

CATEGORY: MANAGERS/ENTREPRENEURS

Work, Meet Life

Employees, Organizations, and Communities in
the 21st Century

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The only thing we know about the future is that it is going to be different.

-- Peter F. Drucker, Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices (1973)

Born in a middle-class Indian household, the grownup world had always been a fascination. Watching my father leave for office every morning, return the evening, and occasionally travel in trains and aircrafts, is all that formed my perception of 'work', which seemed to take up most of his time and energy. As I entered college, images from my occasional visits to his workplace came to mind: the workstation, surrounding cubicles, an elusive glass cage at the corner, rows and rows of typewriters (and later, computers), and a world far removed from personal and family life. I thus began to prepare myself for a similar scenario waiting outside the University gates. I couldn't have been more wrong!

Technology, Globalisation, and the Workplace that is not a place

This happens to be a consulting firm headquartered in Boston. Each morning, between 8 A.M. and 9 A.M. Boston time, which is 5 A.M. in the morning here in California and 11 P.M. in Tokyo, the firm conducts a one-hour management meeting on the Internet... As a result of which, that consulting firm is not organized around localities but around clients.

-- Peter Drucker On Leadership, Forbes (November 2004)

My first job while in college was as a content writer for an NGO. I created email and website marketing material for its client organizations, and was paid per-page of content created. While I had been interviewed, selected, extended an offer, trained and put to work, I found some other aspects of my work rather odd: I actually never met anyone, in-person. In fact, I had only heard my boss's voice twice in all, and didn't even know any of the other content writers working there. There wasn't even as much as a piece of paper involved in this whole transaction.

Work is now no longer a place you go to; it's what you do. Mobile technology has changed the way we work, allowing for convenient, flexible workplaces. Yes, the workplace does still exist, but that's not where all the work gets done. The average employee today puts in 46 minutes of work before they've even arrived at the office, and 75% of employers recognise this by giving employees the tools they need to work remotely. "Face time" is now optional. This change in the nature of work has enormous implications on how organizations perform.

Years later, I founded an organization, with a co-founder from halfway across the world, whom I had never met before. We were introduced to one another from a 'Direct Message' on the micro-blogging platform, Twitter, and acknowledging that we had some similar passions and ideas but different strengths and experiences, we gave shape to our enterprise,

concocting a business plan over Google Docs, an online collaborative tool. A few weeks in, AnaGenesis was born, registered simultaneously in New Delhi and Boston. Our clients, partners and employees were spread out across the globe as well, and we made the time differences work out in our advantage when we could.

Being remotely located still meant we performed as well as, if not better than, any conventional brick-and-mortar enterprise. The collaboration platform allowed us to monitor employee activity, keep teams synchronized to shared goals, and be more productive than ever. And all this without having to fight traffic, sit in a cubicle for 8 hours, and leave to fight traffic again.

Workplaces of tomorrow may thus be entirely located online. Rob Carter, chief information officer at FedEx, stated in an interview to TIME, that the workplace of 10 years down the line is best demonstrated by the online game World of Warcraft. Its 10 million dedicated players are divided in teams for a fast-paced, complicated series of obstacles, and each player (via an online avatar) must contribute towards the shared 'quests'. Intensely collaborative, constantly demanding, often surprising, and a hit amongst Gen-Y'ers: the workplace of tomorrow has arrived.

Decentralisation: The Elephant in the Back Room

The first time somebody from Detroit actually visited the European subsidiaries was in 1950. A trip to Europe was a big trip. You were gone three months. I still remember the excitement when the then head of GM went to Europe in the 1920s to buy the European properties. He never went back.

-- Peter Drucker On Leadership, Forbes (November 2004)

Drucker championed decentralization and simplification, since it creates small pools in which employees gain satisfaction from the fruits of their hard work, and nascent leaders can make mistakes. Corporations tend to produce too many products, hire employees they don't need, and expand into economic sectors that they should avoid. A company should be thus be engaged in only the front room activities that are core to the business, while back room activities should be handed over to other organisations.

Crowdsourcing, similarly, is a popular concept put into use today, sourcing work from a large number of people, either employees or Internet users. In some cases, it allows them to contribute without necessarily getting paid, as is the case with WikiMedia, home to the world's largest free encyclopaedia and many other knowledge repositories. Open-sourcing is similarly responsible for some of the most popular computer applications used today. As Drucker wrote in "From Analysis to Perception — The New Worldview," nearly 23 years ago, "Since information knows no national boundaries, it will also form new 'transnational' communities of people who, maybe without ever seeing each other in the flesh, are in communion because they are in communication."

This has given rise to some rather novel, though somewhat unpopular, business models as well. Organizations are now focussed on finding the essential people and outsourcing the rest, many a times across economies and nations. An interesting example is that of India's rural Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) firms. Organisations based in the US and Europe outsource the more mechanical and monotonous jobs, usually dealing with data entry or cleansing, to these centres located in rural India, where youth and local women are leaving low-paying blue collar jobs for more dignified employment in this space. Even the low-income population is now a part of the knowledge economy.

The same done at the home office is just too expensive, and too slow. Instead, work allocated by you at the end of your day (as the BPO worker is waking up in her/his time zone) can be completed and emailed back to you before you start work tomorrow. You two may never meet, but are both doing essential work.

From IT to Manufacturing: Death of the Blue Collar

One cannot hire a hand; the whole man always comes with it.

-- Peter F. Drucker, Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices (1973)

Almost 20 years before the founding of Microsoft, Drucker coined the term "knowledge worker" later adding that they are likely to become the dominant social — and perhaps also political — force over the next decades.

According to McKinsey & Co., nearly 85% of new jobs created between 1998 and 2006 involved complex "knowledge work" like problem-solving and concocting corporate strategy. The U.S. Department of Labor identify network systems and data communications as well as computer-software engineering among the occupations projected to grow most explosively by 2016, while job opportunities in mathematics and across the sciences are also expected to expand.

However, one would be misplaced in assuming that the knowledge worker's domain is limited to information technology.

For starters, have a look at a gleaming antiseptic room in Southern California where Edwards Lifesciences produces artificial-heart valves. While you may call these highly skilled workers seamstresses, these women occupy a niche in which US firms are dominant and growing. Each replacement valve requires some 1,800 stitches so tiny that the work is done under a microscope. Up to a year of training goes into preparing a new hire to join the operation. Manufacturing can thus now be associated with highly skilled workers creating high-value products in high-stakes industries.

Drucker held the view that people are an organization's most valuable resource, and that a manager's job is both to prepare people to perform and give them freedom to do so.

Rising from the Sloan Age: Employee as the Organization

The best way to harness human talent is through full-time, exclusive employment relationships where people are paid for the amount of time they spend at a common location. They should be organized in stable hierarchies where they are evaluated primarily through the judgment of their superiors, and what and how they do their jobs is prescribed.

-- Michael Chui describing the model of scientific management advocated by Alfred P Sloan, former Chairman of General Motors. *The Future of Work: What It Means for Individuals, Businesses, Markets and Governments*, The Aspen Institute (March 2011)

The management of knowledge workers should be based on the assumption that the corporation needs them more than they need the corporation.

-- Peter F. Drucker, *A Functioning Society: Selections From 65 Years of Writing on Community, Society and Polity* (2003)

As we have seen, today's technology as well as the attitudes of the modern worker makes it necessary to reconsider the role of organizations. Given that knowledge skills are far more portable than manual ones, a society consisting of knowledge workers would be far less dependent on the firm. If knowledge workers and online markets can radically reduce transaction costs, over and above what a firm can achieve, is the firm even economically justifiable?

Over the years, I found myself working for several organizations, even as I managed my own. In fact, many employees and colleagues that I worked with were engaged with multiple employers as well. And it was all in good faith, as long as any potential for conflicts of interest were avoided. Tomorrow's workers will most likely be highly-skilled knowledge practitioners, whose services shall be on offer on a freelance basis (or via a small company), and they'll be characterised by a natural ability to manage themselves.

Organizations will thus be expected to play a far-reduced role with a completely changed understanding of hierarchy. This can be seen in the growing prevalence of horizontally structured firms, and the corporate ladder is now sometimes more accurately described as a lattice. As Drucker said in *The Practice of Management* (1954), "It does not follow from the separation of planning and doing in the analysis of work that the planner and the doer should be two different people."

Work, Life and Community

Only if business learns how to convert the major social challenges facing developed societies today into novel and profitable business opportunities can we hope to surmount these challenges in the future.

-- Peter F. Drucker, *The Frontiers of Management* (1986)

Besides shadow work, a full-time occupation takes up approximately 40-60 hours per week for the average worker, and is thus a defining aspect of our lives. Accounting for more than half of all our waking hours, work is where we express our creativity, pursue friendships and relationships, and experience the routine crests and troughs of life. Work matters to us as individuals, to our families, friends, and to the society we live in.

As indicated earlier, today's worker has a much more liberated outlook towards work, and is free to follow a much blended approach to the work-life balance. We start and end our working days well beyond the time spent in the office, while being free to carry out more personal tasks during the working day.

Today's workers, especially the youth, are far more prone to following their passion when making career choices, with money not being the only or even the most significant motivator. My own career choices as well as my peers' are testimony to that. As a practitioner in the impact sector, I have worked in education, poverty alleviation and energy spaces, with colleagues from all over the world, as young people realise their career ambitions while enjoying the experiences of meeting new cultures and serving the community.

It was indeed Drucker who reimagined the organization as a human community and the job of management as preparing people to perform and then getting out of their way. He also suggested that volunteering in the non-profit sector was the key to fostering a healthy society, and that all earlier pluralist societies destroyed themselves because no one took care of the common good.

An interesting development in this regard is the emergence of social businesses. As society is gravitating towards responsible behaviour, so is business. This is evidenced particularly by the Grameen Bank, a microfinance organization and community development bank, becoming the first business corporation in the world to win a Nobel Peace Prize, in 2006. Drucker himself was all for profit -- but not for profit maximization. His philosophy, of profits not being the purpose of an organization but rather a constraint, is completely echoed in the social business landscape of today. "If archangels instead of businessmen sat in the directors' chairs," he said, "they would still have to be concerned with profitability, despite their total lack of interest in making profits."

The Future That Has Already Happened: Are we prepared?

...what's absolutely unforgivable is the financial benefit top management people get for laying off people. There is no excuse for it. No justification. This is morally and socially unforgivable, and we will pay a heavy price for it.

-- A cantankerous interview with Peter Drucker, Wired (August 1996)

The above sound bite from nearly 16 years ago illustrates that even the sternest warning given in advance is often ignored until it's too late.

It's unfortunate that many organizations refuse to recognize the changing scenario of work and continue to operate as-is. For example, despite flexible work options, more than half of employees still believe their bosses will take issue if they aren't at their desks on time. And even though mobile technologies are far superior than they were, just 11 percent of workers are able to access everything on the move that they can in the office, signifying an enormous room for growth. Managing for the future must start with nurturing its seeds in the present.

Large organizations must learn to change their models and think in terms of relationships and ecosystems among both employees and companies. As Drucker said, "The right size will increasingly be whatever handles most effectively the information needed for task and function. Where the traditional organization was held together by command and control, the 'skeleton' of the information-based organization will be the optimal information system."

Managers thus need to be prepared to correctly describe jobs to their dispersed employee groups, build teams of optimal size and diversity, and find new modes of motivating and monitoring people, something that they haven't had to do in the Sloan age.

Universities and business schools will similarly have to learn to walk the ropes of this new world. As technologies and knowledge evolve rapidly, universities must prepare themselves for administering continuing education of adults. Indeed, Drucker said in *Managing in a Time of Great Change* (1995), "I think the educated person of the future is somebody who realizes the need to continue to learn. That is the new definition and it is going to change the world we live in and work in."

The importance of experiential learning can no longer be undermined. Learning from books can only help measure how well someone learns, rather than how well they perform. Education has to show something beyond just promise.

Business Schools, similarly, may not be recruiting the right kind of people to learn how to run tomorrow's workplace. Peter Drucker said that "management will increasingly be the discipline and practice through which the humanities will again acquire recognition, impact and relevance." It is not just mathematicians and economists, but also poets and historians the organisations of tomorrow need. Perhaps it is time we learnt something from history.

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