



WHAT A PIONEERING NINETEENTH-CENTURY FEMALE CONSULTANT CAN TEACH US ABOUT THE FUTURE OF WORK

Mary Parker's Follett's ideas were way ahead of their time. As we debate the future of work and the role women will play in it, there are some powerful lessons we can learn from the 'mother of modern management'.

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Today's businesses operate in a world of continual change. Faced with the need to constantly adapt and future-proof themselves against disruption, organizations are [wholeheartedly embracing agility](#) and other concepts that emphasize small, self-organized teams, coordinated networks, mutual communication and people empowerment. These concepts offer radical alternatives to the traditional command-and-control-style management that has defined business practices for the past century.

With the publication of the [Agile Manifesto](#) in 2001, we can be forgiven for thinking that we have embarked on a thoroughly modern endeavour. But few people are aware that [many of these concepts can be traced back to Mary Parker Follett \(1868-1933\)](#), a bluestocking social reformer widely considered as 'the mother of modern management'.

Follett had no graduate education or corporate experience. She began her career as a social worker managing neighbourhood community centers in Boston in the United States, and her ideas on leadership and group behaviour gained recognition amongst business leaders in the late 19th century. Perhaps it was her outsider and unconventional status that led her to develop eerily prescient ideas which the Austrian-American management consultant Peter Drucker described as "not only right, but supremely relevant today."

Follett criticized hierarchical organizations and celebrated non-linearity; she believed that decision-making should arise from situational factors, rather than through formal titles. She advocated a participative leadership approach where power is mutually influenced and developed. With her disdain for top-down control, she celebrated leadership that empowered people at the group level. And while [a greater purpose than mere profit maximization is becoming increasingly recognized](#) in today's business world, Follett was already advocating the role of business in society almost 100 years ago.

As Follett herself said: "The most successful leader of all is one who sees another picture not yet actualised." As we debate the future of work and the role women will play in it, we could all heed Follett's wise words. The future of work need not follow the same patterns and organizational structures that it did in the past. It's possible to imagine something completely different.

Take the example of Dame Stephanie Shirley, who envisioned an alternative workplace for women in technology-back in 1962. While women [continue to face barriers in the tech industry](#) today, the situation was even worse back then. Freelance Programmers, a software programming company that Shirley set up from her dining room table, was radical for its time. It was established as a company of women for women, focused on enabling them to manage their work-life balance and put their STEM skills to work.

Shirley was determined to give women, particularly those with children, the opportunity to work. Employees were strongly encouraged to work from home, have flexible hours and embrace job-sharing. To enable this, the business was networked and had an intranet, long before others knew what that word meant. She instituted task-oriented payment, rather than hours worked, profit sharing and; unusual for its time, company co-ownership. The team

thrived, and the company eventually floated on the London Stock Exchange in 1992 with a \$3 billion valuation; making millionaires out of many of its long-time members.

Follett and Shirley, as well as countless other individuals, dared to imagine a future of work where businesses can help everyone to flourish. As feminist management scholar, Celia V. Harquail points out, the debate is not just about women. It's about reflecting and acting on how can business can balance profit-seeking behaviour with equality for all.