THE FUTURE OF WORK

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As consultants, we thrive on providing answers to our clients' problems. But it's also our role to ask the right questions too.

We recognise that, in a world where change feels like it's running at breakneck speed, finding time to think deeply can feel like a luxury people can't afford.

We also know creating spaces for conversations, igniting curiosity, and listening to different perspectives can be incredibly valuable and insightful.

So when embarking on The Future of Work roundtables in partnership with TheBusinessDesk.com, we had high expectations.

The good news is we weren't disappointed - but we were often surprised by the conversations.

It was not a surprise that business leaders in different sectors are wrestling with lots of the same issues, or that the role of technology is a common board topic.

But we were pleasantly surprised that people are still at the heart of almost all business discussions, driving choices and shaping outcomes.

In a future which is often hyped to belong to the machines, our conversations demonstrated that people, culture and strong leadership are still seen as key and at the heart of business.

There is no doubt the Future of Work has many challenges, things to consider and plenty of unknowns. But the feedback from our business leaders shows that talking about the challenges and sharing ideas, the future seems in pretty good shape!

Enjoy reading.

THE FUTURE OF WORK

Managers deal with the present. Leaders deal with the future.

But at a time when the only certainty seems to be continuing uncertainty, how is that achieved?

Curium Solutions and TheBusinessDesk.com brought together 50 business leaders at round tables in key regional cities to share their perspectives on what's next for the working world.

This is what they thought.

THE PLACE OF WORK

"WE HAVEN'T YET WORKED OUT HOW TO WORK POST-PANDEMIC"

Remote *v* office; 9 to 5 *v* asynchronous working; geographic talent pools *v* global. We are still in the early period of what the future of work looks like in the wake of the seismic shock of the pandemic.

There is a huge variety in approach, even in companies operating in the same sector and region, or that appear to look and act the same from the outside.

There is unlikely to be a single, "right" answer, but in time there will be a consensus – and that consensus will be driven by two factors: results (what works for the business) and retention (what works for the high-performing individuals and teams).

But for now there is no rulebook, no status quo or accepted wisdom. Embracing this tension is a key job for leaders.

The office was, for so many people, the constant in their daily routine until the pandemic up-ended how people thought about their job.

The "9 to 5" was ripped up and although it has been largely pieced back together, it doesn't look the same.

Clusters of collaboration

The office is now primarily a place of collaboration. Professional services firms and other people-centric businesses have set the pace in physically reshaping their working environment to provide the hubs and pods to bring people and ideas together.

To meet with purpose, to invest in teams, to build social capital. To plug teams in and recharge.

Employers now have to show they are adding value.

They must make the office experience a positive one, to make it worthwhile to battle the commute.

It needs to enable touchpoints for teams, help foster a sense of corporate community and provide an opportunity to build culture. Amenities help, and there has been significant time and investment put into rethinking office space to cater to both the needs and wishes of workers. Wellness is now central to the planning, not a fringe add-on.

For many organisations, the changes have resulted in the completion of the overdue democratisation of the office.

The trend for open plan offices that was symbolic of less hierarchical and status-driven layouts was already well underway (although when one global professional services firm moved to a hot-desking approach in its new regional city office, one older partner was heard to ask "I know it's all hot-desking, but where do the partners sit?"). Post-pandemic, through more office reconfigurations and relocations, that change is largely complete.

Flexible workspaces also serve the needs of different workers, as well as different purposes. The rise of the neuro-diverse worker (or, more accurately, the rise in the awareness of and willingness to adapt their needs) means more people can work in an environment that best suits them, and allows them to thrive.

"The mistake is to think we can do exactly the same things we did in an office but sat behind a computer screen"

But there is an acknowledgement by many that remote working cannot be a straight replacement for working in an office. Many tasks can be accomplished in the same way, but it requires leaders to be alert to those that can't.

Important interactions, from development opportunities through to difficult conversations, often benefit from being in person.

And the agglomeration effect, so often attributed to cities, applies just as meaningfully to offices. The pace of action, the wisdom of crowds, the innovations and creativity – the multiplier effects that create opportunities and growth.

"THE INEFFICIENCY OF HOW WORK IS STRUCTURED"

While the impact of the pandemic has enabled more radical thinking about the world of work, it has helped to fuel interest in the 4-day week.

In an outcome-oriented workplace, where productivity is measured and not presenteeism, **Monday-Friday need not be carved in stone.**

Parkinson's Law, which wryly observed that work will expand to fill the time allotted for its completion, is nearly 70 years old.

But now emerging research into pilot programmes and established timetables has shown that the focused four-day workers with supportive companies that have reviewed and made efficient their processes and systems, can not only be as productive, but in some cases even more productive than their former five-day-a-week selves.

THE TEAM AND THE LEADERS

A REBALANCED DYNAMIC

One of the most famous calls to civic-minded action and the greater good was by John F Kennedy when he rallied Americans to "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country".

Replace country with company and that has been the accepted wisdom on how to get on at work.

But the employer-employee relationship has not just been rebalanced, in many cases it has flipped.

The candidate is interviewing the company – "persuade me why I should work here" – and once on board the approach is maintained.

One participant, who labelled themselves as "the Gen Z representative around the table", described their mindset as "what are you going to do for me?".

This exemplifies how recruitment and retention strategies have to be overhauled.

"Benefits" are not just salary and holidays, but can now also include a wide package of development opportunities, wellbeing initiatives, flexibility to work when and where they prefer.

The new workplace contract, which weakens the company's authority over the knowledge worker, also helps to create an impatience among junior staff.

THE LINEAR CAREER PATH HAS BEEN RE-ROUTED

Young employees are in a rush. They are being driven by economic factors, with the average salary- to-house-price ratio means wannabe-homeowners need to be earning well quickly. They are also affected by the impact of social media, with LinkedIn especially being a constant reminder of seemingly everyone else's exciting jobs, promotions and career progressions.

But younger employees and those who are much older are also seeing the weakening of linear careers and jobs for life.

Yes, it is not unusual for a leader in a professional services firm to have stayed with the firm they trained with or joined very early in their career (especially as consolidations and mergers mean

they may have worked for three or four firms without ever actually moving).

But that sector faces pushback on the notion that every junior member of the team wants to make partner. And that means the old approach to work-life balance is under pressure too.

Employers have responded to what the pandemic forced them to embrace, but many are resisting the "what's next?".

Thinking the unthinkable has returned to just waiting to see which of their competitors' actions will force them to change.

LEAD, DON'T (MICRO-)MANAGE

So what are junior members of the team looking for from their managers and leaders? They want to be trusted – to deliver outcomes and results, but their way and using the technology and tools that are now available.

They want clear communication, but with an expectation that it won't be delivered in a way that could be construed as a personal criticism.

They want autonomy; **they don't want to be managed, but they do want to be led.**

That leadership must be authentic – but as one participant said, in a great example of the honesty that is required of a modern, open leader, "being authentic is tiring".

It is hard giving of yourself every day. To listen carefully and patiently, to meet the other person where they are and not where you want them to be. To encourage them to also be their authentic self, which will only happen if they see leaders demonstrating those traits too.

Authenticity is also the root of diversity. Breaking the bonds of conformity to embrace a wide range of perspectives and experiences, and giving them weight in decision making.

REPLACE PERFORMANCE INDICATORS WITH PEOPLE INSPIRERS

Traditional KPIs are important to businesses, but so are Key People Inspirers. Does your senior management or board spend time focusing on that?

Is there an understanding of how each person's role fits into the whole, and how their contributions contributions help to move the business forward? Does that role allow for flexibility but also for growth? How seriously is there an attempt to align personal goals with the organisation's strategic goals?

In hybrid or remote roles, this becomes even more critical. So much traditional development in the workplace happened by osmosis – informal feedback, unplanned moments, learning by observing.

The working world had been on a long trend of breaking down walls, but the working-from-home revolution has rebuilt them, virtually. And removed the watercoolers.

This means training and development, especially on the so-called softer skills, need to be given the same priority as technical skills, with the same structured approach to training needs.

At the same time, leaders must focus on the skills of the future. The accelerating pace of change in technology is also creating a future skills gap that is widening on an almost-daily basis.

Technology will provide the how, especially but not exclusively on the routine tasks.

The skills of the future will be focused on relationships – providing the human element to business interactions – and on adding value. The creativity, the engagement, the relationship: the why.

TRANSFORMATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

BE POSITIVE ABOUT ITS DISRUPTIVE IMPACT

Artificial intelligence has already proven itself to be a transformational technology and the widespread adoption of it is changing working practices, large and small, on a daily basis.

It is creating opportunities for improvements in productivity and in products, and is expected to drive huge change.

Much of the initial focus has been on AI's potential to eliminate jobs – one report suggested 300m jobs globally – but there is a realisation that roles and functions will change.

And in the short-term the reality is more simple: a competent person using AI consistently and appropriately will out-perform someone who isn't.

You'll be replaced by your competition long before you are replaced by a standalone AI solution.

"WE CAN'T REALLY PREDICT HOW THIS IS GOING TO PLAY OUT"

There is a fear about technology, caused by a lack of understanding, worries about the costs (and the costs of making the wrong choices), and being daunted by the speed of change.

Many businesses remain in a "wait and see" position, but that won't be tenable for long with AI technology now accelerating up the adoption curve. There is lots of testing things out in small ways and pilot projects to understand what is possible and what will positively impact the business.

But it needs to be used in partnership with individuals and teams, to ensure they embrace the right tools and stay focused on the desired outcomes and not on the technology itself.

"WE DON'T HAVE A CONVERSATION WITH A CLIENT THAT DOESN'T TALK ABOUT TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL"

One obvious opportunity is to remove much of the repetitive process work and free up more time for the human, value-added tasks that require relationships, creativity, and judgement calls.

AI might be good at the what and the how, but strategic questions of when and how fast are much trickier to compute.

And that also points us to a critical issue with technology.

They are ultimately just as much people problems as anything else.

It's about skills and continuous skills development, listening to customers and suppliers, project management, and leaders being alert to opportunities and threats. The best technology will be of little help without getting those key things right.

The leaders who will succeed will balance flexibility, technology, and human elements, while also being open about the challenges of navigating uncertainty.

One participant summed it up: "It's always got to be about what are we doing to enable people to do their roles to the best of their ability. If the tech helps, great, but we all employ people into our businesses because we trust them."

LEADING INTO THE FUTURE

THE PANDEMIC IS NOW THE PAST, SO LEAVE IT BEHIND

The pandemic was a unique period which forced leaders to step up, face a crisis and embrace a new working world.

It was hugely challenging and exhausting, and lasted much longer than the times the country was in lockdown or wearing masks.

One participant put it plaintively: "Leading a company is incredibly difficult. How are you supposed to tell your staff everything is going to be okay if you don't really believe it yourself?"

Three years later, many organisations have not moved on. Leaders got so used to firefighting – many, in fact, are in more elevated positions precisely because of how well they responded to the crisis – that they have not been able to get out of that mindset.

But they must if their organisations are to succeed.

Yes, there are crises and short-term difficulties, some just affecting that organisation and others – economic, political – that have a wide impact.

But there are also challenges with a much longer timeline – technology, skills, sustainability, business growth – which require a deep strategic response.

Leaders must get out of survival mode and learn, or re-learn, how to look around corners.

THE ACCIDENTAL LEADER

Organisations can be hampered by the rise of the accidental leader, those people who have been promoted without being properly trained and equipped for managing others.

There is an expectation that they will not only manage, ensuring the successful completion of tasks and projects, but they will also lead, inspiring others to fulfil their potential, to create and maintain a culture based on values and shared goals.

They are having to deal with change at such a tremendous pace, while also battling their own workloads, pressures and insecurities, and they are thinking: 'Well, no-one told me how to do that'.

Leadership skills do not suddenly appear because of a promotion or new role. Nor do they appear just by the passing of time - experience is only valuable if there are learnings and understanding, and development.

Leadership gaps, even leadership vacuums, can be profoundly damaging. It was described as a "real existential leadership crisis" for companies.

It is a crisis that is expected to worsen. There is great uncertainty about what the organisations they are running will look like and how they will function. The threats and challenges will continue to rise at speed.

EMBRACE BEING A LEADER AND NOT JUST A TEAM MEMBER WITH SENIORITY

Individuals who are in leadership roles but do not see themselves as a leader – instead thinking of themselves as "a senior one of them" – not only do themselves a disservice, but also limit the business.

Leadership drives real value and it is a skill that needs studying and actively developing. There was widespread agreement about the importance of having a business coach or mentor, to have "someone to hold you accountable – point out the obvious and hold your feet to the flames".

Leaders also need to invest in having the right people around them. Otherwise they become trapped doing, not leading: "you keep yourself busy…you're just locked in a loop that you can't break out of".

LEADERSHIP IS THE ONLY SOLUTION THAT WORKS

Quality leadership is the only solution that has a fighting chance of addressing all of the challenges at once.

"Vanilla leadership" can be enough in times of stability and general growth. Being in the middle of the pack can feel safe in the moment, but it is not always the best long-term option – and going along with everyone else is not leadership.

In uncertain times, showing up when you can't control the outcome defines leadership.

And when everyone else around you is standing still waiting to see what happens, step forward and lead.
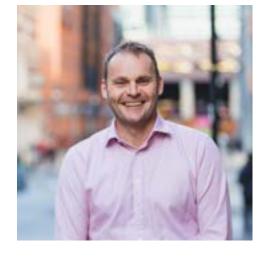
CONCLUSION

I really enjoyed meeting such a diverse range of businesses during our regional roundtable series.

People remain very much at the heart of our businesses, and I hope that emerging technologies will help everyone to be more efficient and effective in the future, helping us to embrace rather than resist it.

There is no doubt that the past few years have been challenging for leaders and businesses alike, but we have all learnt a lot of lessons along the way. How we apply those lessons will differentiate the future winners from the competition.

Over the last 16 years Curium Solutions has worked with customers across multiple sectors and geographies.

There are three signs that I look for in the companies to assess their likely success in transforming their business:

Andy Dawson
Director & Co Founder
Curium Solutions

1. The ability to deliver and execute their plans, recognising where they have gaps that need to be addressed.

2. The importance they attach to taking their people on the journey with them. The business can't change if the people won't.

3. Understanding the importance of putting their people at the very heart of the business and its future success.

As we enter the second half of 2024, the world is still full of uncertainty, but I am seeing a lot more ambition and future planning happening. That is a good sign for all of us.

Finally, I wanted to thank the team at TheBusinessDesk.com for their help with this project, you have been very easy to work with.

I also want to thank everyone who attended one of the roundtables and made such valuable contributions. If you need a partner to support you on your People First Transformation journey, then we would look to explore that with you.

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