The Future of Work: Implications for people, jobs and careers

Tim Bentley predicts that in the future work world, commitment will be to one’s profession rather than to any organisation.

You don’t have to be a crystal ball gazer to know that the work lives of the next generation are going to be unrecognisable from the way we think about work today. As the title of future of work guru Lynda Gratton’s most recent book on the subject proclaims: ‘the future of work is already here’. Indeed, the nature of work is changing before our eyes, and it is crucial for our economic and social wellbeing that New Zealand businesses don’t get caught unawares by a tidal wave of change.

In this brief essay, I outline some of the forces for change and consider their impact on the nature of future work, with a particular emphasis on the implications for workers and their careers. I will also briefly introduce AUT Business School’s Future of Work Programme, which seeks to understand the impacts of changes and seeks to inform policy and help organisations leverage new ways of working.

In the future we will see a more flexible, collaborative and increasingly insecure workforce. In the future, no one is going to pay you just to show up. Organisations will increasingly rely on the participation of older workers in the workforce. Businesses will be run by a generation with different values to their predecessors and we will see a greater representation of women at the head of our organisations. These workplace changes are driven by new digital technologies, globalisation, environmental pressures, changing workforce demographics and new forms of social interaction and organising. These forces have a growing impact on the structure of employment, the nature of work, and the demands for skills, and are shaping both career choices and the very notion of what a career is.

Future of work forces strongly impact the way work is organised – how, when, with whom, and where people work – and the demand for different goods and services, and ultimately for skills. ICT has revolutionised how work and business are done. New markets have developed and technology has given people greater autonomy and flexibility at work. New digital technology has changed where work is located. The ability to work remotely, including telework and work in the fast growing digital work-hub space, is rapidly changing the way we think about work – that is, what we do, not where we are. The digital generation will not want to work in the way we do, and the commute may seem a foolish waste of productive or leisure time to our children and grandchildren! Technology is also affecting what is taught in schools and in higher education, how it is taught and where it’s taught.

Globalisation is an outcome of technological change, but is an important drive of workplace change in its own right. Outsourcing has grown considerably due to low transport and communication costs. ICT advancements have allowed work to be distributed on a global scale, and the reality of a single global market for everything is not so far away. We are now much less constrained by global boundaries and everything – including careers – is mobile.

Demographics are another major driver of workplace change. The workforce is becoming increasingly diverse, with growing ethnic diversity due to globalisation and the need for immigrant labour. Employers now need to manage up to five different generational cohorts, each with its
own needs and expectations regarding work and careers. The aging population means people will have to work beyond traditional retirement age if we are to meet our national workforce and skills needs. So how will we replace the retiring Baby Boomers and their skills with fewer people coming into the workforce from our NZ population? Our options are simply these: retain older workers, attract more women into the workforce, increase immigrant labour. Each of these options have workplace implications. Career implications from these future of work forces include the decisions about when to retire or whether to seek a graduated retirement path. Certainly retirement behaviour is changing. We have moved from the acceptance of early retirement in the 1970s and 80s to the current drive to delay retirement and extend eligibility for super beyond 65.

Future of work forces and workplace changes have important implications for skill demands. In the same way we could have never predicted what some of today’s jobs would be, we cannot claim to know what jobs in the future of work will look like. What we can do is ensure that future workers have the necessary set of core skills and competencies to be successful in the future of work. As ever, core skills of numeracy and literacy will be essential. Other skills and competencies include: adaptability and flexibility; communication skills and relationship building competency; cross-cultural skills and cosmopolitan competence; problem-solving skills and competence for novel thinking and ambiguity; trans-disciplinary skills and interdisciplinary work competence; team working and competence in cooperation and collaboration.

So what of careers? Those coming into the workforce now and in the near future will enter a world with more global markets, meaning working overseas and away from home for long periods can be expected for some occupations. There will be an increasingly permeable boundary between work and home-life. Indeed, the 9-5 workday will be largely outmoded. Work will be less secure; workers can never again expect a job for life with work increasingly freelance. This means individuals will be responsible for their own career development and for updating their skills. We will see more flexible organisations and work arrangements such as telework becoming more common as culture and management practice catches up with technological capability.

What role do these factors play in career perceptions, in how we determine our career path, and for career customisation? Certainly, the individual will be in charge of their career – not the organisation. They will be highly mobile and will work across multiple projects and work teams. Commitment will be to one’s profession rather than to any organisation.

The AUT Business School’s Future of Work programme seeks to address these and other problems through a multidisciplinary project involving collaboration between some 30 or so academics and industry and government partners. To learn more, please visit our website: www.workresearch.aut.ac.nz

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