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The New Workplace

Many forces are shaping the workplace today, and organizations are in a constant state of evolution. Change is more frequent and pervasive than ever before. In fact, change is the only constant. We need a new word for this type of change, this change that has no beginning, no middle, and no end. We could call it “continuous fluctuation,” or “expected turbulence,” or “business flow.” Whatever we call it, things change so quickly that businesses face everything they had to face in the past, only at triple and quadruple the speed!

Some things that occur faster or change more frequently than ever before are

- The life cycle of products (from inception to delivery)
- Communication methods and tools
- Delivery systems
- Decision making
- Formation and disbanding of teams
- Formation and disbanding of organizations
- Company mergers and acquisitions

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- The rise of new products and services
- The employee makeup of an organization
- Organization goals and strategies
- Job requirements, positions, and the frequency with which people change jobs

Why does so much change so quickly? A quick look at the evolving world over recent years will help us to understand why business and organizations are so dynamic today.

The world of work has literally become “the world,” as companies do business around the world and around the clock. Global, as well as local, factors must be considered in decisions, and people must be skilled at working across cultures and nationalities.

Technology has shortened the life cycle of products, made cross-global communication faster, proliferated information, created hundreds of new jobs, and left in its wake now obsolete methods, machinery, and knowledge. The once-familiar environments and boxes we called “jobs” do not exist in the way they did a decade ago. Industries have come and gone, or are waning, and new industries are on the horizon. The computer has changed the way we communicate, the way we do business, and the way people work together.

Technology has also created the twenty-four-hour clock. With the increased capability for communication via e-mail and the Internet, people today are expected to be in touch almost continually with those people important to the work they are doing. People all over the world can feasibly work around the clock, due to the ease and speed of today’s communication and technology. As a result, workers may feel “married” to their work night and day, never totally free from the tug and demands of it.

More information is available to people, and it is available twenty-four hours a day. Employees have access to up-to-date company information via their company's intranet and to world-wide information via the Internet. Managers have less and less of a secretive hold on information, while employees have more information to do their jobs. Most people today have so much information that they hardly know where to begin to sift through it. Indeed, information management has become both a privilege and a challenge to everyone.

With all this change, job boundaries are blurred and job definitions outmoded. The nature of work today is that people move from project to project, from one organization structure to another, and from manager to manager. They may serve on several teams at once and "report" in a matrix fashion to multiple managers and team leaders.

Unemployment in the United States, especially for skilled and knowledgeable workers, is at an all-time low. Low unemployment means aggressive competition among organizations for qualified workers. It also means that people need to be motivated and treated well or they will seek work elsewhere. Low unemployment usually means more employee turnover.

The temperament of today's worker has also changed. Due to low unemployment, workers can demand more job benefits and special considerations. Workers want to be more and more independent, while the work they are doing calls for more and more connection. Younger workers are less patient with constraints and traditional approaches to work. Line and block chart reporting, bureaucratic complexities, close supervision, putting in a certain number of hours at work, wasting time in meetings, not being given authority to get work done, and waiting one's turn for development are not tolerated by today's competent, self-starting worker.

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At one time, it was expected that everyone would hide his or her differences at work and melt into the workforce. People were expected to leave their ethnicity, backgrounds, gender, and creativity at home. Today, people expect to bring their identity to work with them and to make a meaningful contribution because of that identity. The world is diverse. The marketplace is diverse. The workplace is diverse.

Today's marketplace explodes with new products and services and is highly competitive, time-driven, and unpredictable. Companies with effective processes—meaning adaptable, responsive, action-oriented, risk-taking, and future-focused—will be poised to take advantage of new markets and trends. In fact, *the way a company works can determine whether or not it can stay in business*. Process is as critical as product! Some people say the process is the product. The only way to stay competitive is to use *processes* that ensure responsiveness to the marketplace. And because the marketplace is ever-changing, the processes too must change.

Managers at all levels are being forced to group and regroup, to think and rethink, not only the way they organize and run their organizations, but what their organizations are going to be about—not in the distant future—but tomorrow! The kind of collaboration, heads-together, innovative work that “work teams” were challenged with a decade ago is now in the laps of all leaders today. No one manager can make the complex decisions that arise in today's work environment. These decisions require team efforts, synergy, and the combined expertise of many.

Impact on Individuals

Individuals are impacted in many ways by the forces shaping the new workplace.

First, people no longer have jobs, they have assignments. They may have a “job,” but that job will change frequently. Actually, they may have several assignments. They may serve on one fairly stable team for as long as a year, or they may serve briefly on several teams, some with short and some with long lives. At a glance from the air, the world of work may resemble a flowing river bobbing with little rowboats of “teams” with people jumping from one boat to another.

Second, the roles of leaders and individuals continue to change. Once-clear role boundaries are blurred today, and people are often expected to do more than one job. They may be called on to switch roles as needed to accomplish overall (and frequently changing) goals of their organization. The formerly revered, one-up/one-down manager-subordinate relationship has almost disappeared in today’s high-growth, fast-paced organizations. Words like “supervisor,” “subordinate,” “employee,” and “manager” are apt to be avoided, replaced by words such as “associate,” “team member,” “team leader,” or “colleague.” Managers and their direct reports are apt to work more as equals and teammates than as boss and follower. The emphasis is on equalization of individuals at work, implying that all aspects of work are important. If the work is important enough to apply resources to it, then the person who carries out that work is valuable. If all of the work is valuable, then all of those who do the work are also valuable.

The role distinction between team leader and team member is also diminishing. All people are expected to work on teams, sometimes several at once, and to work within hierarchical boundaries when necessary, not against them. People frequently change hats from team member to team leader to individual contributor to manager to spokesperson. For some, this switching of roles occurs on a regular basis. For others, it is occasional.

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One person may serve in many capacities, such as team member, collaborator or partner, team leader, multi-team leader, or manager. People must become comfortable and adept at all aspects of teamwork: being on the team as a team member, directing the work of a team as a leader, coordinating and inspiring the work of several teams as a manager or multi-team leader.

Third, no one can know all he or she needs to know to do a job today. The individual worker is now in a similar dilemma to the manager of ten years ago—expected to carry out tasks and a role without enough knowledge, buy-in, or support. The individual worker of today must cull the wisdom and garner the support of other people to get the work done. The need, then, is to “team up,” to understand when to “team,” and then to know how to “team.”

The exact team someone is on becomes less of an issue than how teamwork infuses much of what that person does. The person who refuses to team up—collaborate, share responsibility, share rewards—may be left without the information or support essential to do the job.

Fourth, skills that enable people to communicate openly (collaborate, innovate, decide, plan and develop methods for cohesive implementation of plans) are critical. Not only must people possess these skills, but also they must be able to use them quickly and adeptly in different environments. A person may represent his or her company at several facilities worldwide, be asked to travel globally and adjust to different cultures, and be expected to interact skillfully and in a timely manner with people of all levels and responsibilities, both within and without the organization. During any given week, this person may be operating in teamwork fashion with several different groups, departments, and even companies! In one setting this person may be presenting; in another

listening; in another gathering information; and in yet another facilitating a meeting.

People need skills to facilitate numerous types of interchanges daily. Facilitation skills and the “listening” attitude that accompanies them are more and more important. With e-mail and the Internet, people communicate more often than ever before! How essential it is today to have the professional skills, not only of operating the machinery and protocols of electronic communication, but of using that communication to facilitate trust, clarify understandings, ask questions, and summarize—all skills required of a good facilitator.

Fifth, in today’s workplace, people are expected to be “superworkers.” They are expected to take initiative to not only do the work but, in many cases, to define it. They must define and redefine their role in light of organization goals and be less concerned with job title and description than they are with productively filling a gap in the organization.

Superworkers are expected to have necessary technical knowledge as well as the ability to communicate, influence, plan, organize, and garner support. They are asked to be team members as well as team leaders. They are expected both to observe the boundaries of their organization and to work around those boundaries in politically astute ways. They are encouraged to define their jobs broadly and be flexible with that definition. Those who do not show initiative to take on new assignments or who do not move flexibly throughout the organization to get things done are seen as not doing their jobs.

Sixth, everyone leads to some extent today, just to get the job done. They lead by sharing information, soliciting input, asking for support, obtaining data, building trust, suggesting solutions, making improvements, and taking an active role in meetings.

From Traditional to Team-Based Organizations

Over the past decade or so, organizations have shifted from traditional, hierarchical approaches to management to more team-based approaches. Many organizations have evolved from places in which employees were generally told what to do to places in which employees are involved in figuring out and deciding what they should do. Traditionally, managers hired, motivated, and directed the work of people who were assigned certain tasks to complete. In some cases teamwork was called for, but in many cases, individuals were given a job to do without the need to interact regularly with others. As jobs grew more complex, more specialists were needed. When a new job needed to be done, a new position was created and someone was hired to fill that position.

In general, people worked apart from one another, coming together only to inform one another or to solve a problem pertaining to the whole group. The work of the group as a whole was overseen and directed by the manager.

Several “old paradigms” (patterns and practices) justified managing people this way:

- The manager was the technical expert.
- The manager made final decisions.
- The manager used a directive, decisive style.
- The manager imposed controls on employees.
- The manager defined how work got done.
- The manager processed all information and communicated it to employees.
- The manager developed the group’s goals.
- The manager administered rewards and punishments.

- Employees needed only a few skills to do their jobs.
- The focus was on specialization.
- The organization was concerned mainly with its own purpose.
- Manager-employee relationships were based on a “we” and “they” distinction.
- People operated within narrow job definitions.
- The organization was structured hierarchically.
- Teams were formed when needed.
- The workforce was homogeneous.
- Change was the exception, not the rule.

Much has happened to dramatize the limitations of these old paradigms. Managers have not been able to keep up with technical advances and new information. Therefore, their former role as experts has become outdated, and they must now rely heavily on technical experts for help in making decisions. In fact, managers can no longer even be expected to set the group's goals single-handedly.

The old paradigms defined individuals' roles narrowly. The strong focus on specialization and the narrow definition of people's jobs made it almost impossible to solve problems that involved several jobs, functions, departments, or, in many cases, divisions or even companies. Too many problems fell between the cracks—between jobs or functions—and no one was there to solve them. An over-focus on specialization led to the attitude expressed in “That's not my job,” a problem that caused vast inefficiencies in business.

When managers and their people set up “we-they” boundaries, the result was more adversarial than cooperative. The old paradigms

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created tension, which often caused management and employees to counter each other. The old paradigms placed a great deal of emphasis on doing the task without addressing the important social dimension of teamwork and organizational work life. Older methods therefore often failed to gain enough commitment from employees to get the job done.

Many new paradigms have worked their way into organizations because of the climate in which today's companies operate. Organizations have implemented new approaches, focusing on greater involvement of employees in decision making and planning, with varying degrees of success. Nonetheless, these new paradigms have evolved and are still evolving:

- Employees are experts possessing unique technical knowledge and skills.
- Employees are the natural ones to make some decisions.
- Controls are minimized or set collectively.
- Employees participate in defining how work is done.
- Employees participate in setting and interpreting group goals.
- People are resources to be developed and used fully.
- Jobs are defined broadly and require multiple skills.
- Employees focus on applying special knowledge to larger problems.
- The organization is concerned with members' and society's purposes as well as its own.
- "Partnership" relationships are fostered between managers and employees.
- Teamwork is structured into the organization.

- Creative and productive outcomes result from the synergy of teamwork.
- Teams take over some of the work of managers.
- Organization structures are flatter.
- People are given larger boundaries and encouraged to develop more skills.
- The organization is customer/market driven.
- The workforce is diverse.
- Change is the norm.

Under the old paradigms, employees had few decisions to make and relied heavily on the manager to direct their work. Under the new paradigms, employees take on more responsibility, moving into areas once reserved for management. Just as management's role changes in participative companies, so does the role of employees.

Teamwork Addresses Old Paradigm Problems

Effective teamwork addresses two key problems with the old paradigms. First, under the old paradigms, the talents of individual employees were often not fully used, and the organization suffered as a result. Second, the isolation of individuals meant that organizations failed to capitalize on *synergy*, the effect of working to achieve something collectively that could not have been achieved through individual efforts. The output of group work is, in many instances, greater than the combined output of its individual members working alone.

Organizations realize that allowing people to consistently work alone does not yield the return on investment the organization

needs to succeed in today's competitive marketplace. Because of the complexity of today's business problems and the continual change faced by organizations, the resources of all employees must be available when appropriate and necessary. Leaders must be able to rely on the wisdom of the group to solve not just the occasional mind-boggling problem but also the ongoing, day-to-day concerns faced by every organization.

Summary

Today's workplace is characterized by change, blurred boundaries, temporary systems, a proliferation of information, a global arena, and people who want more from their jobs than ever before. Philosophies and values may remain for years, but markets, products, processes, and physical locations change again and again. To respond to such rapidly changing environments, organizations must be flexible, innovate, use employees effectively, and be vitally aware of the dynamics in the world around them.