Twenty (two) years of the Henley Forum

2020 was a momentous year for the Henley Forum – it’s the year we turned 20! We marked the year with a special souvenir booklet that highlighted a rich history of knowledge and insights co-created with over 160 organisations in the previous 20 years. This exercise also sparked a reflection on the evolution of the Henley Forum and, at a broader scale, of the fields of knowledge management (KM) and organisational development (OD). And so, at the Henley Forum 2020 Annual Conference, we celebrated our 20th anniversary with a room full of delegates reflecting on the future of KM and OD.

What a year we picked! Not a month later the pandemic hit and the world of work as we knew changed forever. Throughout 2020 and 2021, we continued to engage thought leaders in our community and share their diverse voices and perspectives on how the world of work is evolving and what it means for KM and OD practitioners and for organisations in general. This book is a compilation of reflections on how KM and OD are evolving, and our role in collectively shaping the future of work.

Reflections on the Future

When I read through the many reflections, I am blown away by the diversity of thought and insights presented. Each insight gives us a new future to imagine. More importantly, each places the power and agency on us to create the future we want to be a part of. A key theme across all articles is that that future is constantly being constructed and invented by our actions and choices in the here and now.

The role of KM here is to connect people and ideas, facilitate conversations and mobilise knowledge and learning.

The role of OD is to leverage these ideas, knowledge and learning to help us evolve and adapt in a dynamic world.

Almost all reflections in this book are set against the backdrop of the pandemic. Call it a catalyst or the tipping point, the pandemic has made us all stop and reflect – what do we want our future to look like?

Whilst editing this book, I couldn’t help but draw connections to what was happening within the Henley Forum as we navigated the disruption of the pandemic. Since 2020, we’ve been busy practicing what we advise others to do – knowing, learning, adapting, and innovating. What follows is a story of how we evolved and...
adapted in the pandemic, what we achieved, and my reflections on what’s next for the Henley Forum.

**We are evolving**

The Henley Forum is best understood as a network of academics, industry experts and thought leaders, who convene for the shared purpose of developing dynamic organisations. Around that shared purpose, there is immense diversity of thought, with Members coming from different countries, sectors, and disciplines. I believe this has been our strength over the years – the conversations we have allow different points of views to interact to create new insights.

This diversity has also helped us evolve over the last 22 years. Every year, we welcome new Member Organisations, academics and thought leaders into our community, each bringing with them new experiences, new perspectives, and new organisational challenges. Plus, with every new Henley Forum Director, our remit has been expanding. We started as the Henley KM Forum with an emphasis on KM under our Founding Director, Prof David Birchall. We expanded to the Henley Forum for Organisational Learning and Knowledge Strategies under former Directors Prof Jane McKenzie and Dr Christine van Winkelen. We rebranded as the Henley Forum with the inclusion of organisational development and change management under the strategic direction of Dr Sharon Varney. Through this interaction of perspectives, and around the core of developing dynamic organisations, we have constantly been scaling outwards in terms of our thinking in the fields of KM and OD, the kinds of organisational challenges we support, and real time impact for practice and practitioners.

**Connections – our superstrength**

In addition to evolving our thinking and our conversations, we have also been evolving in the way we deliver our annual programme, whether that is with the introduction of new additions, such as the annual Advancing your Change and OD Practice course, or with the use of different formats, such as our KM Essentials webinar series for bite-sized KM learning. However, the biggest example and perhaps need to evolve came about during the pandemic.

When I joined the Henley Forum in 2019, my first call to action was to strengthen and re-energise our community and network. So, whilst designing the 2020-21 program, we were considering leveraging the virtual format to introduce shorter, snappier networking sessions. And then, as we all know, the pandemic hit, and we went fully virtual. From debating ‘will-we, won’t-we’, we went to ‘this is how we work now’.

In those early days, I remember a sense of nervous energy – for a community built around interactions for co-creation of knowledge, social distancing could have been the death knell. Yet, as a result of our visioning conversations, we felt poised to grab the emerging opportunities and technically prepared to do a good job of it.

What really set us apart from other ‘work from home’ offerings – and there were many – was our purpose and values. We started with the question ‘why does the Henley Forum exist?’.

The Henley Forum is a space where diverse perspectives interact, and so, it was important for us to continue creating spaces for conversations, reflections, and networking, whatever the format.

Over the last 2 years, the Henley Forum team have consistently called upon our connections to continue to respond and evolve in a changing world. We were connecting with the world to
notice what was changing around us and responding by innovating our way of working. We were connecting and listening to our Members to gauge what was working and what wasn’t. And, we were connecting as a team to make sense of and learn from our experiences and evolve our programme delivery along the way.

Outside-in – connecting in a changing world

When the pandemic hit, we responded quickly and with conviction, providing a sense of clarity, certainty and familiarity to our community. We continued to deliver our usual annual programme of events and research for our Members. However, instead of simply recreating everything in a virtual format, we took this as an opportunity to transform our way of working, deliberately creating the future for the next 5, 10, 20 years of the Henley Forum.

We evolved our programme by introducing the monthly Community Coffee chats. These helped us stay connected, enabled serendipitous learning to emerge, and cemented the culture of community and conversations that spilt over to other events in our programme.

We amplified the Henley Forum culture of interacting, learning, and co-creating insights in our virtual events. We especially paid close attention to welcoming different people from different contexts with different perspectives to our events, and deliberately creating lots of spaces (conversations, chat function, breakout rooms and whiteboards) for those perspectives to interact. We used tech such as Zoom, Miro and Hubbub, to create spaces for networking.

Over the last 2 years, our creative and continuously evolving approach to programme delivery has helped us sustain and secure connections with our virtual community. Finally, we leveraged our new format to grow internationally. Working virtually meant we were now connected to the whole world. Over the last 2 years, we have invited international speakers and welcomed many international delegates, connecting us to more diverse perspectives.
All these changes have helped us revitalise the sense of community in the Henley Forum. Whenever I join a Henley Forum event, the excitement, buzz and banter in the (virtual) room is unmistakable. It’s for this reason I can proudly claim that our story of the pandemic wasn’t one of survival, but that of thriving.

Connecting as a team
The Henley Forum as a network also thrives on the connections and relationships we have proactively built within the team – this was a deliberate investment I made when I joined the Forum in 2019. In addition to nurturing friendships within the team, this helped us develop a joined-up approach towards the delivery of the Henley Forum’s annual programme for our Members. Each member of the Henley Forum team brings a diverse set of skills, talents and perspectives, and is responsible for a distinct but connected set of tasks (e.g., strategy, Member relationships, programme delivery, communications, and operations).

When the pandemic hit, these relationships played a significant role in helping us sense, learn and adapt quickly to the rapidly emerging demands. We had built trust and safety that helped us share our worries, experiences with the disruption around us, and some wild new ideas to implement in the Forum. We had built formal and informal spaces where we were sharing our reflections and learning in each of our tasks to piece together a picture that was emerging around us. And we had built the strong ties that helped us innovate and adapt our practice in a joined-up way to continuously deliver value to our Membersiv.

Inside-out – connecting to change the world
The connections and networks we nurtured in the Henley Forum community went on to help us collectively make sense of the chaos around us. Over the months, our conversations became vehicles for sharing stories, converging learning from our diverse experiences, and co-creating insights about how we’re surviving, navigating and learning to thrive in this changing world. The Henley Forum thus became the epicentre of this learning with the ripples expanding into all of our personal and professional lives.

Our conversations helped us connect and spark ideas to ensure that the future doesn’t just happen to us but that we play an active role in creating it in the here and now. Over the last 2 years, we’ve explored organisational challenges around becoming agile in a changing world, and sustaining and securing connections as we move to hybrid working. We’ve heard from thought leaders and industry experts, we’ve conducted leading-edge research, and we’ve connected our own experiences and learning. Through these connections, I believe we’ve actively played a role in evolving the future of work starting with the Member organisations we work with.
Meet the Henley Forum Team

L-R: Prof Jane McKenzie, Ola Oladosu, Dr Sharon Varney, Ellie Done and Dr Divyata Sohal

Professor Jane McKenzie, Advisory Board and Founder Member

Over the past 22 years, Jane has made an outstanding contribution to The Henley Forum and to the world of knowledge management. She has been instrumental in sustaining two-way connections between academia and practice in ways that benefit both. Jane’s influence has enabled and facilitated productive connections between those at the sharp end of knowledge, learning and change practice in organisations, and with practically-minded academics. Together we have developed robust and actionable insights to create impact with real-world intractable problems. Jane continues to share her knowledge and insight generously with the Henley Forum team and our Members.

Oladiran Oladosu, Research Associate, The Henley Forum

Over the past 2 years, Ola has provided invaluable operational and tech support, especially during THF’s transition to virtual spaces. His disruptive thinking and innovative ideas were useful for getting us ready for virtual working during lockdown and spotlighting ideas and challenges we wouldn’t have ordinarily considered. He was usually behind the scenes making sure that our events ran smoothly and that our speakers and members were duly supported, be it tech, administration, social media; if it needed doing, Ola was on it. His research and critical thinking have been sources of valuable contribution to conversations in our community. His informal style and personable attitude have been critical to creating the informal community feel of The Henley Forum.

“One thing I love about The Henley Forum is the ubuntu-type community we’ve shared. There is always this sense of support and family you feel at any of our events or research catch-ups.”
Dr Sharon Varney, Advisor to the Henley Forum

Over the past 7 years, Sharon has brought a unique combination of deep practical expertise, academic excellence and an engaging style to The Henley Forum. She has shaped and evolved the Forum programme to adapt to shifting needs and help our members continually advance the leading edge of practice. She has applied her learning and organisation development (OD) skills to design and host engaging events and inspiring conferences. She has used her consulting and research skills to generate new insights and practical tools that help people respond to real organisational issues.

“One thing I love about The Henley Forum is how we’ve worked with our members to create something unique. Together, we’ve created a special space for genuine innovation to advance practice, for people to connect and share their different stories and experiences across sectors, functions, countries, and views.”

Ellie Done, Henley Forum Co-Ordinator

Over the past 3 years, Ellie has been welcoming and supporting Henley Forum Members. She has been the backbone of the Henley Forum, ensuring our programme is delivered without a glitch. She has successfully stage managed the Forum programme of events on behalf of Forum members. She has innovated and streamlined our membership and communication processes, and has helped develop our webpages and user interface.

“One thing I love about The Henley Forum is our relationship with the members. We take the time to listen to what they want out of the Forum and tailor our programmes and events to fit their needs. We have developed a great affiliation with the organisations which helps make the Forum what it is. I also love working with the Henley Forum Team – Sharon, Divyata and Ola.”

Dr Divyata Sohal, Henley Forum Network Lead

Over the past 2 years, Divyata has re-energised the Henley Forum community by shining a spotlight on connections and relationships. She has brought a unique blend of knowledge and experiences (psychology, KM and OD) to shape learning and conversations that consider the bigger picture. She has used her psychology training to emphasise deep reflections and provocations that provide stretch and challenge to the Henley Forum community. She has proactively built relationships with the Henley Forum Members, with Henley faculty and with a global network to sustainably grow the community and create opportunities for collaboration. She has driven the digital transformation of the Henley Forum, bringing creative and fresh ideas to our programme delivery. She has brought an engaging style to revitalise the Henley Forum’s social media engagement, creating a buzz internationally.

“One thing I love about The Henley Forum is the ubiquitous desire to learn – to share stories, to explore different points of view, to have conversations, to reflect. Over the years, this has helped us sustain a thriving community and be at the leading edge of thinking and practice.”
Two years on

It’s now 2 years since we transitioned to virtual spaces and the Henley Forum continues to grow from strength to strength. The early days of the pandemic was a massive, world-wide experiment on remote working. Similarly, now we’ve transitioned to a phase of experimenting with hybrid working. I am delighted to see that our conversations suggest that we’re reflecting on our journeys so far, being creative, and actively exploring a multitude of issues around hybrid work. The answer isn’t an easy one but at least for now we’re willing to experiment.

This is a classic example of KM and OD working in partnership.

KM is helping us learn from our experiences so far, connect with diverse perspectives, and co-create insights for a new way of working.

OD is helping us apply this knowing and learning to adapt and thrive in a dynamic world.

People and the connections between them are at the centre of this work. And this is the essence of the Henley Forum.

My hope for the future

In closing, I’d like to leave you with my hope for the future of the Henley Forum:

• Across the world, organisations have an appetite for experimenting with new ways of working and organising. The Henley Forum will continue to push the boundaries and invite multiple perspectives to determine what that means for practice.
• Through this global pandemic we’ve all come face-to-face with complexity and our inability to predict the future. The Henley Forum will become bolder about exploring the complexity mindset.
• Our virtual programme delivery removed all restrictions of space and helped us connect with international stories and voices. The Henley Forum will grow into an international community of KM and OD practitioners by welcoming organisations and individuals from across the world.
• With the Henley Forum 22nd Annual Conference, we begin our own experiment of hybrid working. The Henley Forum will continue to evolve our hybrid program to give people choice in how they want to participate.
• Over the last 2 years, we’ve re-energised our community and garnered global recognition. The Henley Forum will become an international hub for organisational learning and development for KM and OD practice.

Continuing the reflections

I hope you enjoy, reflect on, and feel challenged by the insights shared in this book. I would like to extend a warm invite for you to join the conversations –

What are your reflections on the future?

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1 For more on how networks emerge, evolve and create impact, see David Ehrlichman (2021).
2 For more on dynamic patterning and noticing emerging signs of change, see Sharon Varney (2021).
3 Simon Sinek (2009) discusses that defining our ‘why’ and aligning all decisions to it affords us confidence in those decisions and flexibility in ‘how’ and ‘what’ we deliver.
Ola Oladosu’s (2022) Henley Forum research discusses how connections and relationships are critical in creating adaptive spaces to help us adapt quickly in rapid change.