

Executive Summary

Change is sweeping across the world, impacting the how, where, why, when and what of work. Individuals are experimenting with freelancing rather than employee models, hierarchies are giving way to organisational networks, work is seeping out of tightly constrained place and time containers into all of life, and the nature of work tasks themselves are morphing. Many of these changes unleash the potential for creativity and flexibility in how work is designed and performed, but at the same time, come with significant health warnings.

This report explores a diverse collection of changes taking place across the working world, unpacking their nature and considering the evidence about their impacts. While there is much to be excited by—and much to leverage for beneficial outcomes—there are also red flags.

While this report seeks to make a self-contained and standalone contribution on the changing face of work, it is also intended to set the context for forthcoming reports in the *Reimagining Effective Work* series.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
How Work is Done is Changing	5
From Employees to Independent Contractor, Consultant, or Freelancer.....	5
From Working Privately to Working Out Loud.....	6
From Hierarchies to Organisational Networks.....	7
From Devices at the Office to Highly Mobile Bag and Pocket Devices	8
Where Work is Done is Changing	9
From One Place to Many Places	9
From Work as a Place to Work as an Activity	9
From Co-located Teams to Distributed Teams	10
From Organisation-as-Partner to Organisation-as-Parasite.....	11
Why Work is Done is Changing	12
From Working to Eat to Working to Consume Different	12
From Work and Religion to Work as Religion	13
When Work is Done is Changing	14
From the 9 to 5 Workday to All-Day (and All-Night)	14
From Frequent Interruptions to Continual Interruptions	15
What Work is Done is Changing	16
Implications of the Changing Face of Work.....	17
Implication 1. Alone in the World	17
Implication 2. Build Your Own Network of Supporters.....	17
Implication 3. Career Planning Is Up to You.....	17
Implication 4. Learn How to Learn	17
Implication 5. Don't Consume It All	18
Implication 6. Re-Master the Means of Productivity in the Modern Age	18
Implication 7. Embrace the Art and Science of Reimagining	18
Summary	19

Introduction

*What's new is the opportunity to do great things simply through superior imagination in a world of unprecedented technological power. In the era of Lego innovation, we all have access to a really big box of plastic bricks. The contest is to see who can use them in the coolest possible way. **Geoff Colvin***

In the first report in this series—*Reimagining Effective Work: A Snapshot of Transformation in Action (October 2019)*—we looked at multiple examples of changes across the business sphere, including business models (Uber, AirBnb), approaches to solving problems (Zipline), and products and services (footwear with haptic feedback). However, while we may benefit on occasion from these changes, they are often macro-level and environmental changes that have only a minor daily (if that) effect on us personally. Let's change that in this chapter by looking specifically at the changes in our working lives that affect each of us—fundamentally and probably every day.

In this second report, we will:

1. Look at the changes in how work is done, including contingent work, working out loud, and a shift away from hierarchies as the sole organisational design approach.
2. Discuss some of the changes in where work is done, such as the move from one place to multiple places, co-located teams to distributed teams, and within a setting that's more parasite than partner.
3. Explore changes in why people work—encompassing reason, rationale, intent and motivation.
4. Investigate two changes in when people work: the always-on work style, and under conditions of continual interruptions.
5. Briefly mention a plethora of changes in the nature of work tasks—the what of work.
6. Consider what these many changes mean for people at work.

How Work is Done is Changing

The concept of “how” focuses on process and method, or the way in which something gets done. When used as a lens for examining the changing face of work, we can observe changes across several dimensions, such as:

- From full-time employees to a contingent workforce.
- From working privately to working out loud.
- From hierarchies to organisational networks.
- From location-tied devices to mobile devices with anywhere access.

Let's start with the first change.

From Employees to Independent Contractor, Consultant, or Freelancer

Working for a single employer for life used to be the common experience (and expectation) several generations ago, but the pendulum has been swinging in the other direction over recent decades. The modern employee has shorter tenures at multiple employers over the course of their career, and while the permanent employee model continues to dominate globally, new workforce categories are becoming increasingly common. Contingent workers—those hired on a non-permanent basis, such as for a specific project or for a specific skill set—are a growing segment of the labour market and are increasingly important to employers. The contingent worker model offers several benefits to employers:

- Labour flexibility, via access to skilled people for specific initiatives without having to commit to a long-term employee relationship. The best-qualified individual can be engaged for a short-duration, high-impact project, without the consequential challenge of finding ongoing work for them once the project is completed.
- Labour access, via having the ability to engage people with particular skills who are disinclined to enter into a traditional employee relationship with an employer. When the only option is to become an employee in order to contribute value, many skilled workers are disinterested. Different forms of engagement create space for employers to work with those who would otherwise be inaccessible to them.
- Reduction of labour costs and a way to circumvent traditional laws designed to protect people in the labour market. In most contingent arrangements, employers have no responsibility for costs associated with health care, retirement and vacations, among others.

Contingent workers, including independent contractors, consultants and freelancers, derive both benefits and costs from the change as well, including:

- Wider learning opportunities through exposure to multiple clients, organisations, projects, and situations. Observing what does and doesn't work across multiple organisations forces a deeper appreciation of the nuances and challenges. Having access to only a single reference case results in false vision.
- Improved lifestyle via greater control over time spent working and not working. Contingent workers can find it easier to design a satisfying work-life balance.
- Greater control over skill development and career trajectory is enabled by looser restrictions on mobility between an ever-changing roster of employers and clients. On the other hand, contingent workers are on their own and don't have an HR department to guide, assist or help with career progression. It's up to you, for better or worse.

Portfolio careers is a related concept, where a given individual works on a collection of different projects for several clients at the same time. At best it provides cross-fertilisation of ideas and an expanding set of opportunities at good rates. At worst it consigns individuals to working multiple jobs to make ends meet, without any safety nets structured into the employment terms.

The number of people in a contingent work arrangement varies by country. Different reports provide a range of estimates:

- In the United States, the U.S. Government Accountability office pegged contingent arrangements at 40% of the workforce in 2015 and forecasted this to grow to 50% by 2020.¹ Research published by Deloitte in 2018 made a similar assertion: that more than 40% of workers were engaged under a non-permanent work arrangement.² And research by EY Global in 2018 said that between 40% and 50% of the workforce could be non-permanent by 2020, if both contingent and part-time workers were counted together.³
- In the United Kingdom, the Professional Contractors Group said there were 1.4 million British freelancers working across all sectors. With a total U.K. workforce of more than 30 million, that's less than 5%.⁴ EY Global, on the other hand, estimated 4.8 million self-employed people in 2016, or around 15% of the workforce.⁵
- In New Zealand, a study in 2013 by Research New Zealand concluded that contractors represented 8% of the total workforce.⁶

Working a full-time, permanent role for an employer isn't the only way to contribute within the labour market, and while some workers find great success with a contingent approach, several studies have pointed to growing poverty and increased reliance on public health resources among workers without a full-time, permanent job. Clearly there are public policy issues to consider with all types of work in order to develop appropriate protections for employers and workers alike, but the point in this chapter is to merely say that what we would currently label as non-traditional working arrangements are on the rise numerically.

From Working Privately to Working Out Loud

Working Out Loud (WOL) has two components: making work observable and narrating the work.⁷ The first component requires storing current work in a place where other people can access and observe it—and comment, critique, provide feedback on, and offer help with. The second—narrating the work—is done through sharing micro-signals about progress and problems in executing work tasks. Team members practicing working out loud share a short snippet of their current work flow and status at least daily—or more frequently if the rate of change in task progress or work focus warrants it. WOL keeps team members accountable for their current work and raises the possibility of collaboration early and often. For instance, because Jim posts a daily update on the request for proposal response document he is writing, he can signal any problems with missing content as they arise. If any of Jim's coworkers have access to data to resolve the missing content, they share it back with Jim directly while Jim is still in the flow of writing the document.

WOL has been found to be especially beneficial for distributed teams who lack the ability to see what their coworkers are doing. The loss of implicit visual cues on current status when you share the same office space—Sally's in the meeting room having a discussion with the client, or Tim is walking out the door with his briefcase—is replaced with explicit declarations to annotate the work flow.

In principle, WOL doesn't mean lack of professional competence, and it also doesn't mean doing as little as possible while expecting everyone else to do your work (known as freeriding). It provides a stream of small updates that aggregate to a bigger picture of how and what someone is doing,

instead of a meta-narrative delivered via a sanitised weekly or monthly report on previous work actions.

WOL stands in direct contrast to working privately on a document or project until it is finished and ready to share with a wider group of people. While responsibility and accountability for a deliverable remains with the individual (or a team), the way in which the output is crafted changes to enable more spontaneous and early involvement from other competent individuals.

While not synonymous, WOL and daily stand-ups in the Agile methodology play a similar function. Both create a shared sense of current work streams across multiple people, highlighting potential opportunities for contributing to or learning from others.

From Hierarchies to Organisational Networks

Hierarchies were created and perfected in the 1900s to enable systematic control and coordination of organisations with growing numbers of employees, products and locations. For ensuring efficiency, consistency and repeatability week after week, hierarchies as an organisational design approach remain unmatched.⁸ However, while designing organisations using hierarchical principles enables current work to be carried out with the greatest efficiency, by design and mindset they are resistant to change, because an anomaly is viewed as something to eradicate in order to return to normal operating parameters rather than a moment to pivot in the face of learning.

Over recent decades as the external environment of customers, competitors and regulators have changed dramatically, hierarchical organisations have been slow to adapt. Management theorists and practitioners have experimented with a roster of alternatives to better support changing conditions, including self-managing teams, flattening the organisational hierarchy, and shifting to a network-based organisational design, among others. None alone have proven as adept as a hierarchy at efficiently managing current work, but all have re-introduced much needed flexibility and adaptability into organisations. It's a both/and transition with nuance, rather than a binary either/or at opposite ends of a continuum. Hierarchy-only results in stifling bureaucracy and a slow pace of decision-making. Network-only leads to confusion, divergence of direction, and underwhelming results—to the chagrin of several previously high-flying organisations (e.g., Zappos with its attempt to switch to Holacracy).⁹ In the position of nuance, on the other hand, a hierarchy with network-like attributes creates space for the new—any form of change—to grow and expand without being prematurely eradicated.

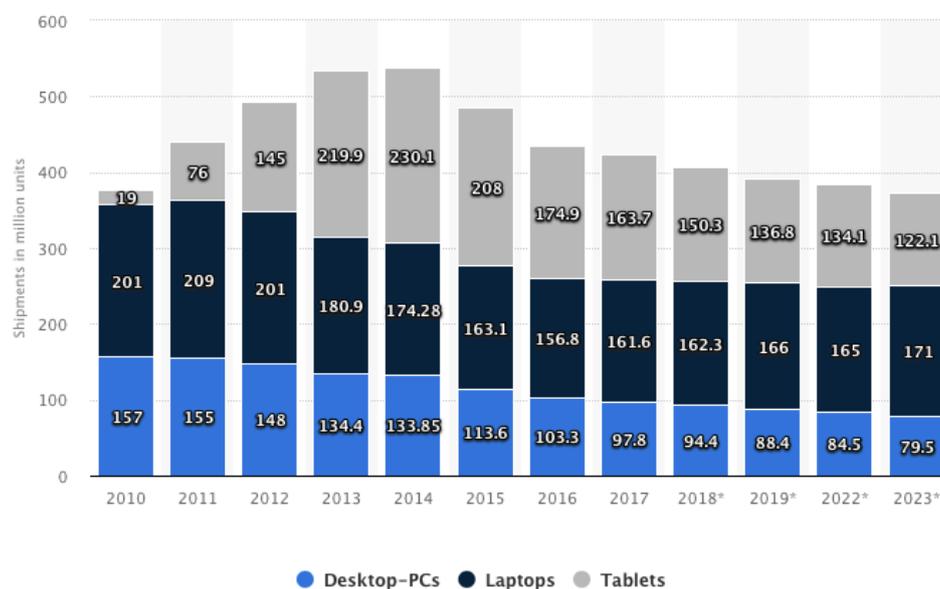
Several years ago, I had the opportunity to consult to a large global organisation with operations in almost every country of the world, that had from its beginnings modelled itself on a militarist organisation. While it was easy to see how new collaboration technologies could be useful for many purposes across the organisation, the most significant challenge was the deeply embedded cultural patterns that stood in direct opposition to collaboration ideals. Leaders were given complete control over what happened within their units, and every request for access to personnel or resources beyond the unit had to be routed through the formal chain of command. For example, if Jeff in the Blue Unit wanted to speak with Andrea in the Red Unit, the request had to be routed up through Jeff's management hierarchy until it got to the management hierarchy in which Andrea worked, and then be routed down through the hierarchy until it was approved by Andrea's manager. Anyone in the chain could veto the request or delay its passage. It was blatantly clear that unless the original *modus operandi* was revised, the potential for collaboration across the organisation would be limited. In order to create space for the new to grow, there had to be a loosening of the command-and-control approaches that tended to create work processes as grey as the traditional flannel suits worn by company men in the 1950s era.

The ideals of collaboration say that people should be able to work with and gain access directly to anyone in the network, meet as equals, and share together (i.e., give-and-take) for the greater good of the whole. Many organisations have experienced the benefits that come with this change of operational mindset, but it comes at the cost of giving away the old mindset (managers hold control and give permission) in favour of embracing a new mindset (leaders create context).

From Devices at the Office to Highly Mobile Bag and Pocket Devices

The devices used for getting work done have shrunk—dramatically. Desktop computers have given way to laptops, tablets and smartphones. Desktop devices tie people to a physical place for working, while laptops, tablets and smartphones free people to work from anywhere. Over the past decade, new unit shipments of desktop PCs have halved while demand for laptops and tablets has remained strong (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Global Shipments of Desktop PCs, Laptops and Tablets



© Statista 2019

The past decade has witnessed a significant transition in purchasing patterns for desktop PCs, laptops and tablets. New unit shipments of desktop PCs have declined by half, along with an increasing share of unit shipments for laptops and tablets. Source: Statista¹⁰

Market research firm IDC sees similar patterns in unit shipments of desktop PCs, laptops and tablets. Comparing 2017 actual shipments and its forecast for 2022, IDC says:

- Desktop PC shipments will decline from 97.8 million in 2017 to 86 million by 2022.
- Laptop unit shipments will remain steady—0.1% growth from 161.6 million units to 162.2 million units in 2022.
- The tablet segment is forecasted to both grow and decline, depending on the form factor. Newer tablet form factors, such as the Surface Pro line from Microsoft, are expected to grow from 21.9 million in 2017 to 34.6 million in 2022, while the slate tablet segment—of which the iPad is the most recognizable—is expected to decline from 141.8 million new unit shipments in 2017 to 102.9 million by 2022.¹¹

Where Work is Done is Changing

The location where people work is changing, especially for non-physical work products and those for which a physical embodiment is not necessary. Information work, knowledge work, and some types of services can be delivered remotely. No physical presence is required. Aspects of this change include:

- From working at one place to working from many places.
- From work as a place to work as an activity.
- From co-located teams to distributed teams.
- From organisation-as-partner to organisation-as-parasite.

Let's take them from the top.

From One Place to Many Places

Knowledge and information workers are increasingly able to work beyond the physical location of a single office. Small but powerful computing devices, ubiquitous mobile and wireless networks, and the proliferation of third spaces (e.g., coffee shops, co-working offices, a library) provide many options for where to work. Once a knowledge or information worker has an appropriate computing device for their communication and collaboration work style, and access to network connectivity from anywhere, they are no longer limited to having to work from a specified location. Location is irrelevant.

Several corresponding changes also enable the transition from the office as the sole location for work to the office as one of many valid places for working:

- Cloud-based productivity services such as Google G Suite, Slack, Microsoft Office 365, Salesforce, and many more. Access to cloud services from anywhere and from any device is a lot easier than with on-premises servers. You don't have to be in the office to gain access.
- New telephony services linked with a computing device instead of a phone handset, such as Microsoft Teams (and previously Skype for Business), Cisco Unified Communications and Zoom. Phone, telephony and often video communication services work anywhere the computing device is located.
- High-density canvassing of city blocks with coffee shops create many options for third spaces that provide free office space for the cost of coffee and food. Printing services generally aren't available, and you can never be quite sure who is listening in on a business conversation. Still, many people find such spaces more conducive to concentrated work than an interrupt-driven office.
- Digital information resources that previously had a physical embodiment, such as books, music, magazines and newspapers. These can be purchased and consumed from any location with an internet connection. For resources that can't be digitised, rapid delivery across city spaces by person or drone cover most other eventualities. For example, a printing order submitted from a table at a coffee shop to the local copy shop could be completed and delivered back to the coffee shop table within the hour using a rapid delivery service.

From Work as a Place to Work as an Activity

Work used to be both a noun and a verb. As a noun, it was the place you went to when work (the verb) had to be done. But work is increasingly only a verb—the activity you do, which doesn't have

to be linked with a given place (noun). As work transitions from the physical (making and moving things) to the mental (intangible services and knowledge), people don't have to go to an office to work. They carry the work in their heads (ideas), hearts (passion, drive and interest), and pocket or bag (tablet or phone).

There is still a place for work as a noun, be that a private office, allocated desk area, or flexible desking at a corporate headquarters. Work as a noun brings many people together in a shared physical place, enabling face-to-face communication, access to shared facilities and resources (such as places to eat and places to store physical items needed for the work), and even the implicit atmosphere of the site. A place is no longer essential—because much of the work can be done without being tied to a place—but a place can still be beneficial.

From Co-located Teams to Distributed Teams

Workers face increasing demands to participate in team-based projects, working with other team members who aren't in the same physical office space or area. Interactions, meetings, updates and discussions happen through so-called collaboration technology, rather than in-person around a meeting table. Working as part of a distributed team offers several loudly heralded benefits:

- Access to the best talent, regardless of their physical location. In this context, “best” generally refers to prior expertise and domain knowledge.
- Lower travel costs to bring team members together for meetings. Who needs a plane when Microsoft Teams, WebEx or Zoom create options for easy-to-setup, anywhere meetings.
- Faster time-to-market via process optimisation by leveraging differential time zones and working hours across each day to make more rapid progress than can be achieved when everyone works in a single 8-hour work shift in one location.

And yet, while those benefits are valid, they don't present the complete picture. Developing effective communication routines when physically removed from the people you work with—and sustaining them over time during the hard parts of the project—is challenging. Research and experience with distributed teams shows:

- Poor communication between team members will undermine the success of the project. For example, software projects often run over schedule and budget due to poor communication.
- Building a shared understanding of the business domain is more difficult in distributed teams than face-to-face ones. Human presence, facial expressions and body language—all essential parts of effective communication and learning—are less available in technology-mediated interactions than when meeting face-to-face.
- Team members struggle with the boundary between work and everything else because meetings called out of work hours encroach on family time and personal pursuits. Done too frequently, and the modern worker trends toward being always on, which is unsustainable while improving outcomes beyond work time and creating robust mental health.

It will be difficult—if not impossible—to turn the clock back on distributed teams. But if we are going to reap the proffered benefits and improve the outcomes associated with such work forms, we must re-define “right talent” beyond knowledge only. This means:

- Possessing people skills to work remotely from other people, especially when team members are from multiple cultures, speak different languages, and think out of different worldviews.

- Having non-work in-person and physical social supports to address the lack of face-to-face interaction with others in a work context.
- Time and resources to learn what's needed to deliver the current work initiative.
- Developing the ability to manage the interactional and learning dynamics of the group while not being in the same place.

From Organisation-as-Partner to Organisation-as-Parasite

In the age of lifelong careers with a single employer, the organisation was in partnership with the worker for their career advancement, learning opportunities, and income stability for 40 or more years. When change was required, the organisation remained committed to its workers. In the modern age, organisations are more likely to be a significant source of pain, annoyance and irritation to a worker attempting to get their job done. More parasitical than partner. For instance, workers must often produce while faced with significant organisational pressures in the areas of:

1. Reorganisations of teams, projects and reporting lines. Whether following the appointment of a new CEO or done on the heels the last ill-fated attempt, reorganisations inflict disruption on established routines, uncertainty for those being reshuffled, and angst for internal and external customers as everything tends toward the dysfunctional end of the spectrum. There are times when reorganisations are necessary, but if done too often they wreak of incompetent leaders attempting to make their mark rather than a prudently considered approach to getting better. And ultimately, irrespective of whether they are introduced for well-advised ends or not, they come with significant downsides.
2. Requests for necessary equipment, learning opportunities and other needs are blocked because of budgetary constraints. People are asked to get a job done, but the resources they need to do so are withheld.
3. Headcount reductions and hiring freezes. New people can't be hired, and departing employees are not replaced. For the latter, their work is divided up and allocated across already overworked individuals. People begin to do the work of two or three individuals. When they leave for better opportunities, the reality of their overwork becomes evident to the hiring manager who struggles to find a single individual who can pick up all the threads.
4. A mandate to "do more with less"—relentlessly, continuously, and to the point of diminishing returns where workers burn out from unmitigated stress and overwhelm. Doing more with less is an appropriate mindset and approach up to a certain point, but it can be pushed too far with damaging consequences for employees and customers alike.
5. Cross-cultural project teams without cross-cultural competencies. Working with others is hard even when everyone is from the same culture, speaks the same language, and are co-located. Mix it up with multiple cultures, diverse backgrounds, different origin languages, and separation in time and space, and you have both a recipe for intense creativity and explosive, damaging interactions.

Why Work is Done is Changing

Why people work is changing, in parallel with the how and where dimensions we have already looked at. Why is about reason, rationale, and intent. Changes in the why aspect include:

- From working to eat to working to consume different.
- From work and religion to work as religion.
- From buying things to buying experiences.

Let's look at each in turn.

From Working to Eat to Working to Consume Different

The proportion of people needed to grow the food to feed a nation has diminished due to farm mechanisation and the industrialisation of the food supply chain. All of us are no longer tilling the land from dawn to dusk to put enough food on the family table, but rather allocating only a percentage of our earnings to buy what others have grown, packaged and shipped to our local store.

The Economic Policy Institute in the United States offers a Family Budget Calculator to show the income a family needs for a modest but adequate standard of living.¹² For example, two adults and two children living in the San Antonio/New Braunfels metro area requires an annual income of US\$72,291, of which 11.2% is for food. In the Birmingham/Hoover metro area, by comparison, the annual income requirement is US\$82,555, with the food percentage at 11.3% for food. The Cincinnati metro area is slightly higher again, requiring 11.5% for food. See Figure 2. While that's still a lot of cash, it's a far cry from 100%.

Figure 2. Annual Living Costs in Three American Metro Areas

ANNUAL COSTS			
2 adults and 2 children San Antonio/New Braunfels metro area		2 adults and 2 children Birmingham/Hoover metro area	2 adults and 2 children Cincinnati metro area
 HOUSING	\$12,012	\$10,584	\$10,140
 FOOD	\$8,085	\$9,302	\$8,683
 CHILD CARE	\$11,813	\$14,095	\$15,106
 TRANSPORTATION	\$13,619	\$13,814	\$14,068
 HEALTH CARE	\$11,693	\$15,133	\$10,589
 OTHER NECESSITIES	\$8,108	\$8,023	\$7,594
 TAXES	\$6,961	\$11,603	\$9,234
Annual Total	<u>\$72,291</u>	<u>\$82,555</u>	<u>\$75,414</u>

The percentage of a modest income required to feed a family of four is less than 12% of total income, with some variations between metro areas.

What we do with the rest of that income can be divided across standard categories of expenditure, but the specifics of what we buy can easily tend toward wants rather than needs. Or put another way, we buy a Tesla to drive to work when a Toyota Prius would do the core task just as well but at less than half the cost; the want percentage of a given expenditure overshadows the need percentage. Housing is similar. In recent decades, the average house size has grown while family sizes have shrunk. Across many categories of expenditure, people buy more than is needed. Or as Dave Ramsey (among others) quips, “*we buy things we don’t need with money we don’t have to impress people we don’t like.*”¹³

From Work and Religion to Work as Religion

Religion offers meaning, a moral code, ritual and something or someone to worship. Work and religion have co-existed for centuries, but work has taken the preeminent place for many people, with religion discarded as worthless trash. In doing so, the differential effort put into both avenues have fused into one. Work as religion offers:

- Meaning, via a contribution beyond the self while being recognised for that contribution.
- A moral code—live well, work hard, and prosper financially.
- Ritual, such as go to work every day and get the job done. In some circles, this ethos morphs into “grind every day.”
- An object of worship, including more money, greater power, and elevated prestige.

Work also extends a version of life beyond death—if you just work hard enough, you will be remembered after your death and be kept alive in the day-to-day interactions of people who come after you and rely on your inventions, businesses and thinking.

From Buying Things to Buying Experiences

Everyone needs a certain number of things to live—food, clothing and shelter are the basics—but our consumption-oriented culture has pushed the acquisition of things to the extreme. While there’s an initial dopamine-gifted feel good thrill when buying something, things don’t improve long-term happiness. Hedonic adaptation means that humans rapidly return to a relatively stable baseline of happiness regardless of what happens to them, for good or bad.

A common theme across certain age segments as well as marketing messaging from the services economy is to buy experiences instead of things.¹⁴ Travel. Eating out. Concerts. Swimming with the dolphins. Paragliding. Etcetera ad infinitum. Those who invest in experiences more than things report increasing levels of happiness, because:¹⁵

- Experiences are unique to the individual, situation and direct social group. Comparing and contrasting experiences with other people is much more difficult than seeing who has the best new car.
- Experiences such as eating out, going to a concert and traveling are often done with other people, giving immediate social benefits. After the fact, experiences are shared and re-shared in other social settings through discussion, recollection, and passing around the photos.
- Experiences are fleeting. They last for a moment and then they’re gone forever, leaving just the memories. Therefore, unlike things, experiences cannot be adapted to.

The net effect of a transition to buying experiences instead of things is that the outcome of working—the reason it is done beyond embracing the work itself—is changing in nature.

When Work is Done is Changing

When is a time-based attribute of work, and it too is undergoing change. Aspects of changes to the when of work include:

- From the 9 to 5 workday to the All-Day (and All-Night).
- From frequent interruptions to continual interruptions.

Let's start with the always-on worker.

From the 9 to 5 Workday to All-Day (and All-Night)

Enabled by mobile devices and ubiquitous wireless networks, work demands have seeped into all aspects of our lives. Where earlier generations went to work (a place) for a set duration of time—the 9am to 5pm workday plus commuting on either side—modern workers are continually connected and always-on. The tentacles of work have captured workers in a vice-like grip, demanding total allegiance of priority, thought space and energy. Wireless email in the late 1990s via a Blackberry was embraced by a fraction of the population, but now it's the fraction who aren't walking around with their noses in their phones tethered to places beyond where they step.

Flexible working hours, remote work and working from home all offer the ability to work at whatever time is right for the individual. Don't come to the office and keep regular hours. Instead work from wherever you are, whenever you need to, and then stop. The risk with all flexible working arrangements, however, is that people slide to working a greater number of hours, trending away from a fixed quantum of working time to being always-on. Teleconferences with office-based colleagues and remote team members further complicate the picture, since they are often called outside of someone's flexible working day. Various studies have shown that:

- People working from home put in an average of 5-7 hours more per week than their office counterparts.¹⁶
- People working remotely a few times per month are more productive while working offsite. Of the 77% of workers who report this to be true, just under a third say it is because they work longer hours, which isn't actually a productivity increase just an increase in the input side of the equation.¹⁷
- Remote workers do a lot more overtime than their office counterparts, and they are not paid for it.¹⁸

The implication of an always-on work style means never-off. Life begins to revolve around a singular aspect—working—and everything else has to compete for the shrinking plate of leftovers. Engagement with civic pursuits, hobbies, leisure, family members, friends and just being shrinks into oblivion. The rich colours of everything beyond work are ignored, leaving a monochromatic experience which dulls the senses to possibility, the heart to passion, and the body to tone. When we should be present with those around us, we are far away through the portals of our phones and tablets, plugged in for the next dopamine-hit from work updates on Slack and likes on social media.

From Frequent Interruptions to Continual Interruptions

When there is no friction (cost) to interrupting another person, and the technology tools enable frictionless and free-flowing modes of interaction, interruptions to focused work are continual and relentless. Anyone with a computer or mobile device with apps for email, calling and chat is open to being interrupted continually. In past times, interruptions were frequent—the co-worker stopping by your desk to recount a recent client win or holiday experience, the delivery of new letters, memos or fax messages—but not continual and relentless. The modern knowledge and information worker now dwells in an environment of disruption, interruption, and never-ending noise.

Open plan offices and open collaboration tools are the two main culprits. Open plan offices—sold as the pinnacle of serendipitous interaction and creative collaboration—create direct environmental noise that is unrelated to the work people have to get done. One person’s essential conversation in an open plan office is the bane of focused attention for everyone else. Open collaboration tools that link people together across time, space and place simultaneously creates both tremendous interpersonal connectivity and complete interactional overwhelm. The numbers say:

- In 2020, the number of email users worldwide is estimated at 4.04 billion people,¹⁹ who collectively send or receive 306.4 billion messages per day.²⁰ On average, that’s 76 messages per day per person, although it is likely the business email user receives a higher average number of email messages compared with a home email account.
- Across teams and organisations using Slack, around 12 million daily active users are logged in for 9 hours a day, and active for 90 minutes per day. During this time, 1 billion messages are sent each week, or 84 messages sent per Slack user.²¹ Therefore, as your Slack network grows, so do the number of incoming messages; at 84 messages sent per week per user, that’s potentially 84 incoming messages per network contact to deal with as well. As with email, it is likely the business user of Slack has a higher average interactional count.

Workers interrupt themselves frequently too, with the smartphone being the prime culprit. In addition to the number of messages via email and Slack, workers also check their phones incessantly. The number of times this happens each day has been increasing in recent years:

- In 2017, Ofcom in the United Kingdom reported that 78% of UK adults owned a smartphone, and that they checked it every 12 minutes on average. This usage starts within the first five minutes of waking up for 40% of UK adults.²²
- In 2018, a Deloitte survey reported that Americans looked at their phone 52 times a day, up from 47 times a day in 2017.²³ For just over one third of American adults, this usage “very often” or “fairly often” includes business use outside normal working hours.²⁴
- In 2019, Asurion found that the average American checked their phone 96 times a day, or once every 10 minutes. Among Americans aged 18-24, the average was twice this.²⁵

When attempting to complete work tasks, modern workers must deal with an avalanche of interactional demands from others along with self-interruption behaviours, a situation which undermines the quality of working time and work outputs.

What Work is Done is Changing

The nature of work—the tasks done by workers—is also undergoing a substantial change. Those changes include:

- From jobs and job descriptions to a project-based approach to working. Jobs come with a fixed description, which remains in place until renewed, changed, or fundamentally altered through a major reorganisation. Projects, on the other hand, are time-bound, goal-oriented and offer greater flexibility for people to dip in and out of different competency areas and skill sets.
- From farming to produce food to manufacturing, knowledge work and the services economy. Only a small percentage of the overall workforce now work the land, but even their efforts are generally expended inside a range of air-conditioned, computer-controlled farm vehicles rather than actually touching the ground directly. The vast majority of the workforce make machinery and other hard goods, get paid to think (and sit in endless meetings), or deliver services such as hairdressing, cleaning, and tourism adventures.
- From routing, filtering and summarising information to being a front-line producer. While middle managers had a larger role than solely routing, filtering and summarising information up-and-down the hierarchy, that was an important part of their role. But as new communication technologies have entered the workplace that enable direct, non-mitigated information flows from senior executives to workers and vice versa—along with the move to self-managing teams and project-based workplaces—the need for many layers of management disappeared. Middle managers either morphed into a producer of more direct value to the organisation, left to join a consulting company or go independent, or took early retirement.
- From one set of accepted tasks to an entirely new set of accepted tasks with the same job title. IT professionals, for example, are much less likely to run on-premises infrastructure now, which used to include tasks such as buying hardware, setting up servers, and administering the server software through crashes and patch cycles. And every three years, to do it all over again when the new version hit the market. As organisations transition to cloud services where the cloud provider runs the infrastructure, IT professionals are having to master new competency areas including administering cloud contracts and running training and adoption programmes for end users.
- From interacting with people face-to-face to interacting through computer-mediated channels. “Can we meet?” used to denote a request for an in-person meeting with a potential client or colleague, along with travel requirements, power clothing, and finding the right place to hold the session. Now with widespread adoption of tools like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Facebook Messenger and a multiplicity of others, meeting is text-only, voice-only, or via video. We have to attempt to do business through much narrower communication channels, interacting with prospects, clients and colleagues who are as presence-challenged as we are.
- From knowledge workers having secure jobs to advancements in artificial intelligence threatening even jobs with high knowledge quotients. Accountants, business advisors, academics, lawyers and doctors are seeing parts of their jobs being subject to automation through artificial intelligence. Roles such as these were originally viewed as impervious to the creep of technology, but no more.

Implications of the Changing Face of Work

We have touched on the wide diversity of changes in work, workplaces, and work styles. There's a lot going on. For the vast majority of people, the forces at play impacting their own work often feel uncontrollable. Further, while some changes are insignificant and easily adapted to, others are deeply significant and offer greater challenge. The questions are many: how does an individual change their way through all of these changes? What does being effective look like as the foundations shift? What should we be doing more? Less of?

In this concluding section, we look at seven implications of the changing face of work.

Implication 1. Alone in the World

You are on your own. There are big forces at play—overwhelming ones it seems—that are driving changes in how people work and live. It would be easy to get caught up in the overwhelm and come out disempowered and depleted.

And yet, the other side of “you are on your own,” is that there is a lot of room to explore and experiment. In the midst of changing conditions that affect not just you but everyone else too, look for ways to make a contribution, to be of value, and to be adaptable in the face of relentless change. People need to eat, find shelter, get to work, look after their loved ones and families, and have clothing to wear. There are many fundamentals that remain constant even in the face of such overwhelming changes, although how those fundamentals are met are up for reimagining.

Implication 2. Build Your Own Network of Supporters

Don't try and go it alone. Build a platform of strength in association with other people, which will require curating your own network of contacts and wild supporters who love you and your work. Although there are downsides of open global connectivity through social media platforms designed to steal attention and compromise personal data, the upside—if carefully managed—is the ability to find others who have common interests. Do some research. Reach out. Give value. Explore opportunities. Among other benefits, a network of supporters will show what you don't currently know, highlighting possibilities for improvement and taking the next steps.

Implication 3. Career Planning Is Up to You

Career planning and progress is up to you. No human resources department is going to do it for you or to you. The days of fixed career paths up through the ranks—climbing the proverbial organisational ladder—are no more. Ten-year, five-year and even three-year strategies are increasingly misguided, since change renders many plans irrelevant.

Two things are required: do your best work today and look ahead to what tomorrow will demand of you. The first delivers the currency of competence and reputation, the second possibility, growth and progress.

Implication 4. Learn How to Learn

You can't afford to stand still and not improve your skills and work competencies. Learn about how the world is changing, the changes that affect your work directly, and the new skill areas that are likely to be in demand. There's a learning-of-content aspect to this, because competency in an area or domain requires content mastery. Choose a relevant topic, and dig in deep.

But there's also a learning-as-process aspect, of learning how to learn and learning how you specifically learn best. For some that's a formal classroom. For others, a quiet corner to read a book. For yet others, a discussion at a coffee shop. For others still, it requires hands-on experience and experimentation to discover how to convert ideas and concepts into actual reality.

You know you best—or should. Embrace what works best for your learning, even if that's countercultural or not in the flow of general expectations.

Implication 5. Don't Consume It All

Build your own buffers against unexpected shocks. One common recommendation from financial advisors is to have an emergency fund available to cover at least six months of expenses and living costs. But the more important buffers are non-financial: physical and emotional health, life and career resiliency, strong friendships, and a focus on learning rather than doing nothing to progress to a new job role or contribution area. Buffers and margins create space in a system between what is currently expended and what could be expended under maximum load. Always performing at maximum load—spending everything—is more commonly a recipe for early burnout (but yes, sometimes also exceptional performance in one area of life).

Implication 6. Re-Master the Means of Productivity in the Modern Age

In the modern age as the how, where, why, when and what of work changes, re-mastering the principles of high productivity is essential. Long standing principles of prioritisation, focus and concentration are being eroded by the interruptions and distractions we both endure and eagerly embrace through our ever-present devices.

Recent work by a new generation of thinkers provides essential guidance, from Cal Newport on deep work (versus the shallow work of interrupt-driven approaches),²⁶ Gloria Mark on the cost of interruptions to flow,²⁷ Sophie Leroy on attentional drag,²⁸ and Adrian Ward and others on the cognitive cost of even having a mobile device present,²⁹ among others. Intentional engagement with these ideas—and an embrace of the best principles instead of the commonly practiced ones—is the better route to high achievement and job security.

Implication 7. Surrender and Give In

Surrendering to the changes rolling across the world doesn't mean giving up and doing nothing. Surrendering isn't about giving *up*, it's about giving *in*. It's not about ceasing but rather about learning a new reliance, a new way of collaborating, a new way of working in partnership with the changing forces of the world rather than resisting them. Surrendering means acknowledging these changes are happening, learning to roll with them, and giving yourself the opportunity to find a new rhythm in life and work.

Summary

During a conference talk in Auckland several years ago, the keynote speaker—James O’Loughlin—offered this succinct advice about change in products, services and the design of work: *don’t change anything that’s already perfect*. After a moment of relief had settled on the audience, he stated the obvious: nothing is perfect, nothing is complete, nothing has no space for improvement. There’s the personal implication that every designer and producer of work should be looking for how to take the next step toward the unreachable destination of perfect, and the competitive implication that others are looking for ways to make your current perfect way irrelevant. Clinging to the mindset of “we’ve always done it this way before” leads to decline and irrelevance, even as the statement itself is factually incorrect, because no, it hasn’t always been done that way.

Work is changing. Perfect has not yet been reached. What’s the next step?

About Michael Sampson

Michael Sampson is an author, analyst and advisor. Michael's domain of interest is how people and teams can embrace changing conditions to pursue transformation, with a focus on new technologies that support rethinking work practices, organisational design, culture and business models.

Learn more at www.michaelsampson.net

Independent Research

This report is an independent publication of The Michael Sampson Company Limited and was internally funded. No vendor requested or paid for its preparation or publication.

Disclaimer

The information provided in this research report is by necessity of a general nature, and its applicability to a specific business or organisational context is not guaranteed. Due professional care must be exercised in applying the ideas within this research report. All care has been invested in the preparation of this material, but the author accepts no responsibility for its application.

-
- ¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Contingent Workforce: Size, Characteristics, Earnings, and Benefits*, May 2015, at <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-15-168R>
- ² Dimple Agarwal, Josh Bersin and Gaurav Lahiri, et al., *The Workforce Ecosystem: Managing Beyond the Enterprise*, Deloitte, March 2018, at <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2018/contingent-workforce-management.html>
- ³ David Storey, Tony Steadman and Charles Davis, *EY Global: How the Gig Economy is Changing the Workforce*, November 2018, at https://www.ey.com/en_gl/tax/how-the-gig-economy-is-changing-the-workforce
- ⁴ Ben Matthews, *Freelance Statistics: The Freelance Economy in Numbers*, August 2019, at <https://freetrain.co/freelance-statistics/>
- ⁵ David Storey, Tony Steadman and Charles Davis, *EY Global: How the Gig Economy is Changing the Workforce*, November 2018, at https://www.ey.com/en_gl/tax/how-the-gig-economy-is-changing-the-workforce
- ⁶ The Contingent, *The Contingent Workforce in New Zealand*, January 2013, at <http://www.thecontingent.co.nz/assets/Uploads/The-Contingent-research-summary-January-2013.pdf>
- ⁷ Bryce Williams, *When Will We Work Out Loud? Soon!*, November 2010, at <https://thebryceswrite.com/2010/11/29/when-will-we-work-out-loud-soon/>
- ⁸ John Kotter, *Hierarchy and Network: Two Structures, One Organization*, Harvard Business Review, May 2011, at <https://hbr.org/2011/05/two-structures-one-organizatio>
- ⁹ Bourree Lam, *Why Are So Many Zappos Employees Leaving?*, The Atlantic, January 2016, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/01/zappos-holacracy-hierarchy/424173/>
- ¹⁰ Statista, *Shipment Forecast of Tablets, Laptops and Desktop PCs Worldwide from 2010 to 2023 (in millions units)*, Statista.com, May 2019, at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272595/global-shipments-forecast-for-tablets-laptops-and-desktop-pcs/>
- ¹¹ IDC, *Despite Steady Commercial Uptake, Personal Computing Device Market Expected to Decline at a -1.8% CAGR through 2022*, February 2018, at <https://www.idc.com/getdoc.jsp?containerId=prUS43596418>
- ¹² Economic Policy Institute, *Family Budget Calculator*, March 2018 at <https://www.epi.org/resources/budget/>.
- ¹³ Dave Ramsey, *The Total Money Makeover: A Proven Plan for Financial Fitness*, at <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/25775-we-buy-things-we-don-t-need-with-money-we-don-t>.
- ¹⁴ Jonathan Pryn and Clare Hutchinson, *Next boss: We're losing sales because people don't want to buy more 'stuff'*, March 2017, at <http://www.standard.co.uk/business/business-news/next-boss-we-re-losing-sales-because-people-don-t-want-to-buy-more-stuff-a3497441.html>
- ¹⁵ Ilya Pozin, *The Secret to Happiness? Spend Money on Experiences, Not Things*, March 2016, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ilyapozin/2016/03/03/the-secret-to-happiness-spend-money-on-experiences-not-things/>. This is but one of many articles on the topic of buying experiences instead of things. It's worth a broader read if you are interested in the approach, but doing so is beyond the scope of this report.
- ¹⁶ PGI, *The Yin + Yang of Telecommuting*, September 2013, at <https://www.slideshare.net/PGI/the-yin-yang-of-telecommuting>
- ¹⁷ CoSo, *CoSo Cloud Survey Shows Working Remotely Benefits Employers and Employees*, February 2015, at <http://www.cosocloud.com/press-release/connectsolutions-survey-shows-working-remotely-benefits-employers-and-employees>
- ¹⁸ Charlie Sorrel, *Working From Home Usually Means Longer Hours For Less Money*, January 2017, at <https://www.fastcompany.com/3067389/working-from-home-usually-means-longer-hours-for-less-money>
- ¹⁹ Statista, *Number of E-mail Users Worldwide from 2017 to 2023*, August 2019, at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/255080/number-of-e-mail-users-worldwide/>
- ²⁰ Statista, *Number of Sent and Received E-mails Per Day Worldwide from 2017 to 2023*, August 2019, at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/456500/daily-number-of-e-mails-worldwide/>
- ²¹ Craig Smith, *55 Amazing Slack Statistics and Facts (2020)—By the Numbers*, February 2020, at <https://expandedramblings.com/index.php/slack-statistics/>
- ²² Abrar Al-Heeti, *Voice Calls on Mobile Networks See First-Ever Decline in UK*, August 2018, at <https://www.cnet.com/news/thought-phone-calls-were-outdated-theyre-only-declining-now/>
- ²³ Abrar Al-Heeti, *Americans Are Checking Their Phones Now More Than Ever, Report Says*, November 2018, at <https://www.cnet.com/news/americans-are-checking-their-phones-now-more-than-ever-report-says/>

²⁴ Todd Spangler, *Are Americans Addicted to Smartphones? U.S. Consumers Check Their Phones 52 Times Daily, Study Finds*, November 2018, at <https://variety.com/2018/digital/news/smartphone-addiction-study-check-phones-52-times-daily-1203028454/>

²⁵ Asurion, *Americans Check Their Phones 96 Times a Day*, November 2019, at <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/americans-check-their-phones-96-times-a-day-300962643.html>

²⁶ Cal Newport, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, January 2016, at <https://www.amazon.com/Deep-Work-Focused-Success-Distracted-ebook/dp/B013UWFM52/>

²⁷ The Economist, *The collaboration curse*, January 2016, at <http://www.economist.com/news/business/21688872-fashion-making-employees-collaborate-has-gone-too-far-collaboration-curse>

²⁸ Sophie Leroy, *Why is it so Hard to do My Work? The Challenge of Attention Residue when Switching Between Work Tasks*, July 2009, at

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/46489122_Why_is_it_so_Hard_to_do_My_Work_The_Challenge_of_Attention_Residue_when_Switching_Between_Work_Tasks

²⁹ Adrian Ward, Kristen Duke, Ayelet Gneezy, and Maarten Bos, *Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capability*, *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, Volume 2 Number 2, April 2017, at <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/691462>