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Is the Future of Work Here?

Skills and Professional Development



In February 2019, The World Economic Forum (WEF) laid out the four big trends changing the future of work. They identified:

- The rise of soft skills;
- Flexible working;
- Ending harassment; and
- Pay transparency.

I was struck by the connective thread that runs through this list. Collectively, these trends speak to our desire to make work more fair, open, and positive. Implicit in this list is that we all want to work somewhere where we can contribute, be appreciated for our work, and be treated fairly.

2019

Reviewing the list in 2019, I wrote the following.

Consider what this means about our evolving attitudes around work. Over the decades, we've moved from an emphasis on the workplace — the office, the headquarters — to a flexible environment where digital nomads work from the road, from home, or anywhere. And we have shifted our expectations from a more-or-less rigid sense of a traditional workday to embrace part-time, contract-based, and other types of work. We used to have hard rules about what is, and what isn't, work, and our respective rights and responsibilities in those different domains. Today, we must always be aware of and continuously building a personal "brand" in this new world where our persistent digital presence subverts any distinction between professional and personal.

At the same time, as we are becoming more fluid about how we work, we are changing how we consider and value talent. We are seeing new value being placed on "soft skills." Are these more important today given the managerial challenges posed by a more open, fluid, transparent work life? Probably. Is it a consequence of, or a reaction to, the rise of robots and the accelerating automation of previously labeled "knowledge work"? Yes and yes.

This doesn't mean specialized skills don't matter; of course they do. But while employers used to be open to hiring skilled people almost without regard to their ability to fit with a team, smart leaders now look for people who can fit with and advance their culture. While it used to be that you hired for the strongest-possible hard skills and made sure the person had enough soft skills to survive, I sense that equation reversing.

The WEF list is also intriguing in what it suggests about the new rules of work. The new priority on flexibility and relaxation of rigid standards does not mean that "rules" have no place in the modern workplace. In fact, employees are increasingly seeking stronger support and enforcement of rules they consider most important, the ones that dictate interpersonal behavior. They are demanding an end to inequalities of all kinds and transparency across issues once perceived to be personal and nobody's business.

I am also struck by what is not on the list. There's nothing here about automation, AI/ ML, or digital transformation. In fact, there is nothing here about technology at all. We are in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, where several mega-trends are moving at exponential speed and will more violently disrupt markets, industries, and workforces than the previous three. I would not view these forces as incidental to or merely enabling of the WEF's four trends. I view them as fundamental, and if not appreciated and examined closely, they will yield unintended negative societal consequences. The

last two years show it is already happening.

2020

Sitting in my home office in the summer of 2020, it's safe to say the WEF's predictions have proven accurate. Indeed, here in the United States, these trends have accelerated and gained urgency, fueled by the two major forces of this moment: the global coronavirus pandemic and the national awakening around social justice.

This is a unique moment. Just about everything about the way we work is now open to change. There is a growing recognition that even if were possible simply to “return to normal” after these forces have upended our world — and it is clearly not — that it would not be desirable to do so. We have a historic opportunity, even a responsibility, to change work in ways that make it more effective, productive, and equitable. We can rethink not just our dependence on the physical workplace, but the way we organize and collaborate, motivate and communicate, and source talent.

This is an exciting time. Companies that embrace change now by reimagining the future of work from the ground up, and building equity and flexibility into every aspect of the employee lifecycle, will be the big winners. Ultimately, we all stand to gain.

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