Choose your own future

A blueprint for transforming your workforce
One size doesn’t fit all

How to transform your workforce

Get started in seven steps

How the landscape is changing

Great debates: unresolved issues as organizations search for the future of work
One size doesn’t fit all

The future of work is no longer clear. So how do you plan for the unknown?

The past year has forever changed the way we work. As organizations, we are dealing with that reality sooner than we thought. It has changed our strategies, brought forward digital transformation, advanced our collaboration systems, and demanded our workforces to adapt fast. And we have done this while simultaneously learning how to support, develop, and grow our people when they are not in our building.

It’s been a steep learning curve. But we’ve learned a lot. Now it’s time to think about the future. Not only what our workforce could look like, but how we will succeed.

What do we need to do to make sure that change is for the better, sustainable, and productive? That real transformation happens. And we learn and evolve to succeed as organizations and as individuals.

The truth is that there is no one future. No single solution that fits every company and every situation. The only certainty is that we will need to do different work differently. But we can learn from the lessons of the past year and take inspiration from those organizations seizing the moment. To shape their future their way.
We stand at a crossroads in the world of work.

Organizations are transforming...

After COVID, organizations will:

- Operate more virtually: 75%
- Communicate with workforces differently: 47%
- Consider deploying or have deployed less contingent labor: 36%
- Retrain and re-skill workers because needs are changing: 27%

but don’t feel ready...

Organizations feel least confident in their ability to:

- Empower employees to act as leaders
- Quickly band and disband ad hoc teams to capitalize on new opportunities
- Differentiate opportunities and career paths to fit various talent profiles

To answer the question, “what does the future of work look like?” we asked hundreds of Korn Ferry consultants. They debated and speculated.

Did they agree on one vision of the future of work and the workforce?

No. Not at all. And that’s a good thing.

One thing is clear; an organization can’t just copy other successful organization’s features and hope to achieve the same results; the particulars of its business, employees, values, and purpose make that impossible. There is no “one size fits all” future. Our collective experience—and our research across more than a thousand companies—tells us that depending on the industry, geography, size of the organization, different futures can—and should—play out.

It is really about learning from other organizations’ successes and then using that to inform your own path. The path that makes work, work for everyone. This paper shares some of those success stories.

To truly transform their workforce, organizations must:

**Commit fully**
You need to make big changes to operate differently.

**Think holistically**
But prioritize ruthlessly.

**Act for the greater good**
With employees and the broader world’s interests in mind.

Source: Korn Ferry pulse surveys of more than 4000 organizations and Organization Scan analysis of more than 650 organizations
Commit fully

You need to make big changes to operate differently.

It’s long been fashionable to declare that one future of work is looming like a monolith on the horizon. Or to say that a particular flavor of the workforce will be the go-forward model. There are many trends any organization can grab hold of today, which promises a genuinely changing workforce.

At Korn Ferry, we agree with thinkers such as Aaron Dignan. He makes the compelling argument that unless we question organizations’ principles—i.e., the operating system on which they run, not just the features they possess—we cannot hope to shift away from the Tayloristic ‘human as machine’ thinking of the nineteenth century.

We have studied more than 1000 organizations to understand the difference between those who transform and those that transform highly successfully. Organizations that genuinely changed committed to meaningfully different ways of operating. But equally thought-provoking, when we examined over 100 variables, there was no one “silver bullet” that equaled success.

“We need to go faster. Be more innovative. Make better decisions — waste less time. Break down silos. Work horizontally. Simplify our structure. Focus on the customer. Increase information flow. Scale without losing what makes us great. Change our business model. Attract different talent. Retain the great talent we have.”

The Operating System Canvas. Aaron Dignan
What differentiates organizations that successfully transform

They ask their employees to do more complex work.
Successful organizations think outside the box and challenge their people to do the same. Jobs at successfully transforming companies are more fluid than stable, emphasizing collaboration, and managing complexity. (10% more complexity than those at peer organizations).

People work differently with each other.
Successfully transforming organizations scored 10% higher on agile, test, and learn approaches and 25% higher on characteristics that include stakeholders and ideas to build trust.

They make meaningful structural changes, but there’s no one format for success.
All the organizations we studied that transformed successfully made meaningful structural changes. However, there was no common thread to the nature of those changes to organization structure.

What differentiates organizations that successfully transform

It is principles, not tactics that you should be emulating.

Be a leader of your organization’s journey.

In this fertile moment for change, it’s critical that each organization consciously choose their own future. After all, work doesn’t just magically change on its own; it shifts because people’s needs shift. You must have self-awareness as an organization. Understand what your business needs going forward. And this should be independent of what any other company in the world is doing. This is foundational to making the decisions that will shape where your work, and where your workforces, are headed.

Big questions

What to ask yourself

• Is this a fundamental operating system-level change, or just incremental?

• From a mindset perspective, is our organization ready for operating system-level change?

• Are we copying another organization’s choices that might not work for us?
Think holistically

But prioritize ruthlessly.

When you think about transforming your workforce, where do you start?

We see workforce change as the function of six interconnected levers.

These are:

• **WHO** do you need to be successful? What skills, behaviors, and experiences are critical?
• **HOW** do you need people to work?
• **WHAT** do you need people to do?
• **WHEN** do you need people to work?
• **WHERE** do you need people to be based?
• **WHY** does your organization exist? What is your purpose?

The current debate around remote work might seem to be a question of WHERE. However, making choices around where people work also creates questions on talent mix, collaboration models, work schedule, the role of automation, and the very purpose of work itself.

Understanding and properly handling these interdependencies allows organizations to make significant, conscious decisions.

To properly transform your workforce, clear focus is vital. Take meaningful action on two or three of these levers, rather than more minor steps across all six.

- Right skills, behaviours, experiences
- Attracting/including a diverse array of talents
- FTE vs contingent labour
- Redefining jobs
- Creating career mobility
- Role of automation
- Flexible work
- Determining working hours
- Sustainable working schedule
- Work/life integration and balance
Big questions

What to ask yourself

• What is the impact of choice across all six dimensions? Are there unintended consequences to a choice?

• Which of the dimensions is most important to your organization’s future of work?
Looking to transform your workforce? Working preferences matter

Korn Ferry research based on millions of assessment data points suggests that different people with different psychological “personas” will have dramatically different work preferences and abilities. This makes a palpable difference in the affinity for remote work.

### Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need for others</th>
<th>Leadership guidance required</th>
<th>Structure vs flexibility</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Degree of involvement and interaction with peers, managers, and others.</td>
<td>Degree of support, direction, and “push” provided to ensure goal achievement.</td>
<td>Extent of which individual needs defined structure and role. Tolerance of ambiguity.</td>
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### Personas

1. Visionary
2. Architect
3. Facilitator
4. Explorer
5. Advocate
6. Driver
7. Connector
8. Stabilizer

### Traits

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<tr>
<th>Presence</th>
<th>Striving</th>
<th>Agility</th>
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<tr>
<td>High: More group activity</td>
<td>High: More self-directed</td>
<td>Exploration and ambiguity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low: More independent activities</td>
<td>Low: More guidance and direction</td>
<td>Structured with consistency</td>
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Act for the greater good

With employees and the broader world’s interests in mind

Many ‘future of work’ visions ultimately fail or succeed because they don’t balance three critical audiences, each with deep-seated interests: employer, employee, and society. Korn Ferry’s research on motivation found that workers who believed their jobs were useful to the greater good were more likely to engage in innovative activity. Not only increasing the collective potential of their workforce’s capability by 41%, but aligning the interests of the employer, employee, and society.

Done poorly, this equals anything from regulatory-based shutdown to employee attrition and loss of market momentum. Done well, this results in operating system level change not only being achieved but consistently maintained and evolved.

Employers

Employers generally want greater productivity

Employees

Workers seek engaging, rewarding work that operates in harmony with their lives

Society

Society seeks a balance between economic growth and other personal pulls on workers (such as caregiving)

Big questions

What to ask yourself

• Does this choice make the day-to-day connection between people and their work easier or harder?

• Could this choice have negative impacts on society? (E.g., regulatory, activist.)

• Does this change the experience of our customers for the better or worse?
How to transform your workforce

A three-step process

To get to the workforce you need for the future, we recommend a three-step process.

1. Imagine a future vision

2. Architect key structural, capability and talent decisions

3. Transform to bring large populations on the journey
Imagine

• Imagine an array of workforce futures, accounting for the impacts of slow vs. fast change.

• Define future-facing capabilities. Understand the human and technological capacity needed to drive that vision, including contingent work, robotics, bots, partnerships, and ecosystems.

• Compare your future vision to the current reality using a data-driven approach—what is today’s work vs. the work of tomorrow?

• **What this work looks like:**

  • UK Rail Network needed to meaningfully speed-up the execution of a multi-billion pound digital transformation, which had been delayed by lack of resources. We worked with them to build a large Digital engineering workforce in 10 years less than initially estimated. To do so, we modeled the effect of different workforce strategies (recruitment, development, talent management) and ways of doing the work to identify the right mix of levers to pull to make sure they had the right workforce to deliver these programs.

  The result: a dramatic reduction in the time to build out the digital capability for the network.

• **Dimensions examined:** Who, What, When

Architect

• Understand how needed skills should flow through the way work is planned at your organization—from high-level structure down to the nitty-gritty of jobs.

• Build a holistic plan to close volume gaps, including re-skilling/upskilling to physical workplace changes to rewards strategy.

• Prepare for short-term challenges and setbacks—transformation is rarely straightforward and easy.

• **What this work looks like:**

  • A Fortune 100 global leader in IT and Hardware was performing but at risk of becoming irrelevant. When the new CEO took over, they saw the need to redefine the company for the future—embarking on their digital transformation to win in the cloud infrastructure space. The engineering team developed new software and hardware, and the market-facing selling team positioned new offerings needed to transform.

  Korn Ferry worked with the organization to transform its existing 166 Job Families and 1,503 individual Jobs to align to the transition they were going through. To do so, Korn Ferry utilized real-time, proprietary market data to drive a multi-pronged skills strategy focused on re-skilling/upskilling, external sourcing, and internal mobility.

• **Dimensions examined:** Who, What, Where
Transform

• Redevelop talent and acquire new talent.

• Create an employee experience—through culture shaping and change management that activates new ways of working.

• Build new capability and infrastructure to support new ways of working and new work being done.

• Continually assess and adjust, recognizing that shifting needs and contexts will always require new perspectives and solutions.

• What this work looks like:

• An international pharmaceutical company, ranked in Forbes Global 500, sought to drive digital transformation by building a Digital Center of Excellence (CoE). This CoE consisted of roughly 100 employees and would be tasked with driving the company’s digital innovation. The company wanted to evaluate internal talent for overall fit and conduct external searches where internal talent was not available. Korn Ferry assisted the organization by shaping a process to assess internal talent vs. external talent, recruiting external talent, creating and delivering development journeys for internal talent selected, and managing overall governance and workflow to assure a fair, transparent, and effective process.

• Dimensions examined: Who, What, Where, How, Why
Get started with seven steps

So how can my organization get started?

1. Know your starting point
   Take a robust, data-driven, benchmarked look at your current work choices, from how work is shaped and structured to the leaders and talent performing the work.

2. Drive the vision inclusively
   By listening to a diverse array of voices around what your organization’s future of work might look like, you can ensure you hear from all three critical groups (employer, employee, society) and consider variations in how work needs to get done within your organization.

3. Map the journey
   Using your organization’s purpose as a guide, ask these questions: Where is work being created? Where is it being changed? How is the human-job interface changing?

4. Examine “uninteresting” jobs
   (including leadership roles). Organizations often ignore the unglamorous jobs that are quietly changing the most and don’t treat leadership as a job, causing critical disconnects in work all across the organization.

5. Organize work to fit the purpose
   Job architecture today is often a function of history, not a true reflection of how work gets done—and as such, it usually works against what organizations are trying to accomplish. Step back and see the forest for the trees. Realign to your vision wherever possible.
6. Examine your capabilities

What does your organization “need to be good at”? Then assess how well those capabilities are reflected across human work and technological capacity alike.

7. Identify the big “population shifts”

Understand where large numbers of workers will need to work differently in the near term—and allocate real resources against them today (including skills and behavioral development, as well as outplacement support if required).
Even before COVID-19, organizations were quietly reshaping many workforce trends. Here’s a quick summary of where we see things moving more rapidly or slowly than anticipated, or very different than anyone might have predicted.
### Faster than expected

**Who**

- Movement between jobs, especially at executive levels.
- Perhaps due to lower engagement with employers during remote work, the COVID period has seen an unusual level of job-switching, especially at executive levels. Our research suggests that “career nomads” who switch roles at a higher rate can be valuable assets to organizations. However, at a replacement cost of 50-75% of compensation, these moves can prove costly.

**What**

- Holistic attention to how work is organized at enterprise level.
- Companies are experiencing a surge of interest in job architecture, i.e., looking at how jobs across the organization systematically relate to each other. The goals of these initiatives include everything from fairer pay and succession processes to greater career mobility.

### Slower than expected

**Who**

- True integration of the gig economy into organizations’ strategy.
- Contingent workforces often remain accidental and poorly oriented. There is usually no coherent strategy behind their placement or tasks. For example, contractors often take on critical tasks that should be handled by full-time employees. While FTEs are saddled with transient tasks that should go to gig workers. A consistent view of talent is critical to remedy this issue.

**What**

- Career mobility within organizations.
- While career mobility is a hot topic, organizations have yet to see many of their initiatives’ fruits. This stalled progress can be attributed to lingering organizational siloes, inconsistent or missing accounts of career paths and jobs, and a lack of employee channels to understand any given role’s actual work.

### Differently than expected

**Who**

- Demographic change in the workforce.
- For years, labor market analysts have predicted a massive loss of older workers. However, this hasn’t happened. Either for financial reasons or personal preferences, Boomers have continued to work past the traditional retirement age. In the US, for instance, workers over 65 are the fastest-growing segment of the workforce, and the OECD projects this trend to continue. Countries worldwide may have a larger proportion of older workers by 2030 than was initially anticipated.

**What**

- Automation.
- Discussion of the role of automation in the workplace has long focused on what’s exciting, either physical robots or all-knowing artificial intelligence. In reality, automation has created major shifts in the workforce in less flashy ways. Robotic Process Automation (RPA) quietly takes over numerous back-office tasks or relatively simple algorithms, managing thousands of workers’ actions.
The notion of robotic managers may sound impossibly futuristic, but in retail and foodservice industries, a sharply increasing number of employees’ schedules are already set by automated software systems. Companies have found the systems generally useful, while workers increasingly protest that untransparent algorithms make decisions that cause life chaos for them.

While many workers have the flexibility for workday start and end times, “presenteeism” or managers placing a premium on individuals being visible during standard working hours has refused to die off. Even remote workers are finding themselves tracked by software measuring their activity; insecure managers are being sought out by hoping to catch them off task.

The COVID period has forced a strange kind of work-life integration. On the one hand, workers working from home report challenges from glitchy tech to marauding children and pets. Contributing to a blurring between work and home life. On the other hand, freedom from commuting and the flexibility that results have rebalanced the work-life equation positively.

Perhaps the most prominent feature of the COVID period is a rapid shift to remote work. For instance, in the European Union, remote work rates pre-pandemic ranged from the single digits to upwards of 25%. During the pandemic, they spiked as high as 70% in June/July.

Tech talent remains, for the most part, focused in high-cost locations such as Silicon Valley, London, or Singapore. One issue underlying the slower progress of small tech hubs such as Austin and Tallinn is career mobility. Workers like to have options. It will be interesting to see if this dynamic finally begins to change in an increasingly virtual environment.

COVID hit just as many organizations had finished rolling out open-plan environments to mimic tech companies. We’re now seeing hasty redesigns to more closed-off spaces. This will be good for general health and introverts alike and decrease distractions that get in the way of productivity. A criticism often leveled at more open-plan set-ups.
Faster than expected | Slower than expected | Differently than expected
--- | --- | ---
Embrace of organization-level purpose. | Embrace of purpose-driven roles. | Shared understanding of organizational purpose.

Our data has long linked deeper organizational purpose with increased financial returns. This phenomenon intensified even further recently. Purpose-driven organizations have seen higher engagement levels across the board during COVID as there has been more focus on people and the human impact of what we do. The health and safety challenges of the COVID period have driven many employees in purpose-driven roles to leave in frustration. One survey showed that first responders were the largest job-seeking population in the United States, while teachers worldwide are concerned at returning to potentially unsafe classrooms.

An interesting debate around the purpose of certain technology organizations has categorized the past few years. As unintended consequences have been felt from technology creation and unanticipated customers (such as governments), workers at tech companies have driven active debate about what, indeed, is the very purpose of the work they do.

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Faster than expected | Slower than expected | Differently than expected
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Asynchronous collaboration. | Fluid team approaches. | Attention to employee wellness.

First prompted by the rise of the Agile movement and then urged on by the scheduling challenges of COVID, asynchronous collaboration (where people work together, but not simultaneously) is facing a rapid rise. Fans of asynchronous collaboration note that it fosters inclusion and creates greater accountability on teams, as all contributions are highly visible. Many organizations have embraced Agile teams and project management, but truly fluid teaming on the ground has been slower. What’s clashing with this growth? Legacy job descriptions, political turf wars, and misaligned/individualistic rewards structures all seem to be stopping organizations’ best intentions to create a fluid teams environment.

Employee wellness was already in the spotlight when COVID hit. The pandemic has shifted the employee wellness lens to mental health in the “always-on” virtual workplace. Workers complain of being overloaded from long days balancing video calls, homeschooling, and the chronic stresses of lockdown. "Burn out" alerts are hitting all-time highs.
Great debates

Unresolved issues as organizations search for the future of work.

We asked our consultants to discuss some of today’s hot-button topics around the future of work.
My first real job was in London, as a credit analyst for Shell. I had to commute an hour on the tube each way. I loved the work, but very little of it needed me to be there in person. Meeting the team once or twice a week would have met my needs to feel connected and give me back an equivalent of a whole working day.

Over the last few months, many myths about what work can be done in-person vs. remotely have been blown apart. Companies have processed billions of dollars of transactions. CEOs are recruited, hired, and onboarded. Teams are trained and deliver work to customers. All remotely.

The question employers must ask is why they are so keen that employees come back to the office?

Do you trust your employees? No? If you don’t believe they’ll do their work without physically watching over them, you have a much bigger problem.

Do you worry they don’t have the skills they need? Then develop them, just as you would in the office.

They won’t know what to prioritize? Be purpose-driven and reinforce that in your discussions with employees. Link it to the work they do.

How do you measure performance? You may be measuring performance by presenteeism. Look for ways to measure quality, innovation, and work delivered and hold employees accountable for output, not just showing up.

Consider the tech industry. There is a huge concentration of talent on the West coast, resulting in gaps in critical talent, high performers, real estate costs for employers, retention issues, and diversity challenges. Imagine if the industry could draw from talent from across the US, across the world, with small drop-in offices for teams to meet and connect when they want to. Tech companies would have greater access to talent, happier, more productive teams, lower costs, and greater diversity.

Imagine the impact on our lives, the environment, the whole economy if we channeled all that commute time into productive work, leisure, and spending time with our families!

We still need to meet colleagues in-person, not every day in an office. The future of work is based on doing different work differently. Building agile teams who form and reform across functions, across geographies to deliver solutions for their business.
In-person is the future:

Nina Boone

I love working from home. No commute and all of those things that go with it. Heavy traffic. Too many people on the train. And that person in front of you at the coffee place wants “102 degrees and foam”. I also get to exercise in the morning and have a healthy breakfast before plugging-in, instead of spilling my black coffee (or insert favorite breakfast drink here) all over my laptop. But the reality is that I am talking to myself way too much. It’s isolating. Lonely.

I want to hear someone else’s voice. In-person. Someone who is sitting right in front of me. I want to lean in for discussion over a document that we are collaborating on; I want to lean back in my chair as we kvetch about ideas and different ways to think about things.

I want to compliment someone on their attire that day and ask them where they got that tie, purse. whatever. I want that unexpected exchange of ideas in the hallway, in the kitchen, at their office doorway. And, oh my gosh! I want to give my elevator pitch in the actual elevator. These interactions make a day go quickly. They make client work memorable; relationships are richer and deeper. They are what make us human. The energy that comes from being in-person, problem solving, ideation, pouncing on ideas, and running with them just can’t be translated or duplicated through a computer screen.

And it shows. Meetings often feel flat. People make excuses not to have their cameras on; I can’t see the whites of their eyes. The nod when they like what they hear or the furrowed brow when they’re thinking it through.

Then the talk after the meeting does not happen (where real breakthroughs often do). I want a breakthrough! That eureka moment when we lock-eyes and know we’ve got something great.

I also miss high heels! Ahh, my feet hurt already just thinking about it, and I love it!

No regrets actions either way:

- Understand which jobs are “remote-able” and which ones aren’t. You never know when remote might be the primary option, even if it’s not your organization’s preference.

- Build engagement and empathy skills in your front-line managers. These skills will serve them well in person or remotely and will strengthen your culture.

- Understand your organization’s views on collaboration and performance. This goes beyond the mechanics of tools and interaction in any space, virtual or physical. What does your organization believe good looks like across these areas?
Machines are the future vs. people are the future

Machines are the future:

David Sholkoff and Alida Al Saadi

Technology already dominates. The argument is over. We have already eliminated people as being critical.

Consider the dairy farm. Cows and farmers all make up the “ecosystem.” Over the last century, milk demand increased. To keep up with this demand, farmers needed a more effective and efficient way to supply milk. Technology was the answer in the form of milking machines. This replaced hand milking by the dairy farmer in a similar way that computers replaced manual work or spreadsheets use formulae to automate complex calculations.

The relationship between the cow and farmer changed, and the participants’ experience (the cow and the farmer) became less important. But more milk was now being produced with arguably increased benefit to the world. Technology has helped us feed the world more efficiently. Does this mean that the farmer’s role is diminished? No, the farmer’s role has changed.

According to Melvin Kranzberg, “Technology is not either good nor bad; nor is it neutral.”

This domination of technology has not just happened at a dairy farm. It is happening at today’s workplace across all functions: manufacturing, supply chain, professional jobs, and offices. We now have GPT3-AI (an open-source AI) to write articles without humans. We have robots for production and design changes in manufacturing plants. We have personal AI (digital twins) to replicate ourselves for efficiency. We are automating all functions for process simplification, productivity, and the betterment of humanity.

What about roles that are dangerous, unhygienic, is replacing these with technology not beneficial? Or opportunities to provide better service or save lives with more automated processes. Or cognitive technology such as AI Chatbots that help with recruitment, customer service, even healthcare.

Will people find themselves replaced by machines for more jobs in the future? Yes. The key will be making sure there is equal opportunity for those people to do different work.
Technology would dominate if we lived in a world where the only considerations were efficiency and profit. But we don’t.

In August of last year, the Business Roundtable redefined the purpose of a corporation to promote an economy that serves everyone, not just shareholders. Businesses are responsible to all dairy farm ecosystem members, from farmers to cowhands and, yes, even to the cows themselves. Investors and milk-drinkers not only want cheap milk, but they want the milk to be produced ethically, the business to be run fairly, and the farm to minimize its carbon footprint in the process.

And if dairy farm owners don’t deliver? Well, investors won’t invest, and consumers won’t consume. The connection between the “stakeholders first” approach and long-term business value has never been more evident.

In balancing people and profit, leaders will never please everyone. They must rely on nuanced ethical, cultural, societal, and reputational considerations to make imperfect but “best possible” decisions. The exact type of decisions that machines are poorly-equipped to make.

This is particularly true in today’s “adapt to survive” COVID economy. Business managers don’t have time to program a computer to tell them what to do, nor could they rely on the insights generated. They have to respond rapidly, drawing on the context that can’t be quantified and their own human experience to predict how other humans react.

Yes, milking cows can be mechanized and maybe even done humanely and environmentally friendly, but what about higher-order work? The most valuable services in the marketplace will always be done better by humans. In an era defined by crisis, where emotional intelligence, compassion, resilience, and morality may prove more important than ever before, the future of work is human. As long as business is about humans, the future of work must be too.

People are the future:
Sarah Jensen Clayton and Khoi Tu

No regrets actions either way:
• Clarify what the work of your organization is, to drive smarter decisions about people vs machines.
• Upskill your populations on “human-only” skills like empathy and complex problem-solving.
• Keep a close eye on roles where humans can work more safely if technology comes into the picture.
Watch out for rapid disruption vs. watch out for slow change

Watch out for rapid disruption:

Mario Zenouin

For years organizations have been listening to long talks on the importance of preparing for and coping with change.

Remember VUCA? It’s one of those acronyms to buzzwords. Well, organizations were often reminded that we now live in Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous times. That new skills are needed to cope. Leaders offer lots of “I hear you” when discussing the need for re-skilling, yet very quickly, it slides down again in their list of priorities. COVID did not change this discourse, but it made acting upon it more urgent.

Guess which employees and businesses are killing it now? Those who proved to be agile, not afraid of change, willing to operate in unchartered waters. Those who reached beyond their comfort zones, who showed innovation when it came to developing solutions. They were successful because they kept their cool. How many of those employees do you have? Probably not many.

More dramatic disruptions are yet to come. Why would the trend be reversed? If anything, and with the pace that things are moving, disruption is on steroids for the foreseeable future!

Politically, economically, socially, technologically, environmentally, and legally, the pressures are mounting. The point is that the disruptions caused by COVID are just the tip of the iceberg. We have seen industries turning upside down.

How “long” is long-term planning today? We’ve seen how revolutionary technologies are changing the way we engage with each other and how we work—at a pace never seen before. For all of this, organizations need to learn how to recruit and develop for agility. They need to build a skilled workforce to interpret trends, identify disruptors, establish early warning signals, and quickly ADAPTING.

Bureaucracies and red tape will make organizations suffer, along with non-calculated risk-taking. Managing this critical balance will be crucial. Preparing for the “worst yet” while hoping for the best cannot be more relevant.
Recently the New York Times published an Opinion piece by Jerry Seinfeld, “So you think New York is Dead.” Mostly Jerry bemoans the author of a widely circulated LinkedIn post for declaring today’s pandemic the final nail in New York City’s coffin. As a fellow New Yorker, I’ll bet that a good percentage of those that have migrated out of the city will be back as we make our way through this moment in time.

Similarly, I’ve observed thought leaders across the management space declare dramatic, irreversible changes to the workplace, workforce, and work as we know it. I encourage them to take up deep breathing or meditation before rushing to conclusions.

Think about it: As sharp as the COVID disruption has felt, there are even more potent disruptive forces lurking in plain sight. Remember when Millennials were entering the workforce, and we all thought their presence spelled the end of work as we knew it? That didn’t happen, and in fact, the fastest-growing segment of the American workforce today is over 65. That’s not dramatic or sudden, but the impacts could be huge from leadership, organizational, and human resources perspective. Consider the knowledge and succession consequences of retaining long-tenured employees, as well as the challenges of working cross-generationally.

Another conundrum we are presently facing is the real-estate impacts of employees desiring greater work-life flexibility.

It’s unlikely that office spaces will disappear overnight, but rather a greater integration of virtual and in-person work is right around the corner. One of my colleagues describes disruption as something you can’t even imagine because it’s so far outside the realm of what is presently possible. However, more often and less discussed are the small changes occurring each day that eventually add up to huge impacts. The present moment is worthy of your attention.

Watch out for slow change:

Laura Kelfer

No regrets actions either way:

• Develop your disruption-response capabilities and adaptive strategies to accept and navigate the change of all types and speeds."

• Closely monitor changes in your workforce on a data-driven basis.

• Evaluate where you need added organizational capacity for greater flexibility in case of key shifts in the environment.
The job is dead vs. long live the job

“The job is dead:

Tracy Bosch

Organizations are at their best when people have a purpose. When teams are improved to surface the best ideas, execute efficiently, and learn as they go.

Yesterday’s patriarchal models assumed that the best person to decide on ‘optimal’ was the man at the top. In a time when there was less competition, game-changing technology, and choosy consumers, you could more easily develop permanent structure—box in jobs, assign tasks—safe in the knowledge that you’d optimized it to carry on forever.

The problem is that the pace of change has escalated to the point that we no longer have time to stop redesigning the jobs every few months. Not only that, we’ve realized that there are many smart people in an organization—not just the people at the top. We’ve discovered that many of the challenges organizations face are best solved when approached by a diverse team, not a fixed person in a fixed job.

In many cases, the job is the very thing that keeps work from transforming. “I can’t do that. It’s not on my job description.” Work could be automated or transformed that is stuck in job descriptions that cannot be changed outside the scope of collective agreements or layers of HR approvals.

These organizations will find themselves left behind—partly because competitors will work in a more agile way, partly because people are tired of being trapped in the box that is their job. Employers can offer supported opportunities for career progression and learning that flows at the pace of business. People will be more empowered, more engaged, and more optimized to get things done.

Today’s work is what happens when people and jobs come together to get things done. As simple assignments become increasingly automated, our remaining work is human and more complex. It needs to free itself from the shackles of yesterday’s tough jobs, evolve with the business, and inspire people along the way.

Choose your own future

TRACY BOSCH
Senior Client Partner

PHIL JOHNSON
Senior Client Partner
Agile is dead—long live common sense!

Work is work. It’s what people do to help their employer succeed. Whether it is as an employee doing the same things day after day or as a contractor doing different things on different assignments—it doesn’t matter. It is still work. When people spend time doing the tasks that they want to do, figuring out each morning what they’re going to work on today, dabbling at this and that—that’s not work. That’s a hobby. As the song says—"one man’s (sic) work is another man’s play."

Most work is structured—and for a good reason. Outcomes are more reliable, and costs are lower when work is organized and focused—Henry Ford taught us that. Imagine what the results would be if an NHL goalie decided they want to play forward today and the winger went into the nets! Sure, there is a place for agile work approaches—where speed/time to market is more critical than cost efficiency or reliable service delivery, but that is not the world that most of us inhabit. It will certainly not be the case in a post-pandemic world where organizations (mainly public sector organizations) will need to focus on cost optimization.

Agile working is seen as a panacea and a model for the future because it’s used to suggest many different concepts. Being customer-focused isn’t exclusively agile; being flexible and helping your co-workers isn’t exclusively elegant. Agile as a method of organizing work is appropriate for a small minority of situations. However, it’s still mission-critical for most of us to simply care about our customers, be a good colleague, and get on with our jobs.

Long live the job:
Ph""il Johnson

No regrets actions either way:

• Periodically revisit the core work of your organization. What’s changing, and what’s not? It’s easy to get fixated on exciting areas or “hot jobs,” but an overall appraisal can convey more significant changes that might get overlooked otherwise.

• Dig deep into what your organization is seeking in terms of agility. Does an Agile process with Agile job framing truly suit, or might other interventions work better?

• Engage with the people doing the work. How much structure do they need to perform their work well?
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