

The Future of Work

In 1932, British philosopher Bertrand Russell forecasted a society where people would work an average of four hours a day. Eighty years later, most of us still work a lot more than this ideal figure. Moreover, the trend seems to be toward an increase in hours instead of a decrease. Indeed most executives feel that they are working longer than the previous generation, thanks to information technologies that help them to be always connected... to work.

But we should not blame Bertrand Russell. Many of the smartest brains of their time made similar mistaken predictions. Is it therefore pointless to anticipate? We do not think so. Studying the failures of future prediction, one can see that it is necessary to weave the different trends together to understand how they impact each other. It is important to understand the drivers behind different trends that could impact the future of work, and put them into a framework to show how they will interact and create different future scenarios. In order to invest and innovate, today's leaders need to feel confident about the varied forms that work may take in the near future. In order to build those expectations, they need to design possible scenarios. It is the construction and analysis of those scenarios that will help business leaders the most. Identifying key trends and issues will make them realize where they should focus their attention and where they can observe the largest impact on their business.

Through a review of the main trends and issues identified in the available research, one will realize that the literature in this field is incredibly abundant. Almost every management consulting firm and governmental association wants to present its vision of the future. The key knowledge we gain from this analysis is that scenarios can be very different but are mostly based on a few specific trends. To understand the way these trends impact work, we used a tri-polar framework of Employer, Employee, and Work Environment and included the impact on Government & Society. The relationship between those poles coincides with the megatrends that have been identified through research: Technology, Demographics & Cultural

Mindset. With this framework it is possible to test and analyze the impact of those trends and issues.

If we study the impacts of technology, we will see that it is often designated by the mainstream media as a systematic cause of job reductions, with the traditional example of the dead and gone phone dispatcher, or the assistant stenographer. But they usually ignore the new jobs: website copywriter, sustainability expert or social media manager. These are roles that did not exist ten years ago.

In our second phase, we investigated in more detail two key trends: the monitoring of employees by their employer and the open talent economy. The first trend may spread rapidly amongst top executives and we can use two analogies. Firstly the Blackberry in the mid 2000s, when executives chased it to be recognized as 'key employees'. Secondly, the current trend in sport where expensive athletes are monitored closely to make sure their team can get the best performance out of their 'assets'. The second trend is the open talent economy, where online services allow entrepreneurs and freelancers to bid for specific projects for a defined price. Those platforms allow employers to directly access a worldwide workforce that will compete for their jobs. We showed how those trends could influence the way we will work in the near future.

In the third phase, we showed concretely how the combination of trends generates such complexity, that it is difficult to forecast a future for work. It is up to business leaders to isolate a few trends, for example looking at the cultural mindset of 'living to work' versus 'working to live', the aging of populations, global access to education allowed by MOOCs and the age of retirement. According to the possible positive and negative impacts of those trends and their interactions, leaders can generate a range of scenarios with perceived opposite outcomes. At this point in time those outcomes could all be equally likely to materialize. One may ask: "So, why do we spend so much time anticipating if the outcomes can be so different?"

One possible answer is that many different scenarios can materialize and any prediction can be wrong. Therefore, the most important lesson for leaders may be to know how to identify the

key trends that can impact the future of work, and understand how these trends will form a scenario for their business. By studying and gaining a deeper understanding of the possible scenarios they can perform an analysis of the challenges, risks and business opportunities that arise, and plan to take advantage of them. Business leaders will have to adapt to any development and, eventually, to know how to lead their people to adapt. This last point is certainly the main skill current and future leaders should focus on: leading for change.