

# How Leaders Face the Future of Work

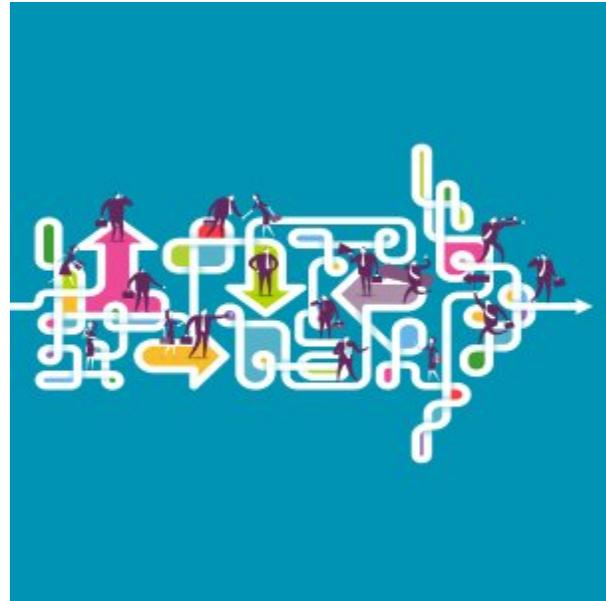
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# How Leaders Face the Future of Work

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We are living through a grand transition in the way people work. Constant and extraordinary innovation in machine learning and robotics has and will continue to reshape work. Some tasks will be replaced. Others will be augmented. No one — whether highly skilled or less skilled — will be untouched.

As people live longer and their working lives expand to many more years, they will move inextricably from the traditions of the three-stage life — full-time education leading to full-time work leading to full-time retirement — to something a great deal **more fluid, flexible, and multi-staged**. These technological and demographic

forces will continue to influence family structure, as more women work and more partnerships are built on “career plus career” rather than the tradition of “career plus carer,” further changing the shape of the relationship between a family and the workplace.

My interest here is what this means for leaders.

In many ways, a leader’s day-to-day life is more protected from these major shifts than those of many employees. The complexity of a leader’s work makes *positive augmentation* rather than *replacement* the most likely outcome of technological innovation. With their capacity for wealth creation, leaders have a great deal more opportunity to “go plural” and work with multiple organizations at the same time, and to develop encore careers whenever they wish. Perhaps as a result of their own protection within the workplace, some leaders have failed to realize that the daily lives of those who work in their organizations will inevitably be transformed over the coming decades.

But leaders need to be deeply aware — right now, not down the line — of the **transition taking place**. And they need to have clarity about the roles they can play in preparing their employees for the future of work.

## Three Steps for Leaders to Pave the Way Into the Future of Work

I believe that for leaders to create clarity about the future of work, they need to be engaged with issues of narrative, perspective, and role modeling. Specifically, leaders must take these three steps:

**Create a narrative about the future of jobs.** Most working people have an idea that technology will change their work. Some, such as drivers, cashiers, and salespeople, know that this change will occur in the near term. We know from employee surveys that these changes are a concern: Many workers fret that they don’t have the right skills to do new jobs, and few know what these new jobs could be. Really understanding the impact of technology on jobs requires deep understanding and a fine-grained analysis of the country, the sector, the job, the tasks, and the skills; there are no easy answers.

So it becomes the role of an organization’s leader to create a narrative about the future in terms of the **broad pathways of jobs and likely job creation**.

This does not have to be, and in many cases, cannot be precise. The leader’s narrative should acknowledge that work is changing and offer a job-by-job analysis supporting the narrative that provides some idea of what this trajectory could look like. Employees can then engage their own sense of agency and motivation to think about how they can take action.

**Develop a perspective on learning.** One of the fundamental outcomes of the intersection of technological innovations and increasing longevity is that one-off early education will not be sufficiently strong enough to propel people through their whole working lives. People will need to engage in work that has development opportunities built into it, be prepared to spend some of their leisure time upskilling, and probably take significant chunks of time out of work to learn a new skill.

Many companies shy away from this responsibility, believing that in such a volatile labor market with short

job tenure, it is not in their interest to help develop employees.

I believe this is the wrong approach: Increasingly, people will choose companies based on their capacities to create learning opportunities and will stay and flourish because these opportunities are available. So the second way that leaders prepare for the future of work is to have a point of view about learning. They can do this by **actively championing the learning agenda**, by making their involvement in learning initiatives a priority, and by role-modeling adult learning through their own development activities.

**Role model flexibility.** As the future of work transforms jobs and skill requirements, it will also transform the ebb and flow of daily life. To understand this, imagine for a moment that you are in a job that you know technology will transform, and you are keen to learn and develop. Imagine also that you believe you will live into your 90s, probably over 100, and you have calculated that to do so, you will need to work into your mid 70s or longer. This is a scenario (and a calculation) that many people will be making. Multi-staged lives will take many forms: Some people will take time out to explore new directions in their 40s, some will work part-time in their 50s while bringing up children, some will jump back into serious work in their 60s when they still have lots of energy and more time to focus on work.

In this scenario, the 9-to-5 workday (or 8-to-8 in some sectors), the five-day workweek, and the limited holiday entitlement seem hopelessly misaligned. Some companies have realized this and have created opportunities for

flexible work, job sharing, paternity leave, sabbaticals, and mid-level hires.

But here's the rub: People are disinclined to take these opportunities for flexibility for fear that it will adversely affect their career, signaling that they are not aligned with the values of a high-performing culture.

If they are to take these options for flexibility, it will be because this fear has been addressed. There is no doubt that the clearest signal of all is that **leaders themselves model flexible working** — that they take paternity (and maternity) leave, that they work from home, that they job-share and take sabbaticals. Becoming a role model for flexible working could be one of the most crucial supports a leader provides in preparing for the future of work.

## Don't Let Fear Take Root

Many of us are worried about the future of work. When we feel worried and stressed, we are less likely to be cooperative, less likely to innovate, and more likely to be aggressive.

Leaders can play a key role in alleviating these concerns by narrating how the future could be, by having a point of view about learning, and, perhaps most important, by modeling what it is to look forward. Looking back in decades hence, it will be these leaders who will be remembered as being best prepared and who navigated through this time of intense transitions — and who did not let fear take root.

**About the Author**

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