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Applying the Rite of Passage Approach to Ensure a Successful Digital Business Transformation

Successful digital transformation requires converting an organization's employees from legacy talent to a future-ready, digitally empowered workforce. We describe how the CEO of ASK Consulting, a U.S. recruiting company, successfully guided his employees through sweeping technology-driven organizational changes by treating the employee transformation as a rite of passage. Based on the ASK case, we explain how to structure a rite of passage and recommend actions for the master of ceremonies (the change agent) who shapes the employee experience and leads employees through a digital transformation.^{1,2}

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Managing Digital Business Transformation as a Rite of Passage

An increasing number of organizations are undergoing digital business transformations,³ which involve major technology-enabled changes that redefine a firm's internal operations and significantly change the way it interacts with customers. Digital transformations are a form of change management,⁴ but many of the time-tested techniques for planning and managing change deliver underwhelming results or simply fail to achieve the most fundamental objectives because they focus on *business* transformation. Though many of these techniques provide advice on managing people, a transformed company must redefine not only its strategies, business models and technology but must also transform its people.



¹ Hope Koch is the senior accepting editor for this article.

² The authors thank Hope Koch and the review team for their developmental feedback and guidance throughout the review process. We also thank the ASK Consulting interviewees who helped us with this research.

³ According to Fitzgerald, S., Jimenez, D.-Z., Findling, S. et al. in *IDC FutureScape: Worldwide Digital Transformation 2021 Predictions*, IDC, October 2020, approximately 70% of companies are undergoing some form of digital transformation.

⁴ The difference between digital transformation and other change management efforts is the focus on leveraging technology to create new opportunities for growth and innovation. Other change management efforts may focus on improving processes or restructuring the organization but they do not necessarily involve a comprehensive integration of digital technology into all aspects of the business. For more information, see: 1) Eden, R., Burton-Jones, A., Casey, V. and Draheim, M. "Digital Transformation Requires Workforce Transformation," *MIS Quarterly Executive* (18:1), March 2019, pp. 1-17; and 2) *Digital Transformation Initiative: Executive Summary*, World Economic Forum, January 2017.

Individuals' definitions of success, their methods for solving problems and their approach to innovation can become an inextricable part of a company's culture and can provide strategic advantages to organizations.⁵ However, these cultural elements often become frozen in place, especially when they have led to success in the past. A successful digital transformation redefines an organization, which can require re-envisioning many elements engrained in the company's culture and can present seemingly insurmountable challenges to transformation initiatives. Some organizations find that they cannot overcome the degree to which their employees are frozen in a certain mindset and an outdated way of doing business.

Those directing digital transformations need an approach for transforming their people from legacy talent to a future-ready, digitally enabled workforce. In this article, we postulate that to transform people within an organization, change agents should manage employees' experiences as a rite of passage. Such rites have been used for thousands of years to transform people and to identify those who cannot complete the transformation. In a business context, transformed people lead and work in a transformed enterprise, while those who do not complete the rite of passage remain with a legacy business unit or are released to pursue a position in another untransformed company. This article draws on a century of anthropological insights into rites of passage and illustrates the approach with a case study of ASK Consulting, a U.S. talent recruiting company that underwent a digital transformation. ASK's CEO led employees through a rite of passage in which those who successfully completed the rite thrived in a vastly different organization, while those who did not complete the rite were no longer able to be part of the firm.

Understanding Rites of Passage

Rites of passage follow a simple structure that is archetypal to the way humans experience life.

5 A company's culture can provide a strategic competitive advantage when it has a strong set of core values that are rare in the marketplace and are difficult for others to imitate. For information about the strategic advantages of culture, see Barney, J. B. "Organizational Culture: Can It Be a Source of Sustained Competitive Advantage?" *Academy of Management Review* (11:3), July 1986. pp. 656-665.

Rites of passage follow a consistent, universal three-stage process of separation, transition and integration. The first stage separates an initiate from the status quo and from one's current role and status within a group or society. During the second *liminal*, or transition, stage, a person adapts to fit a new role or position. In the final stage, a person becomes integrated with the new role or status within a new group or society.⁶

To transition from one type of person or member of one group to another, individuals must first be separated from the other members of their current group. Though the decision to participate in a rite of passage is made at the individual level, the rite is shared by all undergoing the transition. They share a process of conversion in which they foster a sense of community, not based on previous roles or status, but based on the shared process. A rite of passage involves a test or trial, whether real or ceremonial, during which the boundaries of what is normal and taken for granted are broken and replaced with an expansive mindset in which a different reality becomes possible. Once initiates' minds are opened to new opportunities, the rite of passage guides them to a shared conceptualization of norms and structures. To achieve this, the initiates need a guide—a master of ceremonies—to lead them through the process.^{7,8} Long-established rites of passage have well-established rituals; however, nascent rites of passage may require improvisation by a master

6 The concept of rites of passage, along with the stages of separation, transition and integration, was introduced by Arnold Van Gennep and first translated into English in Van Gennep, A., Vizedom, M. B. and Caffee, G. L. *The Rites of Passage*, University of Chicago Press, 1960.

7 The importance of making a clean break from previous routines and practices, the need for a test or trial and the critical need for a person to guide others through the transition process (i.e. a "master of ceremonies") are described in Szokolczai, A. "Liminality and experience: Structuring transitory situations and transformative events," *International Political Anthropology Journal* (2:1), 2009, pp. 141-172.

8 For a discussion of the importance of the liminal (transitional) period of a rite of passage, including how it opens a person to change, and then guides a person through an identity change, see Turner, V. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage," in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Cornell University Press, 1967, pp. 93-111.

of ceremonies devoted to the process of guiding others.⁹

A key aspect of a rite of passage is that the new status or membership in the new group does not include everyone. Those who cannot complete the journey, which requires divesting themselves of previous habits and mindsets, will not be part of the new group or enjoy the new status. For those who have completed the transformation journey, the rite of integration helps to solidify the new structures and rules. They internalize and integrate these new norms, which become taken-for-granted aspects of their new positions and new group norms.

About ASK Consulting and its Rite of Passage Approach

ASK Consulting recruits and places IT, engineering, finance and accounting professionals within other firms that operate in the U.S. Most of its placements are for long-term assignments, not temporary roles. ASK provides U.S.-based contract employees who work within client firms and who are supervised by the clients. All of its clients are Fortune 1000 companies and include tech companies, financial institutions, industrial firms and government agencies. ASK bills clients for its contractors' services on an hourly basis, adding a surcharge to create its gross profit margin. For over a decade, ASK has experienced consistent year-over-year growth.

The company is organized into three main departments: business development (sales), recruitment and human resources management. ASK's headquarters and clients are based in the U.S., and the majority of its operational staff live and work in India, where the company has three branch offices with hundreds of employees each. The senior executives and business development professionals are based in the U.S. Backend operations, client account management and employee recruitment are based in India. Because ASK recruits IT, engineering, finance and accounting professionals to fill client needs,

recruiters make up the majority of the company's operational workforce.

Despite ASK being in the business of placing highly skilled digital professionals at other companies, at the start of the 2020s it was largely a paper-based, in-person organization with manual processes. It developed solid relationships with client firms, but its customer relationships were managed without the help of sophisticated software or digital processes. Though it used digital recruiting platforms to attract skilled job candidates, the processes for screening, interviewing and onboarding employees were highly manual.

In early 2020, Manish Karani, ASK's CEO, made the existential decision to break from the past and embarked on a rapid digital business transformation. The trigger for this transformation journey was the global COVID-19 pandemic. Led by Karani, ASK's response was to adapt its technology, operating processes and customer engagements. For ASK, adopting new technologies and designing new business processes was the easy part. Off-the-shelf applications and infrastructure as a service were readily available. Karani personally oversaw the programming of applications to automate the search for candidates with the appropriate skills to fill client positions. He created workflow automation applications to replace pen-and-paper processes. The biggest challenge for Karani was not managing the technologies but guiding his employees through the transformation.

During this rapid transition, Karani acted as a master of ceremonies, leading his employees through a rite of passage that separated them from their current structures and norms, supported them through a period of transition in which they adopted new ways of doing business and embraced new values, and internalized the new practices and mindset as the new normal. Karani created a digital vision to unify the efforts of everyone at the company: Become a company that operates at digital scale and speed with unmatched per-person productivity. He created the policies that drove the company and guided employees through the transformation. He became a highly visible presence to employees, increasing his level of communication and involving himself in the day-to-day activities of employees. He offered encouragement and

⁹ Many rites of passage have well-defined ceremonial processes, but for newer rites of passage, the master of ceremonies may need to improvise the ceremonies he or she is leading. For more information, see Prashantham, S. and Floyd, S. W. "Navigating liminality in new venture internationalization," *Journal of Business Venturing* (34:3), May 2019; pp. 513-527.

guidance on how to navigate the company's changes.

Those who completed the transition are now part of the transformed ASK Consulting; those who did not complete the journey—because they declined to participate or because they could not let go of the old norms, processes and structures—were not able to be part of the transformed organization. We now illustrate the rite of passage approach taken by ASK Consulting as it passed through the three stages: separation, transition and integration.

Stage 1: ASK Consulting's Rite of Separation

To undergo a major change to the status quo, people must separate themselves from the established routine. The most emotionally difficult separation is a *territorial passage*, a change in physical location that is both literal and symbolic. At ASK, pandemic-induced global lockdowns provided this first key step in transforming the workforce. Karani ordered all employees to work from home and provided them with the necessary technology and equipment. An ASK HR executive described the Indian workforce's experience: "They had to go back to their town or village and they had no way to come back."

This relocation of the entire workforce did more than separate employees from their physical offices. More importantly, it separated them from the usual managerial practices and business processes. People were separated from their teammates, managers and clients.

A senior director reflected on the change in interpersonal interactions caused by the office closures: "Oh, my God! What I would do to go back to water cooler talk to finding out what is going on and who's doing what. It also helps you decompress when you share 'I just had a crazy day.'"

Manish Karani explained the magnitude of this separation as follows: "We are a sales-driven industry. Sales-driven industries have worked for hundreds of years in a bullpen-type environment—open floor; everyone's loud, everybody's feeding off each other's energy. And that completely changed." He also shared how this territorial passage affected the attitude of his

employees: "I'm completely disconnected. I don't have that energy. I don't know what everybody's doing. The camaraderie that feeds a lot of the success is gone."

Not only did the separation remove the camaraderie engendered by close proximity, but many of ASK's India-based employees faced a new bullpen-like condition: They were now working alongside everyone else in their household, all of whom were also sent home to work. Now that ASK managers and employees were separated from their regular day-to-day business processes and interactions, the normal manage-by-sight approach to supervising subordinates disappeared. The ability to know what everyone was doing in real time and to provide help whenever needed was gone. Employees similarly lost their ability to get immediate feedback or assistance.

Salespeople were separated from their primary sales and business development opportunities. Karani explained the magnitude of the separation from the norms and processes used by his sales force as such: "The sales life has changed. We can no longer meet with the clients we have. We're not able to attend any conferences, networking events, lunches, dinners or happy hours."

Some employees were separated from traditional job duties so they could become open to the new roles and responsibilities required by a transforming organization. For example, after the transformation, an operations executive who previously managed nearly 100 people now had no one. He explained: "Now my work role is completely different. What I'm doing now is focusing on automation and helping my team be more efficient with the help of AI and data. ... So in my team now, I'm at zero team members because there's a big shift."

Territorial separation, separation from co-workers and managers, and separation from standard operating procedures and regular business processes provided the "open space" for ASK employees to transform how they related to co-workers, business processes and the way they related to the company itself. The separation stage equipped them to enter the liminal, or transition, stage of their transformation journey.

Stage 2: ASK Consulting's Rite of Transition

During the transition stage, the master of ceremonies must foster a sense of community, cultivate an expansive mindset, establish new norms and structures, and test the participants to prove that they are ready and able to be part of a new community.¹⁰ This liminal phase serves two key purposes: helping people transform and filtering out those who cannot successfully complete the transition.

Foster a New Sense of Community

Key to a rite of passage is that all those undergoing the journey foster a sense of community. Regardless of their status or position before beginning the rite, all ASK employees were initiated undergoing a shared process. This engendered a sense of equality because all were essentially novices undergoing the experience together.

Everyone at ASK shared equality in their uncertainty. A C-level executive described how he was as uncertain as everyone else about whether he would be able to weather the company's rapid transformation. CEO and master of ceremonies Karani explained how the uncertainty had an equalizing effect throughout ASK's workforce: "You know, emotionally, psychologically everyone was worried."

As master of ceremonies, Karani emphasized this equality among ASK employees through formal policies and by stressing the sharedness of experiences during the transition. During the first six months of the transition, he changed the compensation structure for everyone at the company. Everyone's base pay was decreased by between 10% and 15% and commissions were doubled. The pay cut was introduced so that ASK could retain employees who were having trouble adjusting to remote work and the company's new business practices. The policy reallocated financial resources to cover the cost of employees experiencing a productivity slump during the transition so that they would have more time to adapt. Company executives and top-performing

employees took the same pay cuts as those with middling performance. A senior executive contextualized the sacrifice as being for the communal good as follows: "I felt like a part of my salary was going [away], but it was going for [the greater] good. I am trying to save somebody's job, so that was something really good."

During the transition, the company used transparent evaluation and performance metrics that everyone in the company could see. Managers no longer had different performance data than everyone else in the organization. As a senior director explained: "Letting them know with full transparency—here's the numbers. We're dropping here, we're gaining here. We need to shift to focus here. Showing them the good, the bad the ugly." He elaborated: "Everyone knew where everyone was. They knew how many hires they had. They knew where their profitability was. They knew everything."

The shift from physical offices with pen-and-paper processes to a digital workspace brought about a new sense of community and humanized everyone, regardless of position within the company. As senior director explained: "There's nobody who is working in a corporate environment that is leveraging virtual meetings who hasn't had at least five embarrassing moments over the last two years. ... Everyone knows everyone's kids because they'll be walking around. They know their pets. I think every person I know I've seen the laundry sitting behind them. ... It's humanized people."

By undergoing the shared experience guided by Karani, ASK employees developed a new sense of community—a community of people who would have to change alongside the company. The transformation of ASK was going to be substantial. Within a short time, the company's day-to-day operations would be unrecognizable from the firm as it was at the beginning of 2020.

Though Karani was based on a different continent than the majority of employees and traditionally focused on strategic issues rather than daily operations, he made himself a highly visible presence so that all the employees could more easily follow his lead. At the most basic level, he started to email employees at all levels directly and had phone calls with account managers in India. Pre-transformation, he communicated through various levels of

¹⁰ The liminal stage of a rite of passage doesn't just involve changes within individuals. The individuals change alongside others embarking on the rite of passage. By transforming, they become part of a new community of other converts. For more information, see Szakolczai, A., op. cit., 2009.

managers and supervisors rather than directly. He held daily videoconference calls with teams to answer questions and address concerns. Each day, he made himself available to a new team so that everyone had direct access to him. He hosted regular company-wide update sessions to discuss company progress and to personally express how valuable ASK employees were. He directly taught employees to use the digital tools he built. And employee issues of concern were escalated to him so he could personally address them.

To include everyone in this transformative journey, Karani's increased visibility made him a presence in employees' homes. This meant he had to learn new skills and adopt new approaches to leading. He explained: "I needed to update my [communication] skills and be more mindful about managing, mentoring and guiding people remotely, keeping in mind that now every individual was dealing with the personal situation and personal environment around them." A senior recruiter based in India explained how Karani was a visible master of ceremonies guiding ASK employees through a collective experience, making the individuals undergoing the transformation feel part of a collective whole. She recalled how he made people feel part of a family-like group when he called via phone and video: "How is your family? Is your family OK? Do you need any support? ... So, you know, it's like a family that works together. I now feel I have two families." An HR executive provided an illustrative example: "It was really amazing for me to see when Manish sent out an email after the project to my onboarding team—appreciating them, how much effort they have taken, and how appreciative he is about the efforts we have taken. My entire team was giggling the entire day, thinking that we got this email from the CEO. ... People were keeping that so close to their hearts."

Cultivate a New Expansive Mindset

Faced with profound changes, ASK employees shifted from a status quo mindset to one that was reflective and creative. As CEO Karani explained: "I have seen that some of my team members [have become] a lot more open-minded, like their perspective changed. And so naturally now they are much more open to new ideas and trying new things." Encouraged by Karani, people became more open-minded to redesigning policies and

processes and to trying new ideas. As a senior account manager explained: "We look at the pandemic as an opportunity, not something that crashed."

Karani directed the company to take a deep look at its existing processes with a mindset to use AI and other technologies to make its operations better by doing things differently, not just to automate existing routines. As a senior account manager elaborated: "We looked at what we did to get back to the basics and what we were doing internally to make ourselves better. ... The other part of it is that we started developing those technologies like AI that didn't exist beforehand. We looked at it as an opportunity to do what we do better, [rather than] just doing the stuff that we had been doing."

Managers began to take a more data-driven approach to management. As new digital tools were deployed, they replaced intuitive observational management with analytics to identify the best practices of high performers and used these insights to coach new employees. ASK adopted sales call automation tools like RingCentral and sales call analytics tools like Gong and Wingman (now called Clari Copilot) that would automatically condense conversation transcripts into key points so that salespeople's conversation styles and word choices could be compared, enabling text analytics to identify effective sales techniques that could be shared with the entire business development team.

Employees accustomed to close management had to embrace more self-management because they were no longer in a bullpen environment. They needed to find ways of motivating themselves without the constant presence of a cheerleading manager. Though technology-based tools were available for employee monitoring and analysis of employee behavior, Karani consciously chose to use them to support employee learning and coaching rather than for micromanagement. His approach fostered expansive mindsets rather than constricted ways of thinking through management by metrics.

ASK's digital transformation required employees to develop an expansive mindset, but not everyone at the company was able to do this. Those that couldn't were unable to stay with the company. As a C-level executive explained: "Unfortunately, I had to let people go. They just

Table 1: Technology Used and Tasks Performed Before ASK's Digital Transformation

	Business Development	HR	Recruiting
Technology Used	Office 365. Zoom, telephone, text message, email.	Office 365. Telephone, text message, email.	Office 365. Telephone, text message, email.
Work Practices	Manage client data in Excel spreadsheets and Access databases. Identify prospective clients through word of mouth, internet searches, business news. Initiate new relationships with “wine and dine” face-to-face meetings. Use email and phone correspondence to maintain relationships, anchored with periodic “wine and dine” meetings.	Manage workflow using Excel spreadsheets and Access databases. Send forms and document requests via email. Receive scans of completed forms and required documents via email. Print paperwork and store in filing cabinets. Answer new hire employment questions via phone and email.	Manually adapt job requirements to keywords. Manually search for candidates using ASK's résumé database and online recruiting sites using keyword search. Email and/or text potential job candidates. Answer questions/discuss job details with candidates who respond to solicitation. Evaluate candidate suitability using checklists and professional intuition. Email offer to selected candidate(s).
Performance Measurement Criteria	New accounts opened	Number of associates onboarded	Number of searches. Number of job placements.

weren't able to adapt, and we were able to find people who were a little more creative.” He gave an example of a business development person who was with the company for 13 years but was unwilling to adapt. His success had been based on finding managers at client companies at lunch in their break rooms, or as they headed out the door for lunch, and finding out what new positions they needed to fill. These traditional methods that previously had made him successful were not compatible with ASK's new digital processes. This salesman could not adapt and thus could not complete the rite of passage and was released from his employment at ASK.

Establish New Norms and Structures

Karani's digital initiatives did not simply digitize existing business processes. Instead, they fundamentally changed the way the company does business, affecting every aspect of the company, from recruiting staff to place at client companies, to managing their operational

processes, to developing customer relationships. With expansive mindsets, ASK employees were positioned to adopt business practices that enabled the company to operate at digital speed and scale with remarkable gains in per-person productivity.

In a digital environment, the supervision and management of employees became more hands-off. Communication among peers for entry- and mid-level employees became more infrequent. At the same time, communication and management became less ad hoc and much more formalized. Without the ad hoc communication facilitated by bullpen work environments, regularly scheduled touchpoints became the norm. As an operations executive explained:

“... earlier when they are working from an office, they were hardly having one meeting in a day. They were surrounded by the same team members, so it was kind of an ongoing meeting. If they had a question,

Table 2: Technology Used and Tasks Performed After ASK's Digital Transformation

	Business Development	HR	Recruiting
Technology Used	Office 365, Zoom, telephone, text message, email. RingCentral (communication and collaboration app). Wingman and Gong (sales call analytics apps). Accuick (ASK's proprietary CRM system integrated with other tools).	Office 365, Telephone, text message, email. OVA (ASK's internally built onboarding workflow management system).	Office 365, Telephone, text message, email. R programming language. Assorted scripting tools programmed in Python and JavaScript. RingCentral. Wingman and Gong. Accuick.
Work Practices	Identify prospective clients through word of mouth. Request that members of existing network recommend and refer new clients (i.e., actively leverage existing client and professional networks). Initiate new relationships via videoconference. Process automation: Identify prospective clients through scripted internet searches. AI-enabled identification of best practices for requesting introductions to potential clients and for closing deals via videoconference. Resuming in 2022: Initiate new relationships and maintain current clients with "wine and dine" face-to-face meetings.	Send OVA log-in credentials to new employees. Process automation: integration of data collection forms and direct smartphone camera uploads of document images. Automatically synchronize client staffing data with employee information Automatically synchronize employee data with payroll processor. AI-enabled interactive chatbot providing information about required documentation and how to complete data forms.	Produce short video descriptions of jobs, including anticipated FAQs. Create prescreening questions for interested prospects. Present job details and answer questions in real-time webcast with potential hires. For single-hire positions: Answer questions/discuss job details with candidates who respond to solicitation and pass prescreening. AI-enabled process automation: Generate job requirement keywords. Search internet and internal database for candidates. Email and/or text prospective candidates. Chatbot screens candidate and schedules interview. Identify best practices for presenting information to and answer questions from prospects to increase the likelihood of applying for ASK job and successful client placement.
Performance Measurement Criteria	New accounts opened. Year-on-year growth of existing accounts.	Number of associates onboarded. Time to onboard associate.	Number of searches. Number of job placements. Successful placement ratio.

they would have just asked their team lead, and it would have been answered. What we are doing now is having them do three scrum calls every day with the team. Team leads are connecting with the team three times in a day—morning, afternoon and in the evening ... so that we are just making sure that people are connected, and the

manager or team lead is aware of what the team is doing...."

ASK Consulting's digital transformation leveraged technology to change the fundamental practices in all core operational departments (HR, business development and recruiting). Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the technology and operational process changes at the company.

Table 1 shows that before the transformation, ASK Consulting relied on standard technology and applications to communicate and manage operations. The company functioned by using Microsoft Office, making telephone calls, and sending text messages and emails. Processes were highly manual. Even when using applications like Excel and Access, data entry was manual. Electronic communications were printed and filed in paper filing cabinets.

Table 2 shows that the transformed organization required ASK employees to adopt new norms and accept new structures. The company now functioned very differently, relying on business process automation and AI-enabled tools that became the foundation for new ways of doing business. An operations executive explained: “We look at this era as an AI era. So, we make sure we look at whatever anyone is doing repeatedly [and determine] how we can automate it and remove that administrative burden from the team so they can be more productive with the same effort.” CEO Karani elaborated: “We automated a lot of the processes; [there were] several processes that we had to take a look at. ... things that can be automated, things that can be streamlined. And for things that were redundant, we implemented AI and automation.”

Table 2 also shows ASK’s new norms and structures involved substantive changes to the technology and operational processes used by the business development, HR and recruiting departments at the company, as described below.

Changes to business development norms and structures: ASK’s digitalization moved business development activities into cyberspace, requiring different ways of attracting and interacting with clients. Gone was the in-person “wine and dine” practice that incentivized clients to meet with ASK’s business development people. In person, face-to-face interaction is a quick way to build trust with new acquaintances. It is not difficult to get face time with prospective clients when you offer them a free lunch or dinner at their favorite (and expensive) restaurant. Prospective clients could fit you in during their meal break.

In the digitalized world, however, cold calling falls flat. Few people are willing to spend their lunch break eating at their desk during a Zoom call with someone they don’t know. It is easy to

ignore phone calls and emails from unfamiliar people. Though ASK always relied on its network of clients to spread positive word of mouth, the digitalized ASK needs to rely much more heavily on leveraging its existing relationships to get introductions to new prospective clients. This requires more active relationship engagement with existing clients and faster and more frequent correspondence with potential clients to build the trust and rapport that traditionally would be built quickly with in-person contact.

Pre-transformation, business development managers and supervisors were able to observe their sales staff in a bullpen environment and could manage by intuition. Salespeople could “learn through osmosis” by directly observing the techniques of the highest-performing team members and adopting the best practices they observed firsthand. Much of the coaching provided by managers and most standard sales practices were based on intuition and tacit knowledge gained from experience and direct observation. Though this approach had served ASK well prior to the transformation, the transformed company embraces a more scientific, data-driven approach to developing sales staff.

Changes to HR norms and structures: ASK’s HR department performs the necessary job of onboarding all the skilled professionals who will be contracted out to client firms. Before the transformation, this was a largely manual, paper-based process. Employment paperwork was sent to prospective employees via email and tracked using Excel spreadsheets. The process flow was disjointed, with different documents being managed independently and aggregated by being printed out and placed in a manila folder stored in a filing cabinet. It also required job candidates to print, sign, scan and email forms back to ASK. When new hires had paperwork questions or made other inquiries, a member of the HR team spoke with them by telephone. Tracking employee paperwork and communicating with new hires was time-consuming and could create a procedural bottleneck, slowing the speed with which a new hire could begin working at a client company (and thus generate revenue for ASK).

At the beginning of ASK’s transformation, the HR staff dropped from ten people to four. This coincided with an upswing in the number of employees to onboard. To free up

time previously spent chasing and tracking paperwork, CEO Manish Karani and ASK's technology staff developed a paperless onboarding process automation application.¹¹ Offer letters, background checks and state and federal employment forms are all managed in a regulatory-compliant paperless software application. Applicants can use any device to complete forms and upload photos of required identification documents. The system manages workflow and provides an AI chatbot that guides job applicants and new hires through the appropriate processes. Basic functions such as reminders and follow-up messages that were formerly done manually are now automated. The application provides dashboards to help HR personnel focus their attention where human interventions are most needed. The application also synchronizes employee data with the payroll provider, eliminating redundant data entry by ASK employees.

This new approach to onboarding frees significant amounts of HR employees' time, allowing them to onboard many more people than before. It also cuts the time it takes for job applicants and new hires to complete their paperwork. The average time to onboard a new employee has dropped by three days.

Changes to recruiting norms and structures: ASK's core business is providing client firms with highly skilled professionals, which requires constant recruiting of these specialists. Before the transformation, for each job, recruiters would review client requirements and manually create a checklist to evaluate potential job candidates. Recruiters then conducted largely manual keyword searches to identify prospective candidates, a time-consuming process with a low success rate for identifying people who both had the necessary skills and were likely to leave their current jobs to work for one of ASK's clients. ASK recruiters would conduct a screening telephone conversation with every prospective job candidate to see if they were an optimal fit for the position at the client company. When candidates were qualified for and expressed interest in a

particular job, a recruiter would email the formal offer to them.

The number of recruiters dropped during the early days of the transformation, but the number of jobs to fill at client firms increased geometrically. Manual processes were no longer sufficient, so the ASK recruiters leveraged information technology to scale up operations. ASK automated most of its recruiting processes and now leverages advanced analytics to streamline the search for suitable candidates to work for clients. For example, it now leverages the data from existing clients to automate the search for the most suitable candidates. An operations executive explained: "We have six million plus résumés in our database, and we have access to all the job boards and we have a lot of applicants as well." He also explained the other side of the matching process: "If it is a client we have been servicing for 10 years, we know when they will hire whom and what type of candidate they will like based on people who got selected through us. Based on that, we have come up with this criteria and search strategy."

ASK now applies machine learning and analytics to find the most suitable matches, dramatically reducing the time needed to identify a suitable candidate and increasing the chances that the selected candidate will accept the job offer. Recruiters can now focus more of their efforts on finding workers for new clients, for whom they lack sufficient data to automate the search as extensively.

ASK has also automated the initial screening as well as the interview scheduling process. As an operations executive explained:

"We have built our own chatbot which interacts with the candidates and schedules the call with the recruiter. We have fed it based on 20-plus years of experience in this industry. We know what type of questions a candidate would ask ... just like an interactive voice response system when you call a bank, [where] the initial four or five questions direct you to the right person. We did the same ... which helped us reduce the load on recruiters [who were] making too many calls to reach the right people. Previously we were sending messages based on whatever response they gave. We

¹¹ After completing its digital transformation, ASK Consulting has created a separate technology company that sells its onboarding process management application as software-as-a-service. For details about the application, see *Onboard Like the Pros*, available at <https://www.oa.work>.

were segregating them and scheduling the call with the candidate.”

Though certain positions still require one-on-one interviews, ASK has adopted new recruiting techniques, such as video job descriptions and online group seminars to screen potential candidates. When a client firm has multiple job openings, ASK now interviews dozens, even hundreds, of people in an online seminar, and then makes job offers after the session. In one instance, when recruiting people for logistics and supply chain support roles, ASK extended job offers to 1,300 seminar participants, of which 830 were accepted.

ASK accomplishes this by identifying suitable job prospects and contacting them via text and email. The message includes a 30- to 60-second embedded video in which the recruiter explains the job and provides answers to many questions candidates will likely ask. Interested candidates follow a web link to answer screening questions. If they pass this real-time screening, they can sign up for an online information session hosted in real time by ASK recruiters. During the information session, the recruiters provide details about the job and answer questions from the prescreened attendees. At the end of the session, job offers are made to these candidates who, if they accept, then formally apply online.

This hiring process applies a progressive funneling process made possible by candidate identification algorithms. As a result, only a small subset of those contacted will attend the information session. (The funneling process is described in Appendix B.) Using algorithms makes it possible to identify enough suitable candidates for this process to work at a large scale.

Test the Participants

During Stage 2 of a rite of passage, which is the transition stage, participants share a sense of community with each other, embrace an expansive mindset and adopt new norms and structures. The transition is not complete, however, unless participants successfully pass a test or trial. This can be literal, such as embarking on a dangerous trek through the wilderness or a marine passing the crucible test at boot camp. It can also be more figurative, such as completing

an exam or ritual. Not everyone will successfully complete the trial. Only those who pass the trial will become part of the transformed community.

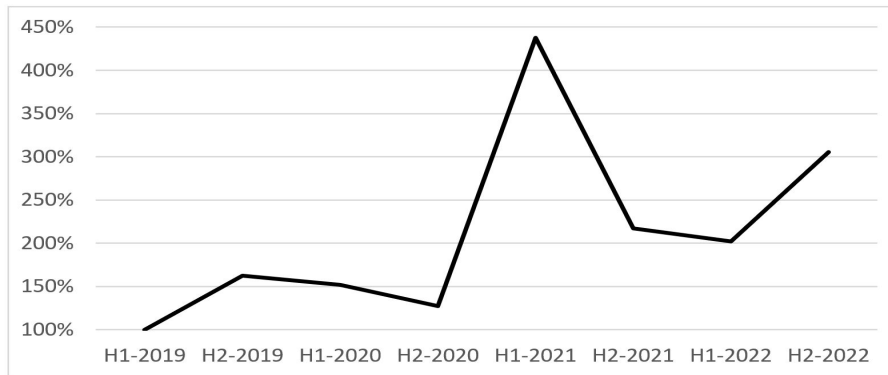
Though some might view ASK’s transformation as an extended trial that tested fortitude and adaptability, a rite of passage requires a specific test to determine whether participants have successfully transformed themselves. ASK used the objective performance measures shown above in Table 2 to determine whether employees had changed alongside the company. Those who embraced the new mindset and ASK’s new, highly productive digital business processes were more successful than ever. Those who did not fully adapt alongside the company, however, could not reach their performance goals and were let go.

Stage 3: ASK Consulting’s Rite of Integration

The third and final stage of the rite of passage approach is integration. ASK’s employees needed to integrate and internalize the new norms not just as “a new normal” but as *their* new normal. Karani used three key signals for those who successfully transformed alongside the company. These signals were intended to cement the new status quo in the minds of those who successfully completed the transformation journey. First, Karani restored the traditional pay structure. This signaled the end of the transition from the old ASK into its new digitally powered identity. Though change is inevitable and constant, the rapid, intentional redefinition of the company and its people had reached its new normal.

The second signal was the permanent closure of the offices in India. These closures made it clear that there was no going back to the old way. The new way was the way forward. The closures resulted from Karani’s strategic decision to integrate work-from-home into the “new normal” of the transformed company but not for cost savings reasons. ASK still pays rent, insurance, utilities and other operating costs associated with the unused office space but will not renew the leases when they expire.

The third signal was the expansion of the ASK workforce. Karani led the effort to restaff the company and backfill many positions that were vacated by those who did not complete the rite of passage. New hires were people who fit the

Figure 1: Client Jobs Filled in Half-Year Increments, 2019-2022**Table 3: Staffing Levels During the Transformation, Including Employee Backfilling of the Transformed Company**

	Business Development	HR	Recruiting
Location	USA	USA and India	India
Jan 2020	10	10	381
Dec 2020	8	4	157
Dec 2021	14	10	324

new ASK community and company culture.¹² They were trained by those who successfully underwent the rite of passage, which both reinforced the new norms in the transformed employees and instilled them in the new recruits.

Outcome of ASK Consulting's Digital Business Transformation

Though ASK Consulting's digital business transformation was triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than by a meticulous plan crafted over several years prior to execution, the transformation has accomplished goals that are hard to achieve through even the most rigorously preplanned digital initiatives. Following the transformation, the company now accomplishes more with less because it now operates at digital speed and scale. For example, the number of jobs filled in the first half of 2021 was 4.37 higher than in the first half of 2019 (see Figure 1). ASK

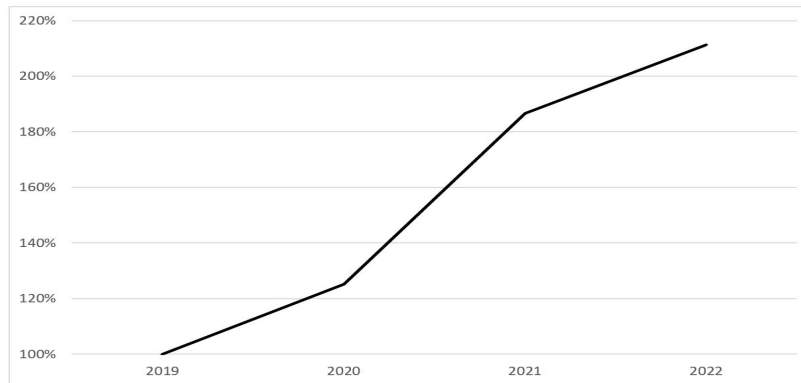
accomplished that with only a fraction of the employees it previously had (see Table 3).

ASK Consulting experienced steady revenue growth in the decade before its transformation, but the impacts of increased efficiencies and digital scale can be seen in Figure 2, which shows the rise in company revenue compared to the 2019 baseline.

Recommended Actions for Change Agents (Masters of Ceremonies)

Though digital business transformations often experience technical difficulties, the people working within an organization present significant challenges. Firms need to transform the people, not just the company and technology. This article shows how to manage this change as a rite of passage, with its three stages of separation, transition and integration, guided by

¹² Note that ASK's hiring significantly accelerated toward the end of 2021, which was after the rite of transition was completed. The company, however, did hire employees during the rite of transition.

Figure 2. Annual Percentage Revenue Growth from 2019 Baseline

a master of ceremonies. This can be accomplished by creating ceremonial processes employees go through to open their minds to new possibilities and then lock in new ways of working. Actions the master of ceremonies (a.k.a. the change agent) should take to guide employees through each stage of the transformation are given below. Figure 3 summarizes the key duties performed by the master of ceremonies during the three phases of the rite of passage. It also describes actions for shepherding employees as they transform from members of the legacy organization to their new identity as members of the transformed organization.

Actions for Managing the Rite of Separation

Those undergoing a rite of passage must be open to new boundaries and structures. To achieve this, employees should be separated from their existing duties and the existing organizational hierarchy. When possible, new reporting structures should be introduced. To achieve the separation necessary to begin a transformation journey, the master of ceremonies should take the following three actions.

1. Provide physical separation from the traditional workspace. The most powerful separation is to move employees to a new physical location. ASK Consulting closed its offices and directed all employees to work from home, unambiguously separating them from the traditional workspace.

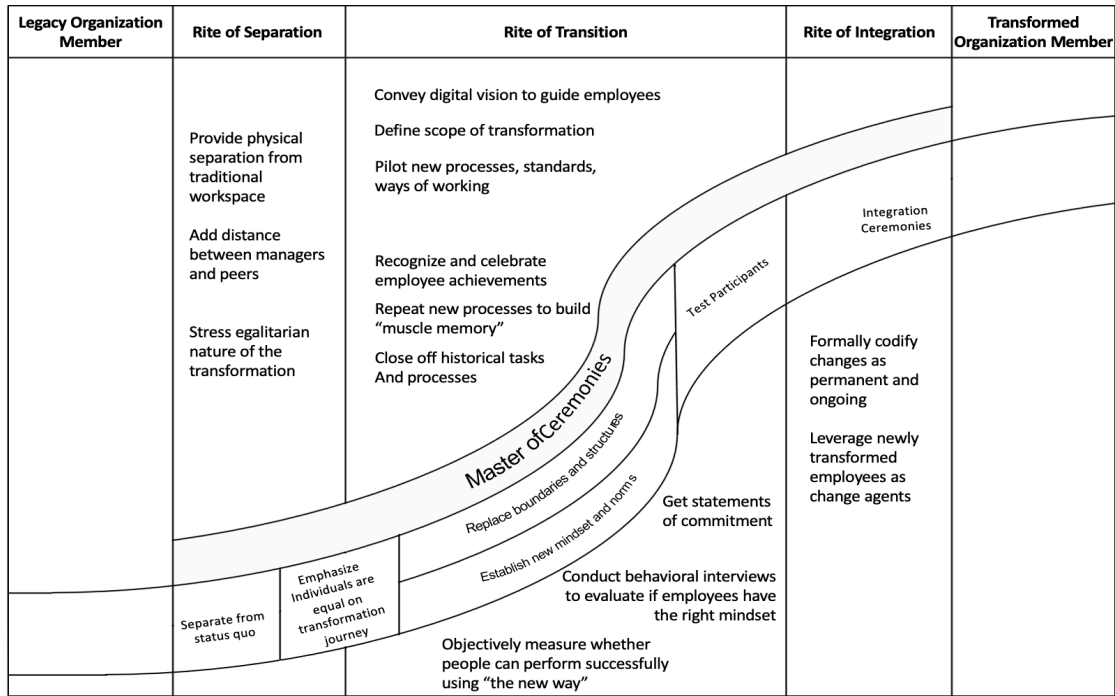
2. Add Distance Between Managers and Peers, at Least Temporarily. This action will emphasize a separation from the norm. ASK's transformation involved a permanent physical separation, but for other firms, a temporary change may accomplish the necessary separation.

3. Stress the egalitarian nature of the transformation. In theory, the organizational hierarchy could be temporarily flattened. In practice, however, the master of ceremonies can promote an egalitarian mindset by stressing that everyone is equal because they are all newbies in the transformation process. ASK only changed a few reporting relationships, but CEO Karani stressed to all employees that they were all equally novice in navigating the pandemic and the transformation the company was undertaking. This reduced the perceived power distances within the hierarchy.

Role of the Master of Ceremonies in Managing the Rite of Transition

During Stage 2, the rite of transition, the most meaningful changes occur, and these

Figure 3: Role and Actions of the Master of Ceremonies in Transforming Employees



changes must be led.¹³ During this stage, the master of ceremonies shows others the way through the transformation. This begins with relaying a compelling digital transformation vision. The vision must also include "why" the transformation is needed. The better the vision, the clearer the roadmap it provides for people to follow. In the case of ASK Consulting, this vision was one of survival by working at digital scale and speed with unmatched per-person productivity.

13 An analysis of firms undergoing significant digital initiatives finds that those with strong, top-down digital leadership are 26% more profitable than the industry average while those with major digital initiatives but without strong top-down leadership are 11% less profitable than the industry average. For more information, see Westerman, G., Bonnet, D. and McAfee, A. *Leading Digital: Turning Technology into Business Transformation*, Harvard Business Press, 2014. Though innovation and implementation of digital initiatives can rely on employees at all levels of an organization, top-down leadership is required to create coherent strategy, overcome competing priorities, coordinate internal and external efforts, and align what otherwise would be conflicting goals. See: 1) Firk, S., Hanelt, A., Oehmichen, J. and Wolff, M. "Chief Digital Officers: An Analysis of the Presence of a Centralized Digital Transformation Role," *Journal of Management Studies*, (58:7), May 2021, pp. 1800-1831; and 2) Budde, L., Benninghaus, C., Hänggi, R. and Friedli, T. "Managerial Practices for the Digital Transformation of Manufacturers," *Digital* (2:4), September 2022, pp. 463-483.

Actions for Fostering a New Mindset

During the rite of transition, employees replace their mindset about what is possible and the organization creates new norms and structures. These changes may occur at the same time and be mutually reinforcing. For example, a change in mindset can make new structures possible, while at the same time, the new structures can represent new ways of working that will shape mindsets and ideas about what is possible. Social psychology tells us that people adapt their values and norms to fit their behavior rather than the other way around.¹⁴ Requiring employees to perform new roles using new processes and policies will make them more

14 Social psychology research on attitude change and behavior modification finds that, rather than changing behavior to match one's beliefs and attitudes, most people adapt their attitudes about specific actions to conform with their behavior. As such, one way to change someone's attitude is to first change their behavior because attitude changes usually follow behavioral change. For more information, see: 1) Triandis, H. C. "The Many Dimensions of Culture," *Academy of Management executive* (18:1), 2004, pp. 88-93; and 2) Triandis, H. C. *Values, Attitudes, and Interpersonal Behavior*, paper presented at Nebraska Symposium on Motivation, 1980.

willing to embrace their new roles and accept the new organizational structures.

The master of ceremonies should take the following three actions during the rite of transition to introduce changes to boundaries and structures.

1. Convey a digital vision to guide employees toward a new horizon of what the company can do and accomplish. CEO Manish Karani's vision was for ASK to become a company that operates at digital scale and speed with unmatched per-person productivity.

2. Define the scope of the transformation. The master of ceremonies should share expectations and opportunities with employees. At ASK Consulting, Karani defined an extensive project scope, one that affected where and how everyone in the company would perform their jobs. The transformation would involve large-scale digitalization, eliminate many repetitive tasks and replace manual and paper-based processes with AI and process automation. Employees would make decisions based on data rather than intuition. Their jobs no longer would involve busywork but would focus exclusively on high-value, result-producing activities.

3. Pilot new processes, standards and ways of working. This action introduces the new structures. Karani could not conduct traditional pilot tests because the pandemic was the driving force in ASK's transformation. Instead, he had to introduce new processes, standards and ways of working as soon as they were developed. The consequence was the rapid and complete replacement of the old structures with new ones.

Actions for Establishing New Norms and Structures

Imparting a new mindset and establishing new norms within a rite of passage takes time. Instilling the right institutional mindset and cultural norms is critical to a successful digital transformation. The master of ceremonies can take the following three actions to foster new norms and structures.

1. Recognize and celebrate employee achievements. The master of ceremonies can build a winning team mentality by personally celebrating others' achievements. At ASK Consulting, Karani highlighted individual and team accomplishments in company-wide

announcements, which was a departure from his traditional CEO role of assigning such tasks to team leads and managers.

2. Repeat new processes to build "muscle memory" for the new ways of doing business. Practice and repetition of new work practices are essential for establishing new norms. All of ASK's employees followed new business processes and used new technologies as they were introduced. This helped them quickly master them and build muscle memory.

3. Close off historical tasks and processes as no longer acceptable ways of doing business. At ASK, workflows were integrated into the new technology. Most of the manual HR and recruiting processes were no longer accessible to employees. The pandemic closed off the option of in-person client sales visits, requiring the adoption of the new business development methods by the business development team.

Actions for Testing Participants

The rite of transition requires some form of test or trial to separate those who can (and do) transform from those who cannot. Without some form of struggle or trial, a rite of passage will not result in people who see themselves as different or transformed, and firms will not filter out those who are ill-suited to be part of the transformed organization. Like most organizational changes, digital transformation initiatives can be stressful for employees. During the transition stage, people may quit and pursue other employment, or they may separate from the transformation initiative to return to previous duties at a company's legacy operations. A test or trial must demarcate those who pass from those who do not. This test or challenge provides an important ritual function. It also serves as a final filter to separate those who have transformed alongside the business and those who have not. The test can be ceremonial, or it can be a more formal test, such as Karani's third test, which measured whether employees were delivering adequate performance results given the new ways of doing business.

The master of ceremonies can take the following three actions to ensure that tests effectively determine whether individuals participating in the digital business transformation have themselves transformed appropriately for the new organization.

1. Get statements of commitment at different stages of the transformation process.

This action enables employees to self-select themselves out of the transformation. Karani asked his employees if they were willing to accept new working conditions and adopt the new business processes. Opting out meant leaving the company for other employment, but in many companies, it could mean choosing to stay with a legacy business unit.

2. Conduct behavioral interviews to evaluate if employees have the right mindset.

This action can reveal whether employees have embraced the new norms. ASK hired new employees during the transition stage of its transformation and backfilled many vacant positions after completing the transformation. It asked new hires behavioral questions to determine whether they had a suitable mindset to be part of the transformed organization, which included a willingness to serve the team and an open-mindedness to change. Relevant interview questions are: 1) Can you give me an example of when your team was facing failure and what you did to turn it into a success? 2) Can you tell me about a time when you had to change the way you did something in order to succeed?

3. Objectively measure whether people can perform successfully using the “new way.”

The master of ceremonies can use empirical performance data, as ASK did, or require a field test demonstration to evaluate whether a person has transformed to the degree necessary to perform at an appropriate level in the new organization.

Actions for Managing the Rite of Integration

A rite of passage requires those who complete the transition to integrate into a new community, in which they have a new identity. Two possible actions the master of ceremonies can take are:

1. Formally declare that changes such as office closures or new processes are permanent and ongoing. This action signals that changes are not temporary and that they represent the new normal. At ASK Consulting, Karani announced that the Indian offices would remain permanently closed, signaling that the work-from-home model and related processes were permanent.

2. Provide newly transformed employees with the opportunity to train new hires.

Leverage newly transformed employees as change agents for new hires and/or others beginning the journey. Give them opportunities to tell their story. ASK hired new employees during and after its transformation. Current employees trained these new hires, presenting the new norms, structures and processes as standard operating procedures to new hires while underpinning their importance to current employees.

Concluding Comments

People can pose as great a challenge to digital business transformations as technology. Companies can successfully manage the employee transformation as a rite of passage that not only refashions the the company and technologies but also transforms the people within the company. This article recommends actions that the change agent, acting as a master of ceremonies, can take when leading people through the rite of separation and then the rite of transition to finally bring them into the transformed organization through the rite of integration.

Appendix A: Research Method

This study took an exploratory, qualitative approach to collecting data. The qualitative approach allowed us to uncover rich details about people’s in situ experiences based on their own words. ASK Consulting was selected for this research because it is a medium-sized enterprise that faced great upheaval during the COVID-19 pandemic. It had sufficient resources to change its business, but it did not have sufficient resources to simply do nothing and wait out the pandemic until things returned to normal. ASK also provided the opportunity for a multi-geography study, making the findings less likely to be biased toward one specific geography or culture. One researcher was acquainted with several ASK executives, facilitating access to company personnel and data.

We conducted videoconference interviews with employees at all levels of the organization, including those based at the U.S. headquarters and those working in the back-office operations in India. The interviews were recorded and

Date	Interviewee's Role	Location
May 2022	HR executive	U.S.
	CEO	U.S.
	C-Level officer	U.S.
	Senior director	U.S.
	Account manager	U.S.
Dec 2021	Senior recruiter	India
	Senior recruiter	India
	Senior recruiter	India
	Senior recruiter	India
	Account manager	India
	Team lead	India
	Lead	India
January 2023	HR executive (second interview)	U.S.
	Operations executive	India

transcribed. We used simultaneous data collection and analysis, with our analysis of new information helping to shape future data collection and focusing our interpretation of the data.¹⁵ Our findings were “member checked”¹⁶ by key participants to confirm that the details in this article accurately portray the case and that the conclusions match the actual experience of ASK Consulting.

We did not start out with the intention of focusing on anthropologic theories of rites of passage. The interview guide was designed to study what makes organizations resilient. We employed a hermeneutic approach¹⁷ to analyzing

the data, allowing us to reach a consistent and coherent understanding of the research context and problem under investigation. During this process, the theory of liminality (rites of passage) emerged as a useful lens for understanding how ASK’s digital transformation was managed. Though the theory has been used to study crowdwork,¹⁸ corporate social responsibility in IT outsourcing¹⁹ and ERP implementation,²⁰ it is relatively novel to information systems research. To our knowledge, this is its first application to managing digital business transformations.

We used the following semi-structured interview guide to conduct the interviews, which lasted approximately one hour each:

1. Tell me about how your job has changed during COVID. This could be about the

15 Simultaneous data collection and analysis can help researchers expand their knowledge and acquire deeper insights into the topic under investigation. For more information, see Corbin, J. and Strauss, A. *Basics of Qualitative Research*, Sage Publications, Inc., 2008.

16 “Member checking” is sharing draft research reports with interviewees to get their feedback on the interpretation of the findings. It is a way to check the validity of the research findings. This research technique is detailed in Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M. and Saldaña, J. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, Sage Publications, Inc., 2018.

17 Hermeneutics is a methodology for interpreting words within the context in which they are spoken or recorded. Details about the methodology and how to apply it in research such as this can be found in: 1) Charmaz, K. *Constructing Grounded Theory*, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2006; and 2) Myers, M. D. “Dialectical Hermeneutics: A Theoretical Framework for the Implementation of Information Systems,” *Information Systems Journal*, (5:1), June 2008, pp. 51-70.

18 Elbanna, A. and Idowu, A. “Crowdwork, Digital Liminality and the Enactment of Culturally Recognised Alternatives to Western Precarity: Beyond Epistemological Terra Nullius,” *European Journal of Information Systems*, (31:1), September 2021, pp. 1-17.

19 Nicholson, B., Babin, R. and Briggs, S. “Exploring the Effects of Liminality on Corporate Social Responsibility in Inter-Firm Outsourcing Relationships,” *Journal of Information Technology* (32:1), March 2017, pp. 47-61.

20 Wagner, E. L., Newell, S. and Kay, W. “Enterprise Systems Projects: The Role of Liminal Space in Enterprise Systems Implementation,” *Journal of Information Technology* (27:4), December 2012, pp. 259-269.

circumstances in which you work, the way you do your job, or the way things changed at the company.

2. What new obstacles did you face during the COVID era? And how did you handle them—if you handled them?
3. What do you think made you successful in your job during this time?
4. What was the mental and emotional experience like for you?
5. What do you think are the differences between the people who are still with the company and those who are not? Specifically, was there a difference in what one group did versus the other? Did the groups take different actions or different approaches?
6. In what ways did your co-workers help you during the pandemic ... and in what ways did you help them?
7. What do you think are the two most important factors that have made your company resilient during the pandemic?
8. What characteristic about yourself do you think has made you resilient during the pandemic?
9. Please tell me about what made you able to accomplish what you were able to accomplish.
10. a. For employees: What is motivating you to stay in this dynamic environment?
10. b. For executives/managers: How did performance management policies keep recruiters motivated?
11. Is there anything you'd like to tell us that we didn't ask about?

We conducted 11 interviews in 2022. After receiving editorial feedback, we re-interviewed one participant and interviewed an additional participant in early 2023. These two additional interviews addressed specific information requested by the accepting senior editor. The table above presents a summary of the interviewees.

Appendix B: How ASK Consulting Recruits at Digital Scale Using Progressive Funneling

When ASK Consulting has multiple job openings within a client firm, it interviews dozens, even hundreds, of people in an online seminar and then makes job offers after the session. The flow chart below describes the progressive funneling process, with potential job candidates being filtered out after each step.

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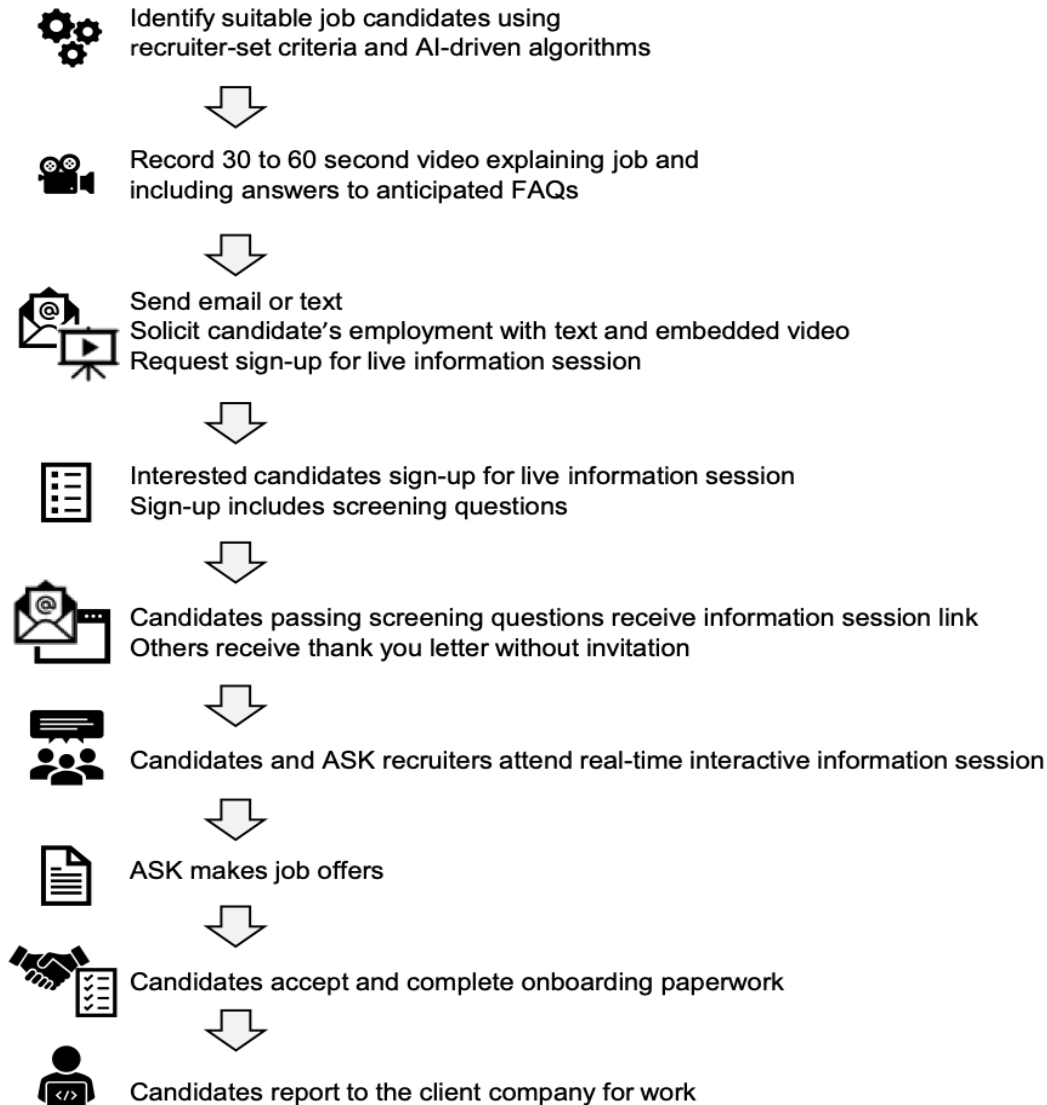
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