

Resource 3: Management, Leadership, and the Workplace of the Future

ONLINE RESOURCES

In almost every organization around the world today, a massive disconnect occurs. We are literally using a fraction of the human talent, motivation, and capacity available to us. Simply thinking about this keeps me up at night. This leads to a much larger error in the global economy. People are simply not being matched to the work where they can be most effective, derive the greatest wellbeing, and make the most substantive contribution to society.

Think for a moment about how adept organizations have become at matching their supply of products with anticipated demand from consumers. Larger companies meticulously test, plan, and monitor their supply chain to ensure you can get anything from a stack of paper towels to a smartphone without delay. They have this down to a science.

Yet when most organizations think about their people today, they are barely scratching the surface of maximizing human potential. Most hiring systems are so antiquated that companies would be better off flipping a coin to decide whom to hire or name the next manager of the team. Resumes predict almost nothing and may even induce more biases than they are worth, based on studies I have followed.

Once people are hired, specific tasks are often doled out arbitrarily or to those who speak out the most. Work teams formed based on the right balance of personalities, interests, and organizational needs are the rare exception. As a result, the vast majority of work teams suffer from a dearth of the physical and intellectual diversity they need to thrive.

SATISFACTION IS INSUFFICIENT

Another huge challenge, one that many companies don't realize they are facing today, is the fact that asking employees if they are merely satisfied or engaged at work is grossly insufficient. The most common definition of employee engagement is "the amount of discretionary effort an employee contributes during the workday." Typical employee engagement and satisfaction initiatives, therefore, focus on "What are you contributing to the organization?" but do not address "Is your life better because of the organization?"

Most organizations claim to want better relationships with their employees, customers, and communities. Yet we are attempting to measure and improve these relationships through a one-directional lens. Essentially, looking at engagement alone is akin to attempting to measure the satisfaction of a relationship between a husband and wife based only on the husband's opinions.

Almost every data point I have studied suggests that most people perceive their lives as being worse off because of their employers. And that perception is correct. Research indicates that most people's wellbeing is actually harmed by the organizations they join.

It doesn't have to be this way. If you go back to the root of this relationship between a person and an organization, every one of us—from the top executive group to frontline workers—plays the role of “employee.” Organizations are essentially groups of people with shared missions. This is why what's best for an employee is usually in an organization's best interest as well.

ORGANIZATIONS ARE THE SUM OF PEOPLE

Don't blame organizations for ruining your health and wellbeing. They are just collections of individuals. This is why fixing the disconnect between people and organizations starts with each of us as workers.

Much like the macroeconomic error I mentioned earlier, most people commit a personal economic error when choosing a job. They focus on the technical elements alone, such as salary, wage, or benefits, and pay far too little attention to the mission, purpose, and intent of the work and how it affects their lives and the lives of people they love.

The mechanisms we use for finding jobs are archaic at best. I honestly can't think of anything much worse than using your resume to predict future performance in a role. There are obviously some professions where specific accreditations and background experiences are necessary. But a resume alone tells you little about how someone interacts with others, what they do best, and where in particular they have stumbled.

One thing that has haunted me ever since my daughter was born in 2009 is that I need her to have a better way to determine how she can use her abilities to serve the world when she grows up. Her schooling will help her to be well-rounded like every other kid; it will teach her to read, write, and perform basic functions. When she reaches college age, someone will likely press her after a couple years about where she wants to specialize or what she wants her major to be. In a typical setup, what she gravitated toward would be driven by economic necessity, what she has seen her parents do, or (ideally) something that resonated with her after the limited exposure she had in high school and college. None of that is sufficient.

If I had to describe the way we've wound up in jobs over the last hundred years, I am pretty confident I'd find that most people have ended up doing work that fits them about as well as if they had been randomized in an experiment. There is even some research to back this up. When managers are hiring people into new jobs, for example, if they ask a bunch of subjective questions and look at resumes as they usually do, the resulting performance is actually a bit lower than if they just flip a coin with each applicant.

ALIGNING WHO YOU ARE WITH WHAT YOU DO

There simply has to be a more effective way for every one of us to find better work. We can do a better job of aligning who we are and what we do every day. If we could find work that fits who we are even 10% better than the archaic methods used today, that would result in a meaningful improvement in global wellbeing and productivity.

Of all the things I have learned in my decades of working in business, research, and human resources, the most important key to sustainable growth is aligning the right person with the right work. That is the first decision a person and an organization make as a part of their partnership. If this one choice is wrong from the perspective of either party, the odds of things succeeding are terrible. Perhaps this explains why more than half of workers are already looking for other jobs two months in.

Even when you look at entire fields of study like performance management or measuring employee engagement, making these things work is almost impossible if you start with a person in a job they dislike and a manager who wishes that person wouldn't show up for work. As easy as it would be to do so, it's not okay to put most of the burden for figuring this out on the person who hires you or the organization who gives you a chance.

I have spent years working with companies to help them find candidates for specific positions who have the right talents for a job. But the inherent difficulty in this approach is that each organization is looking at thousands of applicants to figure out which peg fits in a very oddly shaped hole. It's almost all about a specific organizational need, not a well-rounded understanding of who potential employees are and what their full range of interests and talents are.

WORK 3.0

The relationship a person has with an organization is about to undergo a dramatic change. For more than a decade, experts have talked about how we are moving toward a mode of free agency, a "gig" economy, the "uberization" of work, and a 1099 nation. In the United States, the pace of this change is accelerating in part because of individual workers' ability to purchase healthcare insurance independent from a large employer. While the speed of these changes often varies across countries, states, and cities, one common element is that individual workers have more options by the year.

When you combine this with the way technology is making it easier for all of us to work when we want, where we want, for the hours we want, and for the rate that we demand, this is one trend that it is unlikely to reverse course in most of our lifetimes. So you are a business of one, even if you work for a large employer . . . or at least you will be at some point. This is a great thing for your wellbeing and mine.

Until now, a job has been little more than a bribe. Someone pays you and you do something in return. This may be a gross oversimplification, but that has been the basic social contract between people and organizations for centuries. Soon, we are all going to have a lot more freedom and control.

This shift will speed up as individuals are given more incentive to have a defined contractual relationship. The old model, where an employer owns all of your time and you work for a fixed salary, will be increasingly rare a quarter-century from now. In cases when this does occur, it will be in the context of a much more holistic social contract between the person and the organization.

An organization will have to prove to each of us that in being part of a larger umbrella, all of our lives will be better off—that we can do more collectively than each of us could independently. Until now, almost all of the burden has been on each of us as workers to prove we are adding enough value to stay employed. That will still be true, but so will the inverse: your employer will have to show that they are adding value to your life as well.

When I step back and look at the state of the workplace today, some patterns emerge that appear unlikely to turn around over the next decade. These are things I already see occurring in innovative organizations and pockets today. They are also areas in which there is emerging consensus among leaders I speak with about where these things are headed.

15 BIG CHANGES FOR 2030

Perhaps I am being overly optimistic, but I expect to see many of these changes occur well before 2030 within a few of the organizations that are leading the global economy forward. I am trying to be more realistic about wholesale change across many industries and countries taking quite a bit longer, which is always the case based on my experience. However, because I can already see how companies making some of these changes are gaining a huge competitive advantage, it is easier to see these trends and patterns emerging with clarity.

This is also why I am deeply convinced that our relationship with the work we do will be much better in the future than it is today. The only remaining question is how quickly the social networks around you can accelerate the rate of positive change. What follow are some predictions and ideas for you to consider as you think about building more sustainable worklives.

1. When people do have full-time employment agreements with an organization, the organization will have to prove that this partnership is also good for the person's life, not just profits and productivity. Even at an hourly level, each person's effort will be tied to the value their work creates for other people.
2. There will be far more sophisticated systems and software to match the supply of talent with the demands of human needs. Where we are today is unbelievably rudimentary. Match.com and even Tinder have done a much better job of aligning romantic partnerships than any social network or job board has done with matching people and jobs. But this won't last long. The opportunity to do this better is enormous.
3. Everyone will have a virtual portfolio of experiences. This will include things they have actually physically done for weeks, months, or years. But it will also include virtual try-ons where you'll be able to essentially go into something that resembles a flight simulator for almost any job.
4. Instead of spending months or years in "dead-end" jobs, people will have much faster feedback both on how they are likely to perform a given task in the future and how that task is affecting their daily health and wellbeing. I already know, for example, the degree to which certain jobs, tasks, and even people affect the variability of my heart rate, sleep, stress, blood sugar, and several other factors. I have tracked this meticulously for almost 10 years, and it has led to far better decision-making in the moment.
5. The dynamics of recruiting, developing, and retaining talent will look a bit more like professional sports leagues do today. They will be more fluid, which will put more pressure on organizations to develop contracts and offers that will provide longer-term stability and help individuals decrease the stress of uncertainty and switching roles.
6. Instead of being rewarded solely for revenue growth or profit increases, companies will largely be evaluated by society based on their positive and negative influences. A company that demonstrably improves the quality of the environment or saves a million lives, for example, will have more socioeconomic currency as a result of this work.
7. No one will be forced to spend every day chained to a chair; they won't have to sit in order to be productive. Requiring people to work in a fixed position all day will be a widely known liability, as it is bad for healthcare costs, productivity, and a host of other conditions. Workers will have a wide range of choices about how they want to work. Most will be able to work from home if they get as much done there as they do in the office, work while they are moving or walking, get things done while they are outdoors in nature, and so on.

8. In almost every job, you will have a professional coach or manager who is almost entirely dedicated to the growth and development of people. This is such serious business that organizations will figure out that managing great salespeople, for example, should not be limited to promoting the most successful salesperson to manage everyone else. The traditional lateral progression in many industries and professions is actually counterproductive.
9. Taking time to be with family members in need, parent newly born children, or refresh your physical and mental wellbeing will be the default, not the exception. Some companies are already pressuring people to take time off for vacation, as they know it is critical for the health of the organization.
10. Workers will move from one organization to the next in tribes and teams instead of making solo job changes. Scientists will show how there is so much variance attributed to the dynamic of team performance that it will become accepted knowledge that people should be able to move in larger groups without fear of retribution or lawsuits.
11. The work you do will become a much larger part of your identity in life. Today when you ask another person, "What do you do?" in many cases there is an awkward pause because a lot of us don't know how to or want to answer this question with pride. Because so many jobs are still a product of an industrial era hangover, most people aren't proud of or excited to talk about what they do every day. This will change for the better.
12. Your work and personal lives will be even more closely intertwined, to the degree that they will be virtually inseparable. Your colleagues at work may even openly talk about the influence of your spouse on your opinions and decisions, something that is obvious in our heads but unspoken in every meeting room, all the way up to the Oval Office, today. In the future we will have much more candid conversations about the way things influence our opinions, mood, and current state.
13. You will have a new and heightened awareness of your emotional state, as devices will be able to tell you that your stress levels are elevated or that you should avoid sending that career-limiting email. These technologies will help us make more rational choices and avoid things that cause unnecessary and sustained spikes in stress and cortisol levels. In turn, you will also see more visibly how the work you do throughout the day influences the health and wellbeing of your spouse, kids, and friends. Much like some people get a report today about how the number of steps they have taken in the past week compares with that of their social circles, you will be able to see and detect how events from your workday influence physiological measurements, not just for yourself but throughout your social network. If you are spreading secondhand stress, people will see it.

14. You will know almost instantaneously what your customers and clients think of your work. Much like I know the star rating of an Uber driver before she appears in front of my house (and she knows I am a 4.78), you will know how your encounter with another person has changed their opinion of your organization and maybe even their overall wellbeing. While this may seem a bit much or somewhat intrusive, I think it will allow each of us to see how even our momentary efforts have a residual influence on a person that can last an entire day, if not longer. It will also help us avoid spreading negative emotions on difficult days.

15. Time to focus will be the new status symbol. I suspect the same thing will happen with the focus of our time and attention. Those of us who can afford to will choose to dedicate a few hundred hours to a project we care about and believe in deeply. If you have the luxury of free time in a given day, you will be able to dedicate it to the development of those you care about or going for a walk each evening. Instead of judging the largess of people based on the amount of money they appear to have, we will gauge how people are doing based on how much control they have over their own time.