

THE FUTURE OF WORK

The future of work was the theme chosen for a focused group discussion (organized on the 12th of October 2004) by the Asian Manager. The participants were the senior managers from various industries. The following article has been developed from the transcripts of the discussion, and it outlines commonly observable trends at work, rather than attempting to chart detailed roadmaps of future.

The study of the future is bedeviled by the fact that there are no iron laws that govern human history or its cultural development. Nevertheless, future change, or the aspiration for knowing the unknown, is what a great many human beings continue to live for.

We live in a fast-changing world of nanotechnology, the internet and robot explorations of Mars. Renewable limbs, robotic pets, and human cloning are not that far away. The way we deal with these rapidly changing times will largely define our success as a society. Work, leisure, and even the hallowed institution of the family are all metamorphosing into radically new forms. The new form of the community in which we are to be located may as yet be uncertain, but the pain we now feel, and which we find so distressing, is not a symptom of a terminal decline but the inevitable accompaniment to progress.

In “Managing Turbulent Times”, Peter F. Drucker mentioned that we should not look at the future workforce as one single workforce, but many different workforces. It takes a different kind of thinking – creative thinking, to look at the workforce as many different workforces that offer various kinds of value additions to clients in different geographies. Its implications on management are that there is no one best way to manage or one best way to lead. These different workforces are women, retired individuals, and handicapped people, among others who can contribute effectively and productively.

In today’s context, companies serve clients or a host of clients and customers – individuals and organizations that they have never seen because they come from various geographical locations. We see a number of individuals today who are doing work, whose matrices are being measured real time. We point to the individuals who are likely to change uptime, which has implications on the basic tenets like loyalty, organizational setting, among others. On the other hand, there is also a great deal of non-work. There are individuals who do not have the opportunity to work because of the levels of poverty or the lack or absence of opportunities in whatever economy they are. In other words, we witness new kinds of work; bio-tech, knowledge based work, work that we have not seen before; but we also see a great deal of population in the world that is comprised of individuals who have absolutely no work. Case in point: there is a large proportion of world population today living on less than 1 dollar a day.

We need to provide welfare and social security for those who are without work, as work largely affects the social dialogue. Since the future society will be shaped by both the employed and the unemployed, we need to devise ways and means to bridge this fast expanding gap between the workers and those without work or acceptable levels of work. Literacy and participation will therefore be critical for the future of work, and if we get the education right, we can fix most of the problems in the developing world.

At the same time, these are also difficult times for health care workers, especially in third world countries like the Philippines. Doctors are becoming nurses and nurses are leaving the country for greener pastures. One striking problem is that once the workforce attains a middle class status, they leave the country to seek better opportunities.

In the developing world, the need for organizations to be socially responsible is becoming much greater than it is in the developed world. It is understood that the level of job creation and employment is going to be directly related to the level of social stability, and the ability of organizations to continue operating in these countries. An increasing number of companies today realize the fact that being a good citizen translates into good business sense.

Development in technology are actually enabling, if not driving, enterprises to adopt new work practices, innovative organizational structures, and even new management styles in order to extend their businesses both domestically and abroad. As the pace of business activity increases and markets emerge and disappear almost overnight, different approaches are required to respond to these rapid changes. The traditional industrial model of hierarchical, formal, layered organization is fast becoming antiquated and is being replaced by more flexible, dynamic structures. Telecommuting, flexi-hours, and working from home are fast becoming acceptable and feasible modes of work. There is an increasing number of women managers running global organizations. Organizations are also moving towards pooling resources together and offering "Shared services". Shared services enable the organizations to save on cost, enhance efficiency, improve infrastructure, and reach high service levels.

As traditional organizational structures are fading away, companies in the 21st century are relying more on shared values, culture, and goals to unify their organizations, giving growing importance to employer branding and identity. In spite of being a technology company, IBM is taking a step back, and moving from "high tech" to "high touch", preferring the use of telephones to emails, where ever possible. This is noticeably improving the morale of the people. Organizations are also becoming more conscience-driven. An increasing number of organizations are becoming inclusive rather than exclusive. They are accommodating people regardless of their nationality, religion, color, and ideologies. Competence, above any other consideration, is becoming a way of life in today's organizations. Some organizations are so particular about the kind of managers they want that they are partnering with universities or opening their own schools to develop people with the competencies that will best fit the organizational values and vision. There is also an increasingly blurring distinction between personal and

professional life of leaders and managers. Because of this reason, life span of the leaders and managers will be shorter in future.

Experimentation was traditionally done by scientists, but now experimentation is being done at work to look at new and untried ways of doing work by thinking differently. One of the key ways to motivate employees today is to provide them ample opportunities to utilize their skills and talents to expand their work. As conditions evolve, we will need new and different set of competencies for leaders and managers.

Many people are losing jobs today because of outsourcing and downturn in many economies. In the current scenario, CEOs are being fired left right and center for non-performing or for loss of confidence from the board. In the Asian context, there is a stigma attached to starting a new career, which is seen as something that will become a way of life in future. People will not believe in the promise of long-term relationships with their organizations, and will rather move towards transactional relationships.

The amount of time given to CEOs to prove themselves, to turn around an organization will become lesser in future. We will therefore need leadership at every level of the organization, and we will want people at all levels of the organization who can take responsibility of their actions at every stage.

In the 21st century companies, entrepreneurship will be ever more valued, and we will have more diverse workforces where we will have managers of culture, understanding the values that drive individuals' needs. Organizations will be more flexible, more networked.

Managers in future organizations (private, public, and non-governmental organizations) will do less and less of operating and more and more of thinking, primarily dealing with their publics to influence them. They will have to develop the key skills of trainability and unlearning. We will need managers who can deal with ambiguity, who can think, manage, scrutinize, improvise on the job, and not wait for directions.

The symbol of the modern period was the production line, where dehumanized workers were driven by, and almost became part of, the machine. Now, the move to the information society, and the parallel move to service work, means that the individual – using his or her intelligence flexibly – has become the prime generator of added value. Thus, the individual has become the most important investment, especially in the education and training he has received.

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