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What is the Future of the Workforce? Are We Living in a Present-Day Human Renaissance?

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We are on the precipice of century-level societal change which will reach far beyond the confines of the traditional workplace. Prominent thought leaders are describing this as the Great Resignation, Great Reshuffling, or Great Retirement. In our opinion, these descriptors are too narrow and fall short of defining the seismic changes occurring around the globe.

[Psychology Today](#) might have inched closer to capturing the broader theme by framing this as the Great Reprioritization, but even this is not comprehensive enough. We judge this to be a complete repurposing and reexamination of life, reinventing the role work will play in our lives and across the globe. The Great Resignation or Great Retirement are events that will dissipate rather quickly; however, the deeper relationship between work and life will be redefined forever. What is the future of the workforce? We believe we are living in a present-day human renaissance.

As Peter Drucker said: “The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence itself, but to act with yesterday’s logic.” [It’s time for HR leaders to reimagine](#) a different trajectory. How might you reset and prepare your company for the opportunities and changes the future entails?

The Future of Traditional Business Models

The pandemic only advanced the timing of the recent shifts and changes. The [strain employers encountered](#) in how they cared for employees’ health, work-life balance, and social values reached new heights. Struggles that may have transpired year over year came to light in a mere matter of months.

These factors can be extensive when examining the total landscape. Influences can be traced to economic growth, technology advancements, climate change, and social divides in education, wealth, and health.

For example, the way in which government drives change with legislation pertaining to worker representation and protection or approaches concerns with climate change and social justice impacts how workers view their employers. A recent [Deloitte article](#) discusses how public policy surrounding job and wage security, access to good education, and opportunities to reskill talent could reduce workers’ dependence on employers for such things.

Another imperative factor is the continual advancement of technology. In their book *Machine, Platform, Crowd: Harnessing Our Digital Future*, the authors describe how technology has put

the world in a fourth Industrial Revolution. In recent years, companies have used technology to reinvent the framework of businesses, presenting new and ongoing pathways to success:

[Uber](#), the world's largest taxi company, owns no vehicles...Facebook, the world's most popular media owner, creates no content. Alibaba, the most valuable retailer, has no inventory. And Airbnb, the world's largest accommodation provider, owns no real estate.

The model for a successful business is detaching from traditional models with the advancements of technology, including the empowerment of AI. In a [Deloitte survey](#), 78% of executives believe that AI-based augmentation of workers will fuel new ways of working. Additionally, 78% believe AI empowers people to make better decisions, 72% believe AI will increase job satisfaction, and 78% think AI-based worker augmentation will lead to new ways of working.

The Future of Criteria: What Makes Your Organization Attractive to Candidates

[As noted in an earlier article](#), McKinsey & Company painted a forward-thinking picture where Chief Human Resources Officers and other HR leaders usher in a new corporate era by "[reimagining the basic](#) tenets of organization." They need to consider emerging talent and work models that are creative, adaptable, and resilient. In this new paradigm for work, corporate purpose fuels bold business moves, and "labor" is instead seen as "talent." Hierarchies become networks of teams. Competitors become ecosystem collaborators. And companies become more human: inspiring, collaborative, and bent on creating an employee experience that is meaningful and enjoyable.

A good starting point for many businesses may be shifting views on formal education. In a recent NPR interview, [Beth Cobert](#), the chief operating officer of [the Markle Foundation](#), stated that 70% of the population doesn't have degrees, and that percentage is even higher among minority groups. However, these are the individuals who are making the country run every day. Talent is surely being missed because of these educational requirements. But what if businesses committed to hiring and training individuals based on the caliber of their character instead of solely focusing on specific degrees?

As discovered in [Slayton's recent survey](#), employees in today's market are looking for change in their work environment. Beyond remote flexibility and paid time off, people desire opportunities for more education and professional development, a greater sense of autonomy, and a healthy work/life balance (a more holistic approach).

Interestingly enough, [recent articles](#) have taken similar observations into consideration to formulate and forecast futures for employee/employer relationships. They have described the four potential changes as follows:

1. **Work as fashion** – here the worker-employer relationship is reactive. Employers are constantly chasing new dynamics (“fashions”) like worker sentiments and comparing competitors’ actions and benefits. Even how employers stand on societal issues (the hot button topics of today) are used as a foundational way to attract talent.
2. **War between talent** – here the worker-employer relationship is impersonal. Colleagues compete with one another for positions/promotions. In turn, employers invest less in training/development, leaving employees to invest in development on their own time and dime to gain a better chance of succeeding.
3. **Work is work** – here the worker-employer is professional. Employees and employers depend on each other for work needs, but the company’s social responsibility and employer’s personal views are distinctly separate. Work merely provides the means for employees to invest in their “real” priorities.
4. **Purpose unleashed** – here the worker-employer relationship is communal. Purpose is the focus here and the foundation of the employment brand – moving shareholder capitalism to stakeholder capitalism – purpose, and profit are equally important.

While the criteria of what both leaders and employees expect hangs in the balance, these ideas lead us to some important questions.

Future Predictions – What Does This Mean for HR?

It’s possible the time has come to reconsider what we know in the HR field. [The cost of](#) ignoring the realities of current events is simply too steep to ignore. What then, should we reexamine? Which conversations should leaders be having?

Titles in the workplace might be the place to start. Will employees still be called employees? Or will customer, patron, or clientele be more fitting word choices? In line with the idea of “work as fashion,” candidates have the upper hand when it comes to choices. In a recent [Harvard Business Review](#) article, they envision HR titles to transform to Head of Business Behavior, Gig Economy Manager, or even Workplace Environment Architect. “The 2020s will be a reset moment for HR. We fully expect to see more examples of these theoretical ‘jobs-made-real,’ by visionary leaders in the coming months and years.”

Will hierarchical structures change altogether? Just like well-known artists can earn a greater income than the curators, could employees begin to make more than senior leaders? Maybe. We've seen this model for high performing sales professionals and other unique sole contributors. Yet this might be the biggest question to consider: Will the traditional organizational pyramid model become inverted with employees/customers at the top, managers or "work-stream leaders" in the middle, and C-level "strategists" at the bottom? This might be the final hurdle in [servant-leader models](#) becoming more commonplace to everyday business.

We don't pretend to know the outcome or the specific answers to these queries. But the current factors of this era provide provoking questions worth pondering for the future.