

Further reflections on the future of work sessions September 2023



Over the last few years, a large section of employees has become truly independent from the office, challenging individuals and companies to quantify the value of face-to-face interactions. It is no longer sufficient to rely on an instinctive assessment of its value. Successful teamwork and productive creativity are not always dependent on face-to-face contact, but many thrive on the stimulation and motivation to maximise their performance.

One solution could be to allow people to choose the appropriate environment for the task they are working on, but this does require greater levels of trust than we commonly see in today's working environments. Many company cultures aspire to generate this level of trust, but employees of different levels and roles struggle to adopt the required mindset. We hear examples of employees asking for clarification on remote working arrangements being asked if they're really committed to the company - and a directive for employees to choose the most appropriate work environment for the task being referred to as 'going soft' by HR! Both demonstrate how easily trust can be eroded.

We're also witnessing growing levels of inequality between remote working and employees who have no option but to be present in the workplace. Will the financial rewards for homeworkers be permanently adjusted to reflect the reduction in travel time and costs? How should companies view the improvement of work and life integration, ie children/deliveries, etc. The effect of work on running life doesn't come into financial negotiations, yet. Should present in the workplace employees of the future be compensated for the lack of work life integration? Combine these issues with companies being locked in a battle to attract the best talent, and struggling to fill physical and present workplace roles, and you start to see a very different employment landscape emerge.

Over the next months and years AI will be adding to the pressure on what we might describe as middle management knowledge workers. The predicted productivity gains may require less people to achieve the required output, and this of course is the same group of employees who can work independently from the office. We are already seeing a rise in individuals working for multiple companies on a freelance or partnership basis and this could soon become the accepted model.



AI and automation are also changing productivity for present in the workplace employees and those involved in physical work. Productivity will inevitably rise, as will the requirement of skills for roles, ranging from call centre agents, retail, logistics and construction workers, leaving companies with little option but to adopt learning programmes that address gaps in skill and competencies. And equally importantly, to incentivise employee performance and retention.

Taking these factors into consideration, are we seeing the start of a fundamental shift in how different roles are valued, both financially and socially? Will having a family be less of a barrier to a successful career and financial prosperity? Will having a role that requires a person's presence at work be seen as prestigious?

As working practises continue to evolve, companies and employees will need to adapt at pace to remain competitive.

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