as did Thierry Ribault, author of a critical essay on resilience, at the growing influence of this concept, which is helping to establish a "technology of consent"[13] both in the world of work and elsewhere. ●

10. The "locus of control" model was developed by an American psychologist, Julian Rotter, in 1954.

11. Stevens H. (2008) Quand le psychologique prend le pas sur le social pour comprendre et conduire des changements professionnels, *Sociologies Pratiques*, 17 (2), p. 1.

12. Pieiller E. (2021) Résilience partout, résistance nulle part, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 2021. https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2021/05/PIEILLER/63082

13. Ribault T. (2021) *Contre la résilience: à Fukushima et ailleurs*, Paris, L'Échappée, pp. 223-226.