

The APPLIED Human at Work:
The World of The Worker
In the Digital Era

BY JULIA HOBBSAWM

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“Technology is how a society copes with physical reality: how people get and keep and cook food, how they clothe themselves, what their power sources are, what they build with and what they build.”

*Ursula K. Le Guin
‘A Rant About
“Technology”’¹*

Introduction

More than half the people on the planet work. The working world now totals some 3.3 billion of us, toiling away full time, part time or flexibly.² Every era sees its changes and challenges as unique, but by common consensus this period of history is seeing some of the most sweeping changes to the world of work and with it, the worker.

Whether we are ‘remote working’ in a rural village or in cities, or seeing clients in offices (be they funky co-working city spaces or large conglomerations of buildings some way out of town, joined by walkways, elevators, swipe-in coded doors), we are all to some extent in the same place as each other: Work is where we spend at least 10,000 days of our lives.

Work makes and shapes products and services, experiences and systems which are today almost exclusively embedded in digital systems and whose delivery has a digital aspect. Whoever is doing the work — from a hybrid machine-learned system plus human operator to full-blown robotics — the actual doing of our jobs is reliant on a plethora of gadgets, devices and cloud-based systems.

It is the tension between the welcome, necessary, new range of digital technologies, and the impact on relatively unchanging, finite human beings which interests me and which this extended essay concerns itself with.

Today, technology has become our main co-worker. This was not always the case. The predominantly manual world of work was overturned only as recently as the Industrial Revolution a couple of centuries ago — a historical nanosecond.

The mass connected computerised technologies pervasive in society today are even more recent: Arguably, the timeline runs from the advent of the Personal Computer (1981); the Windows operating system (1985); the World Wide Web (1989); geolocation and GPS (1995); The Apple App Store launch (2008); Cloud Computing (1996)³; Google (1998); The Internet of Things (1999); Facebook (2004); and on to today in which the unified communications of AI, VR and robotics are the current big tech beasts.

The domestic home has experienced utter technological transformation more recently than the workplace ahead of the digital era: during the last century we enjoyed electric and gas appliances transforming how we heat, eat, and entertain ourselves in our private spaces. The refrigerator, the washing machine, the television... the home adapted to absorb these technologies and embraced them at a time when in the main the office had static equipment - remember the typewriter and the telex? - until the 1970s.

¹ Ursulaklequin.com 2004 ‘A Rant About “Technology”’

² International Labour Organisation 2019

³ ‘Who Coined “Cloud Computing”?’ by Antonio Regalado, MIT Technology Review, October 2011

Whilst offices, factories, laboratories and all workplaces obviously have had their share of incoming technology, until the 1980s they lacked the ubiquity and indeed the acceleration: it is rather extraordinary to think that 90%⁴ of today’s US businesses use social media for marketing, when the overall business use of social networks is under a decade old.

Today’s digital technologies, electronic tools, devices and resources which store, convey, convert and transmit digital data from parking tickets to payroll, from homework to hourly schedules, from shared workflows to, of course, email all add significant layers of learning, time and choice to those organising workplaces and those working in them.

How does all of this change sit with us, sitting at a desk or tapping away in our ‘home office’? Do we feel liberated, exhilarated, or enslaved? In truth, as often in life, it is a bit of both. The APPLIED Human at Work has a big balancing act to pull off.

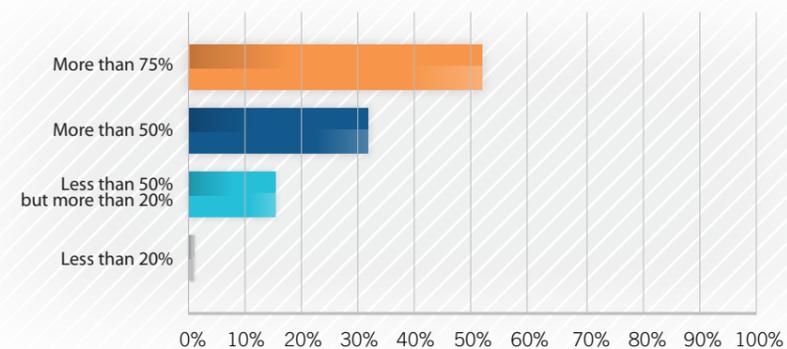
Hybrid Humans

Here’s an analogy: cars. Modern cities and society have been defined by and for the car (the car has been the most pervasive personal piece of technology until the computer and the mobile phone). The 4th Industrial Revolution and the cultural earthquake in values around climate change and sustainability have recently disrupted this model. Debate has opened up in politics and culture around how and why we use cars.

At the same time, cars themselves are undergoing a manufacturing, AI and fuel revolution with hybrid models and driverless versions emerging, as we ask ourselves big questions: who do we design cities for, the human or the machine? And if we do have cars, do we want our autonomy as humans to be withdrawn? Research suggests that in terms of consumer confidence, we currently still want a human at the wheel.⁵

A similarly radical kind of transition is taking place with human work and the workplace and the debates about who is in the driving seat, so to speak. “The worker” is turning from belonging to two basic groups - Manual and Professional - into something altogether more hybrid itself. A recent study by the information technology company Unisys⁶ identifies six types of digital worker: *The Knowledge Worker*; *The Creative Worker*; *The Shift Worker*; *The Gig Worker*; *The Field Worker*; and the *Branch Worker*. Each job demographic is divided into those who work for organisations labelled either ‘technology leaders’ or ‘technology laggards’. The clear implication is both that no job is untouched by technology anymore and that successful recruitment, retention and overall organisational success hinges critically on the relationship anyone in the ‘worker chain’ has to technology.

How much of your working day do you spend on a computer of any kind?



Source: Editorial Intelligence Survey, April 2019

Today’s hybrid human worker needs to be both flexible in outlook and location and in skills. They need both hard and soft skills. They often need to make their own luck, being ‘full-time contractors’ and divorced from a traditional set of hard-fought and hard-won worker rights.

⁴ Statista data showing US business use of social media rising to over 90% in 2019

⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/greggardner/2018/08/16/autonomous-vehicles-face-consumer-attitude-and-congestion-problems/#21055dfd4e1a>

⁶ The New Digital Workplace Divide: Unisys 2018

Today’s hybrid human worker needs to be both flexible in outlook and location and in skills.

For those without skills, or with old skills, the race is on to rescue them from employment oblivion.

Whilst hard and soft skills are equally valued and increasingly required, no-one is completely sure where the priorities lie between the two. Employers are obsessed with reskilling, because this enables them to grow faster, to be efficient, and to develop their workforces for the future. But which particular skills, and for what purpose?

Emerging trends from LinkedIn's third annual Workplace Learning Report⁷ which surveyed more than 1,200 talent developers and over 2,000 workplace learners are revealing: "Foundational efforts like soft skills will remain important in 2019, but will no longer take up the majority of a talent developer's time", commenting that "with the shortening shelf life of skills, creating and maintaining market leadership hinges on talent development's ability to help employees acquire and grow the right skills".

The report lists eleven 'most in demand' hard skills - including 'cloud computing', 'artificial intelligence' and 'UX design', twice as many as listed 'soft skills', such as 'persuasion' and 'collaboration'. Interestingly, 'analytical reasoning' is listed as both a hard skill and a soft skill, which underscores the overlap here: the human and machine need each other, and one is never too far from the other.

#GenMobile

Workers may in reality be physically very far from each other in the same "place" of work. There's a hip new demographic in town: #GenMobile⁸, 40% of whom anticipate an increase in remote working and who want to work anywhere except an office. The desire for mobility may explain why there has been so little resistance amongst workers to the tremendous changes of our times. Unlike resistant 19th-century Luddites destroying new machines and mills in protest at the destruction of manual jobs, 21st-century workers today embrace technology even as they know that automation is a considerable threat to them.

Mobility and smartphones have also ushered in far less static workplace practices in themselves. This is attracting and retaining new employees and contractors. There are actually significantly more skilled jobs than there are workers. Estimates vary, but some say the supply/demand shortages could result in as many as 85 million unfilled jobs⁹ across financial and business services, technology and media by 2030.

Take the pioneering HR work at Netflix,¹⁰ which saw trends such as unlimited holidays and reducing appraisals in favour of a more flexible, mobile system. Movement is the leitmotif of the current working era. You have to be mobile, enable mobility, and embody its essence.

Two-Speed Workplace

"Move fast and break things" was the famous Mark Zuckerberg rallying cry¹¹ for this superfast, superbroadband era. A little nagging voice at the back of my mind says that the workplace is not just speeding up, but becoming two-speed. For those with the skills, in industries with skills shortages, they are increasingly being loaded up with perks and incentives at a cost of a cluttered and complex landscape of onboarding, training and reskilling. For those without skills, or with old skills, the race is on to rescue them from employment oblivion.¹²

In both cases, being a human who works has become a matter of navigating and negotiating through a forest of technology which, even when it liberates, improves productivity, creativity and engagement also adds layers of complexity and strains mental attention. Where we work and how we work has become a perpetual dance between people and platforms.

As I said, this report aims to shed light on just how much of a dance is happening between humans at work and the new technology, and to add a dash of impetus to the conversations we have about where change still needs to happen.

I drew on three key sources for my observations. Firstly, my own clients and network. My London firm Editorial Intelligence has a network of 2,500 mainly UK-based professionals ranging across the five working generations: Gen Z through to Baby Boomers. I asked them a set of questions about how they work directly with technology, and what they feel about it. They responded quickly and in strong numbers. The picture they paint is revealing.

⁷ LinkedIn Workplace Learning Report 'Why 2019 is the Breakout Year for the Talent Developer'

⁸ 'Are you Ready for Gen Mobile? How a new group is changing the way we work, live and communicate', Aruba Networks

⁹ 'Skills shortages could impede global growth' - Korn Ferry's Global Talent Crunch survey 2018 <https://www.recruitment-international.co.uk/blog/2018/05/skills-shortages-could-impede-global-growth-says-korn-ferry>

¹⁰ See Patty McCord's memoir 'Powerful: Building a Culture of Freedom and Responsibility', Silicon Guild, 2017

¹¹ This quote is famously used to illustrate the essence of tech disruption.

¹² McKinsey's 'A Future that Works: Automation, Employment and Productivity' - 2017

Secondly, I drew strongly on ideas laid out beautifully in a whole series of books, papers, journals and mediums by thinkers and doers I admire: From watching a brilliant 20-minute YouTube video of Microsoft's former Chief Experience Officer, Julie Larson-Green, describing the four new digital trends¹³ which will inform how Gen Z works, to Michael Tomasello's outstanding work on human cognition, to the exciting new depth of analysis of neuroscience and its effect on our attention. I hope I have helpfully synthesised some of the information I consume usefully for your understanding and opinion-forming around this subject.

Thirdly, I conducted a series of face to face interviews with leaders in key industries and in particular (but not exclusively) in the People Management space. I wanted to get under the skin of those people at the vanguard of change, the people who I believe we all depend on to get better balanced in the struggle between the human and machine.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first, "Ferocious Flux" looks at the context of just how fast the speed and scale of the changes being experienced at work are. The second, "The Third Person in the Room" looks at technology as an ever-present third party, and what impact that has on the human worker. And finally, I ask: What remains of the human? Those who know their Human Resources trivia will of course know that detractors of this corporate function often call it "Human Remains" behind its back. I conclude with some observations about how we might remain human and re-inject confidence back into this vital work function at the same time.

I confess that I am one of those people who has not been shy to criticise the excesses of the surround-sound world of technology we live and work with, whilst being just as dependent on it as everyone else. My personal hypocrisy is evident. This document is being written not on paper itself (truly an ancient technology), nor typed on a typewriter (less than one hundred and fifty years old) but on a laptop, using digital breakthroughs which have been around for little more than a decade.

Thanks to something called 'Superfast Cymru' broadband, this paper is being written in the middle of the remote Welsh countryside in the United Kingdom, in an area where sheep outnumber humans by many thousands to one. I can save and send what I want using an electronic cloud, and do so faster than I can boil the kettle.

The reason for my resistance comes from a deep abiding belief in the primacy of human beings over any other creature - and that includes a robot! The human's social and cultural development has moved us from the swamp to the skyscraper in a staggeringly short period of time. That's not to say humans are perfect, nor that we can't learn from other creatures, nor that we don't need and benefit from the vast array of technological advances I have cited. But the moment six million years ago when our earliest ancestor, the Australopithecus began to use two legs, instead of four, was more revolutionary than anything we can create artificially. Humans are beautiful. Humans are like nothing and no-one else. I want to stay focused on the reality that we made the technology - it did not and will never make us.

How then do we apply what we know as humans to how we best work with technology and avoid being made into applications, APPLIED workers? Let's find out.



The human's social and cultural development has moved us from the swamp to the skyscraper.

¹³ See Julie Larson-Green's address to the Harvard Business School Digital Transformation Summit 2017

“We live in a time of ferocious flux and change... like holding fast to a whale even as it plunges to the bottom of the sea”

Caitlin Moran,
The Times, April 2019



Ferocious flux

The British writer Caitlin Moran coined the phrase ‘ferocious flux’ and ascribed it to current politics and the loss of faith in the old systems ‘formed in different centuries, with different industries, populations, technologies and economies’.¹⁴

The word ‘flux’ means change, and more specifically constant change. Unlike change which happens en route to a known and finite end point (like, say, a pregnancy or a set of exams), flux involves continuous churn for its own sake, a state of infinity. The lack of clarity in a flux state adds to a sense of uncertainty, crisis, even.

The workplace is quite definitely in ferocious flux. Instability has become inbuilt into every aspect of every organisation. Whilst big leaps of technology effecting our lives have happened before (the printing presses of the fifteenth century, the industrialisation of the eighteenth/nineteenth century) the so-called ‘4th Industrial Revolution’ have ushered in what the World Economic Forum’s Founder Klaus Schwab described as ‘in its scale, scope and complexity, unlike anything humankind has experienced before’¹⁵.

The language of technology is itself in constant flux, but to narrow it down, here is a distillation of the current taxonomy connected to the internet, social and mobile world:

- 1 AI & ML - Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning
- 2 Robotics, Robotic Process Automation (RPA) & Intelligent Machines
- 3 VR & AR - Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality and Videoconferencing
- 4 Social Media Networks
- 5 Internet of Things & Sensor Networks
- 6 Voice & Personal Assistants
- 7 eCommerce & Mobile Commerce
- 8 3D Printing & Additive Manufacturing
- 9 Digital Marketing
- 10 Cloud Computing
- 11 Network & Access Technologies
- 12 Data Analytics

Everyone I talked to takes surround-sound technology completely for granted, constantly updating their installed hardware, software, platforms and devices. One company leader described how 80% of their conference rooms are fitted with video, another says that every one of their 25,000-strong UK workforce are issued with iPhones on joining, with training which goes alongside regulatory and company rules about what can and cannot be looked at, downloaded or used; whilst another described a ten year transition to ‘replatform’ across several kinds of systems in a single department.

A workplace which constantly has to update and replace its products and services is not for the faint-hearted. Flux like this can be exhausting and expensive. Investment has to be continuously in both the technology, to make it customer-friendly, legally compliant but also worker-friendly.

Escalation Time

One constant refrain from the people in People Management I spoke to is the desire to use technology for people to ‘self-serve’ at work; platforms, digital academies and anything which circumvents the cost and inconvenience of having to reach another human. As one put it to me: “you’re on a 10-minute break in a factory and don’t want to have to pick up the phone to fix your holiday time; you want to pick up your phone, check your app and it’s done”.

This may be so, yet the minute a crisis happens — what Martin Armstrong, Vice-President of Payroll Services at communications technology firm Charter, brilliantly calls ‘Escalation Time’ — the reliance on technology to hold discussions to resolve situations drops dramatically and face-to-face interaction becomes crucial.

Ferocious flux quickly turns furious when a human is *not* there to fix a problem which may not be caused by technology, but which cannot be solved by it either. As the social theorist Hannah Arendt put it so well in her seminal book *The Human Condition*¹⁶: “*The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember.*”

¹⁴ Caitlin Moran op-ed column, The Times, April 2019

¹⁵ “The Fourth Industrial Revolution: What it means, how to respond” - Klaus Schwab, World Economic Forum, January 2016

¹⁶ *The Human Condition* was first published in 1958 and republished in 1998 by the University of Chicago Press

Yet the fact is that today the whole world of human affairs is at risk of turning away from itself and towards its non-human colleagues. We have spent a quick thirty years learning to outsource ourselves to technology and it is time to reclaim or at least rebalance our priorities.

The personification of non-human colleagues are of course Robots (interestingly, research shows how quickly humans invest actual human qualities in robots, giving them personal attributes and hugs¹⁷) despite the fact that, not only are they not actual human but a poor imitation of them in anything resembling emotional literacy or feelings. To feel usurped in your family is a well known emotional and psychological trauma. The workplace, facing the arrival of AI, is no different: yes, it may make life easier, faster, but it is going to require considerable new ‘onboarding’ techniques to get it right.

No-one can agree on how many robots are actually coming, and how they will impact jobs, but the World Economic Forum¹⁸ predicts that 75 million jobs are to be displaced by 2022 in 20 major economies. Oxford University found that in the OECD, on average, 57% of jobs are susceptible to automation. This number rises to 69% in India and 77% in China¹⁹.

Although an exhaustive study²⁰ of 20,000 employers in 42 countries by the workforce consultancy Manpower Group shows that 86% believe automation will create jobs, the precondition is a continuous revolution in skills and training. A new workforce with new skills for new times. This is well-intentioned. But it involves constant change.

It is for this reason that words like “resilience” and “agile” have become dominant in business management theory and practice. The obvious point is this: you don’t just need any old skills in the 4th industrial revolutionary workplace: you need survival skills.

Much of this is because down on the ground at work, at a granular, human level the flux has its origin in something very fundamental: a gigantic mismatch between the scale, speed and complexity of applications and algorithms, and their impact on the physical and neurological, cultural and social structure of mere mortals using them to do their daily work.

The Death of Distance

Down on the ground at work, we are living with the so-called ‘death of distance’²¹, when mobile technology has reduced the space between remote server-based computers to desktops, laptops, and now mobile phones. The acronym which says it all for me is BYOD, which stands for ‘Bring Your Own Device’²², to encourage workers to connect to a corporate network and work remotely the rest of the time: to be ‘always on’.

BYOD symbolises the collapse in boundaries between home and work. It coincides, ten years on, with ‘GenZ’ coming into the workforce. This is the generation which came after their older ‘digitally native’ Millennial colleagues, and for whom, research shows, being mobile is possibly the single most important thing to them at work²³.

The Digital Day

It is this challenge, to keep up with quantum mechanics in our normal human bodies and minds, which is the thing which should be keeping us up at night. It certainly dominates the working day.

Global research of 3,000 workers conducted by Kronos’ Workforce Institute, publishers of this report, found that 79% of workers experience some kind of burnout at work, with 86% losing time on ‘work-specific tasks unrelated to their core job’. And 40% say that an hour or more a day is lost to “administrative tasks that do not drive value for their organisation”.²⁴

¹⁷ MIT has extensively studied the way humans project social qualities on to robots: <https://www.media.mit.edu/posts/making-new-robot-friends/>

¹⁸ The Future of Jobs Report 2018 <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2018> and see also The Four Futures of Work: Coping with Uncertainty in an age of radical technologies - RSA report 2018: <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/the-four-futures-of-work-coping-with-uncertainty-in-an-age-of-radical-technologies>

¹⁹ Technology at Work v2.0: The future is not what it used to be, Oxford Martin School and Citibank CPS Global Perspectives and Solutions, January 2016 https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/reports/Citi_GPS_Technology_Work_2.pdf

²⁰ Skills Revolution 2.0 https://www.manpowergroup.com/wps/wcm/connect/59db87a7-16c6-490d-ae70-1bd7a322c240/Robots_Need_Not_Apply.pdf?MOD=AJPERES

²¹ ‘The Death of Distance: How the Communications Revolution is Changing Our Lives’ Frances Cairncross, 1997 and updated 2001 Begun by technology firm Intel in 2009

²² See “Are you ready for #GenMobile? How a new group is changing the way we work, live and Communicate - Aruba Networks https://www.arubanetworks.com/pdf/solutions/GenMobile_Report.pdf

²⁴ The “Always on Con Report” <https://www.kronos.co.uk/about-us/newsroom/french-and-german-workers-consistently-outperforming-brits-work>

The modern workplace is fatiguing people, with their expectations not balanced against reality and us not giving our workforces the tools to juggle a complex life.

The common term for anxiety at work is stress, and the statistics about its prevalence in the workplace are enormous.

My own research²⁵ of 2,500 UK professionals showed that 75% of respondents use more than three devices at work, with over 75 different formats and platforms in use: from email and social media systems to shared document services, databases and specific task-related platforms and intranets. The curse for many is email, group chats and group messages. Of email, one person commented “I get 3-4k emails per month. Imagine having to answer four thousand letters a month!”

As one of my interviewees put it to me: “We’re still managing an industrial 8.30 am - 5.30 pm day, but a digital day doesn’t look like fixed time slots. We’re in an always-on knowledge and digital economy where people can work anywhere and at any time and they want to, but we are still making people work the old work shift. So the modern workplace is fatiguing people, with their expectations not balanced against reality and us not giving our workforces the tools to juggle a complex life”.

That said, none of us would willingly forgo our digital enhancements. The Editorial Intelligence research shows that only 5% feel they are a “necessary evil”. Could you do your job without a device of any kind of the day, or the internet, or the cloud? Yet you could, in many instances, not work from the office, both because this is more culturally accepted but also because in a purely physical way you no longer need to.

But of course, humans are social, not mechanical. We do need people around us, and we do crave connection. The risk of a workplace which prioritises purely technological connection over human face-to-face connections flies in the face of common sense and a lot of science too: empirically, a face-to-face request is thirty-four times more successful than one delivered by email.²⁶

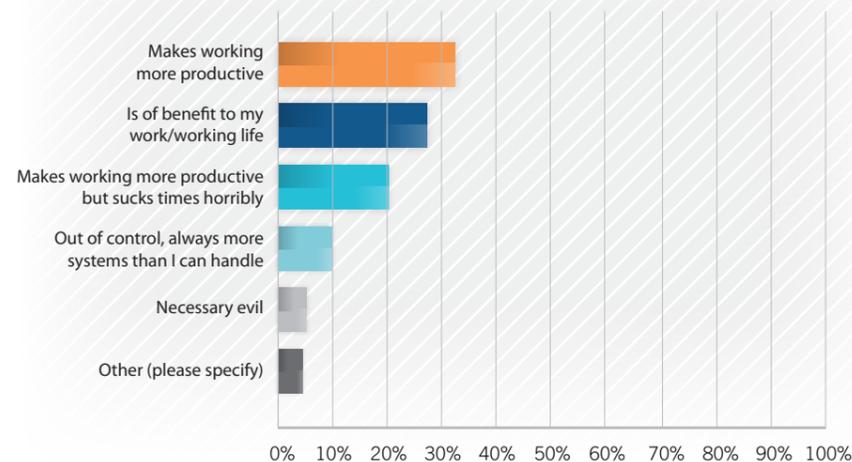
The point about the speed and scale of change - some 2.5 billion emails flying around the world each day, computing capacity measured in trillions of gigabytes - is that it creates instability, which with it anxiety.

Yet if the purpose - and ‘purpose’ is a big word in business these days²⁷ - of technology is to increase productivity, wealth, and wellbeing in the economy and amongst citizens, something is not quite working: the wellbeing and productivity of workers themselves.

Stressbusting

The common term for anxiety at work is stress, and the statistics about its prevalence in the workplace are enormous: in the UK where I am based, 15 million working days per annum, nearly 60% of all working days lost to ill health are attributed to stress and anxiety²⁸. In the US, stress-related absenteeism costs \$300 billion per annum.²⁹

Which phrase best describes your feelings about communication and collaboration technology? Communication and collaboration technology:



Source: Editorial Intelligence Survey, April 2019

²⁵ Editorial Intelligence Survey, April 2019: Online survey amongst the Editorial Intelligence newsletter subscribers and social followers. Survey had 154 responses
²⁶ See research from the Journal of Experimental Psychology (ref to come) and write-up in Harvard Business Review: <https://hbr.org/2017/04/a-face-to-face-request-is-34-times-more-successful-than-an-email>
²⁷ See The British Academy’s Future of the Corporation work <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/future-of-the-corporation>
²⁸ ‘Working days lost in Great Britain’ Health and Safety Executive Data, 2018
²⁹ The American Institute of Stress data <http://www.apaexcellence.org/resources/special-topics/work-stress>

Almost every one of the leaders I interviewed for this report raised the question of stress, at either a personal or a structural level. “People believe that unless you are working 24/7, every minute, you’re not a productive or loyal employee, despite the fact that there is a ton of evidence that this is wrong. Data appears not to change people’s beliefs”, Catherine Lynch, Chief People Officer of the telecoms company Virgin Media told me.

When I interviewed the distinguished Stanford University academic who specialises in analysing the toxic workplace, Professor Jeffrey Pfeffer³¹, he was fairly bleak in his prescription, citing more than just ferocious flux: he believes that wilful corporate neglect is at play. He told me that: “The issue isn’t the technology: the issue is how that technology is employed. So it comes down to values. What are the values that are going to guide how we deploy the technology? What I see right now is that human health and wellbeing, equity, social connection - humanistic values are currently peripheral to dominant values of growth. We are not inevitably and invariably doomed and there is a win-win to be attained, but I don’t see a sufficient number of companies or governments working towards that.”

At this point you may be wondering where corporate wellbeing³² comes in: this has become a firm boardroom favourite and the rise of investment in mental health and physical health, both financially and culturally, is impressive³³. Mindfulness in particular is an acknowledged form of wellbeing, with the global giant ‘intelligent enterprise’ business SAP being the first company in the world to appoint a Chief Mindfulness Officer, Peter Bostelmann, whose work is highly impressive.

I hope that our understanding of mindfulness makes it an outlier for a deeper dive into social health solutions for stress at work. We certainly do have data on the way people use technology at work, and the way it makes them feel. Furthermore, we have at our disposal the neuroscience and social science around the limits of human focus, attention, and cognitive load.

We know now that the brain has rather a limited cognitive capacity and is not good at multitasking³⁴ (contrary to popular myth). More than this, human beings go into stress mode when faced with excessive choice and excessive stimulus³⁵. I was not surprised by research showing that it takes approximately twenty minutes to refocus attention after becoming distracted.³⁶

Social Health and Wellbeing 2.0

I coined the phrased ‘Social Health’ in 2017³⁷ to describe the current predicament in which society now has such an excess of scaled connectedness that it actually has the equivalent of an endemic and epidemic health problem. I argued that, just as the World Health Organisation came into being in a pivotal moment in history, following the Second World War, as a reaction against serious imbalances in the wellbeing of citizens exhausted by war and poor social conditions, we are at an equal inflexion point: the WHO identified³⁸ that the trio of Nutrition, Exercise and Sleep all contributed to “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of injury & infirmity”.

I cite a different trio for Social Health: What I call the triple “KNOT”³⁹ of Knowledge + Networks + Time to create and curate a balanced system around knowledge and information, combined with building diverse, trusted, networks and an autonomy over not just time but timeframe and deadline.

I argued then, as I continue to do now, that the cripplingly complex landscape in which the personal and professional self is expected to roll seamlessly and productively through life cycles is compounded by an almost blind faith that humans can osmotically absorb all of this change without serious help.

If anyone does doubt why social health and a co-ordinated and constructive approach to managing the APPLIED Human landscape of people and tech, and if the moral and ethical purpose is not enough incentive, let the data speak: amongst the corporate leaders I have spoken to in my capacity as Honorary Visiting Professor in Workplace Social Health at

³¹ See “Dying for a Paycheck: How Modern Management Harms Employee Health and Company Performance - And What We Can Do About It, Jeffrey Pfeffer, Harper Collins 2018
³² See “Why Corporate Wellbeing Programs Fall Short” - Julia Hobsbawm, Strategy + Business, September 2018 <https://www.strategy-business.com/blog/Why-Corporate-Wellness-Programs-Fall-Short>
³³ <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/0917/pages/employers-take-wellness-to-a-higher-level.aspx>
³⁴ Overcoming Digital Distraction: Six steps to help you limit connectivity and improve your focus and productivity - Julia Hobsbawm, Strategy + Business blog, January 2019
³⁵ ‘Understanding the stress response’ - Harvard Health Publishing, 1 May 2018 see www.harvard.health.edu
³⁶ “The cost of interrupted work: More Speed and Stress” - Gloria Mark, Department of Informatics, University of California and Daniel Gudith and Ulrich Klocke, Institute of Psychology, Humboldt University, 2015
³⁷ See Fully Connected: Surviving & Thriving in An Age of Overload, Bloomsbury 2017; Fully Connected: Social Health in an Age of Overload, Bloomsbury 2018;
³⁸ The WHO’s constitution <https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are/constitution>
³⁹ “It’s Time for Social Health” - Thrive Global, 2018 <https://thriveglobal.com/stories/its-time-for-social-health/>

“The issue isn’t the technology: the issue is how that technology is employed. So it comes down to values. What are the values that are going to guide how we deploy the technology?”

Professor Jeffrey Pfeffer, Stanford University

Simplicity is important because it cuts and curates: It allows us to see what a priority is and not to get bogged down, sidetracked or diverted.



London's Cass Business School, a number told me off the record that stress-related absenteeism accounts for up to 5% of turnover.

Social Health should become a recognised function within all organisations to monitor, measure, map and modify behaviours around how humans interact with both technology and each other to get their work done productively, creatively, and meaningfully.

The CAT and the KISS

How do we vaccinate ourselves against ferocious flux, or mitigate against its excesses? I call the negative impact of ferocious flux the CAT syndrome, an acronym which stands for: *Complexity, Anxiety* and *Time* poverty. Because we are all trying to keep complexity at bay, all of the time. In some cases the technology creates complex problems-within-problems, especially for managers: to take just one example, the cloud-based group workflow system Slack is one where a company can find itself in complex legal waters if the 'group chat' veers into defamatory behaviours and views - something which was cited to me by one interviewee.

One thing everyone seems to agree on is that complexity is not the friend of today's worker and yet is pervasive; and that the simplicity we crave is often crowded out by the meshed technologies and all sorts of complicating factors from time zones to 'on demand' business models.

Time is not just short, but the way we measure time and value what success looks like can also be crunched: I spoke to managers in a boutique boatmaking business who constantly struggled to replenish their worker schedules because understanding about everchanging manufacturing technology made planning how long anything was going to take a challenge. In the corporate world the annual results or the quarterly report becomes a fixed goal to work towards, which may in fact bear no relation at all to a team's capability or even capacity.

For this reason, if you're worried about having a CAT, I recommend you give yourself a KISS...

This acronym was first coined as a design principle by the military in the 1950s and which stood for 'Keep it Simple, Stupid'. The social desire for a pared-down approach to life and to problem-solving is also known as 'Occam's Razor', which dates back to the middle ages. Simplicity is important because it cuts and curates: it allows us to see what a priority is and not to get bogged down, sidetracked or diverted (remember that compelling statistic it takes us twenty-three minutes and fifteen seconds to regain our focus after becoming diverted).

Such is our craving for simplicity that when I visited South Korea in 2018 to address the OECD's Global Forum on Wellbeing on Social Health and overload at work, to coincide with the reduction in working hours from a staggering 72 hours per weeks⁴⁰, I was asked by Korean media if I had any plans to visit the "Prison Inside Me" de-stress facility in a converted former prison in Hongcheon, which offers, well, voluntary imprisonment, free from digital or other distractions as a form of simple cure.

Another form of detox we crave is that from so-called Decision Fatigue, which became popular when President Obama's simple and predictable wardrobe was revealed as one way of keeping complexity at bay. When you think that we make around 35,000 decisions each day, ranging from what to wear to whether we consent to cookies, to how to safely cross a road, we need all the simplification we can get.

Simplicity is a crucial antidote to complexity. Whether technology is all, or part of, the solution can only in the end be tested and verified by worker, user, customer, and they are neither animal nor robot, but people.

It is the worker who truly knows whether every platform and device is cutting a clean line more productive and smooth working - or not. Having every kind of choice available is less of a simplicity than a tyranny of clutter. It has become common to have to switch constantly between messenger systems, emails, workflow channels, video conferencing, plus text and mobile. Everything either interrupts with a ping or requires logging in. In teams, it quickly becomes apparent that personal choice of platform or communication channel may vary, often between generations. The old adage 'tidy desk, tidy mind' becomes somewhat redundant if the 'desk' is invisible but the devices to hand offer endless choice.

Whether the flux we face can calm down from its current ferocious rate is debatable. My guess is that it is here to stay, and that adopting a K.I.S.S Strategy may be one way organisations can mitigate the overload, and avoid creating a situation where every worker works in a technological hall of mirrors, opening and closing on to more options, complicating, confusing and cluttering instead of clearing and simplifying.

⁴⁰ Korea reduced official working hours from a staggering 72 hours per week to 52 in 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/south-korea-work-week-maximum-a8428946.html>

THE THIRD PERSON IN THE ROOM: Tech's Omnipresence

If you ever lie down on a psychoanalytic couch (or even if you videocall a therapist, a surprisingly effective new solution which is on the rise, thanks to digital platforms⁴²) there is often an invisible third person in the room. That person can be a parent, a past, a metaphor for what you bring to discuss and resolve.

The third person in the room psychologically may shift and morph in your imagination. They may represent a block, a hindrance, a critical voice, or a lost echo, a longing. Or they can be the spur to self-improve, grow and develop, to achieve great things. Even if they are not there, or exist in your life in a very real way, how they affect your psyche is a strange and deeply personal process.

This is because the human being, with a psyche and a soul, is as radiantly unique as any other living creature. Our environment impacts on us with the same minute precision as sunshine on flowers or climate change on ice caps.

Today's world sees a mobile workforce made up of humans who have at their disposal the means to do things which were not imagined five years ago, such is the speed and scale of innovation. Yet they themselves have broadly stayed the same physiologically and psychologically for 50,000 years.

By introducing technology so very rapidly into every aspect of human existence in such a preposterously short historical period of time, we have thrown a third metaphorical person into all our lives. Every single interview I conducted and every single major paper analysing this moment in the history of work talks about skills as the holy grail: skills to ward off redundancy at the hands of robots; 'upskills' to cope with the increased possibility and complexity of new digital tools.

As a report by McKinsey on the workforce of the future noted: "*automation will create an opportunity for those in work to make use of the innate human skills that machines have the hardest time replicating: Social and emotional capabilities, expertise, coaching ... creativity*"⁴³. Human Strength is to mitigate a world increasingly mediated by screen.

We are on the threshold of an even more mind-boggling era of technology, allowing humans to fly forward in their lives. Who can fail to be riveted by the possibilities of the Internet of Things, or the cellular agriculture behind 'clean meat' (mass produced meat which is made from animal cells but not live animals) or the shift to robotic 'pocket closet' spaced apartments, such as the MIT spinout, Ori Living. Overall, the public sphere is far more attuned to the gloom and doom stories around technology than the good news. The social media scandals around data use and Facebook in particular have not helped: the biggest single narrative in the public sphere around new technology after robots is surveillance, privacy and data manipulation.

It is important that we keep perspective, that we don't become overly mistrustful. Yet clearly, we simply cannot rely exclusively on the robot or the chatbot (IBM's report that "by 2020, 85% of all customer interactions will be handled without a human agent") because when we do, we fall faster and further into a distinctly inhuman place, where the very idea of untangling the technology becomes infinitely more expensive and exhausting than planning its real operational impact in the first place.

My own research⁴⁴ showed that amongst highly qualified professionals, nearly 60% feel positively that communication and collaboration technology make working life better and more productive, with 30% saying they would not limit the use of technology for their job under any circumstances.

Nevertheless, that leaves 54% of respondents who would like to 'streamline' their use of technology 'both when working at home and the office'. One thing is clear, however: human skills and being human are what matters a great deal to a very important constituency: customers. PWC's customer experience report 'Experience is Everything'⁴⁵ notes that "human interaction matters now - and 82% of US and 74% of non-US consumers want more of it in the future."

⁴¹ The Craftsman, Richard Sennett, 2008, Penguin Books

⁴² Online therapy - See such websites as www.betterhealth.com and what the American Psychological Association refers to as "a huge draw. It just eliminates so many barriers" - See 'A Growing wave of online therapy, by Amy Novotney, February 2017

⁴³ See McKinsey's report A Future That Works: Automation, Employment & Productivity, January 2017

⁴⁴ Editorial Intelligence Network Survey, April 2019

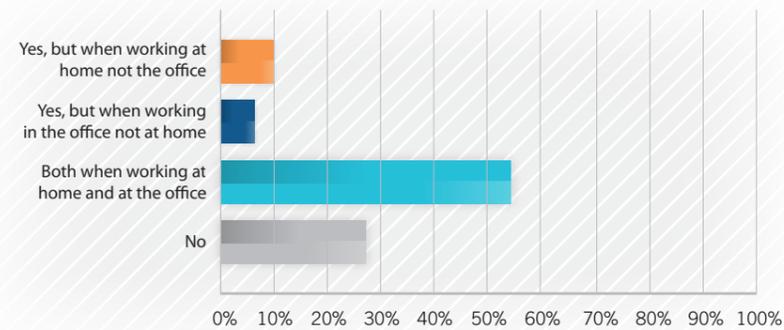
⁴⁵ PWC's report 'Experience is everything: Here's how to get it right' by David Clarke and Ron Kinghorn, PWC 2018

“There is nothing inevitable about becoming skilled, just as there is nothing mindlessly mechanical about technique itself ... technical understanding develops through the powers of imagination”

*Richard Sennett,
The Craftsman* ⁴¹

The first thing we can do is become far more nuanced in how we judge our relationship with this ‘third person in the room’ and begin by recognising the otherness of the digital product and the digital dimension.

If you could streamline or limit the use of technology for your job. Would you?



Source: Editorial Intelligence Survey, April 2019

Technology has made us project a lot of expectation on to bundles of fibre optic cable and devices on which we feel dependent. The mindfulness training and focus on mental health awareness does not, in this respect, go far enough. It does not allow room for too much actual questioning of dependency on digital infrastructure and what to do about it.

The first thing we can do is become far more nuanced in how we judge our relationship with this ‘third person in the room’ and begin by recognising the otherness of the digital product and the digital dimension.

An interesting comment on this came from one of my networks in our research survey:²⁵

“Collaboration is my life and work, so technology opens up enormous opportunities. However, without clear intention and attention to its rightful time, place and priority, it establishes impersonal patterns of interaction. I have to work with people to undo the habits technology has created. No-one looks up at each other anymore”.

The Semantic Steamroller

It was the early 20th-century American commentator Walter Lippmann who memorably declared that “You cannot endow even the best machine with initiative; the jolliest steamroller will not plant flowers”.

Human beings remain full of the same feelings, the same 168 finite hours in a week, the same kinds of bodies and minds, but everything else is wildly, unimaginably different. The technology blogger and Silicon Valley investor Benedict Evans wrote recently of AI and Machine Learning that *“the system that was built to detect skin cancer sometimes detects rulers instead . . . the system has no semantic understanding of what it’s looking at”*.⁴⁶

The solution to the problem of overload and ferocious flux and endemic toxic workplace stress may be to flip the problem on its head: instead of regarding technology as the third person in the room, the one who ultimately must be listened to in order to resolve and reform, perhaps it is us, the human, which is that third person, surrounded as we are by the technological ‘selves’.

What this means is that we need a new form of connection in our minds and in our practices: one which reframes who has true agency, autonomy and control. Because, regardless of how automated and automatic our technology, the vital third person who mediates between them is in fact us.

The recent Boeing MAX 8 air disasters are a cautionary tale for what happens when only one ‘person’ steamrollers over the other. In this instance, two separate but apparently related fatal commercial plane crashes within a year prompted the worldwide grounding of Boeing 737 MAX 8 planes. The preliminary report⁴⁷ indicated both a failure of the anti-stall software but also a disconnect between the training and awareness of pilots relative to the complexity of the new software. Here you have two ‘species’ co-manning a plane: a human pilot and their automated software systems. When they fail to work harmoniously together, in this case when the human was unable to override the technology failure, true disaster strikes.

⁴⁶ Benedict Evans blog on AI Bias, April 2019: <https://www.ben-evans.com/benedictevans/2019/4/15/notes-on-ai-bias>

⁴⁷ Ethiopian airlines crash 2018 <https://www.theverge.com/2019/4/4/18294317/boeing-737-max-ethiopian-airlines-crash-report>

The Blended Self

I wrote about the ‘Blended Self’ in my book Fully Connected: Social Health in an Age of Overload and referred to the person who technology allows to be at home and at work simultaneously, to bring their home lives in to the office just as much as they bring, through email and messaging and cloud-based platforms, their work home.

The Blended Self is both a customer and consumer and a worker. Having enough time to really learn how to use something, or to apply it and then judge whether it works or not, well, that’s back to our CAT⁴⁸ syndrome: it takes time and the greater the complexity, the more the anxiety.

The Blended Self is more than just identity. It is about keeping things real. I wonder how real it was for those Boeing pilots to have a brief training programme (allegedly only 45 minutes) for a new software programme relating to the anti-stall device. I wonder how real it is to feel like something isn’t right and not be able to complain about it to your manager or boss?

I wonder, too, about the point we have reached as humans - either pilots in the cockpit or software designers, or managers and board members, when blind faith in technology overrides human experience? One report read of an older pilot hitching a ride in one of the affected cockpits in between the flight disasters and using his experience and common sense to ignore what the technology was doing. In so doing he was able to avert disaster.

I was struck by remarks Hannah Kuchler, former technology correspondent with the Financial Times, made to me about the whole point of humans and workplace technology. She said:

“Overall, we do things dictated by tools we have and none of the productivity tools in this new collaborative era really encourage proper thinking . . . ‘I was working all day because I was answering Slack messages’ is not different from saying ‘I was working all day because I was answering email’ neither involve deep thinking, which can hopefully lead to more innovative, value-add solutions.”

I was also struck, however, by someone who does keep it real and who does bring her entire self to her job, Cassandra Knight, VP, Chief Litigation Counsel of PayPal:

“Are people going to be marginalised by new technology? I’m not dystopian about it. We’ve had many periods in our past of different points of tech. I am one generation away from picking cotton in the South, nine generations of Mississippians until my parents both were first to go to college and I was born in California. . . coming from this and of course the Industrial Revolution . . . all sorts of changes for workers, paid and unpaid over centuries: There will always be big changes, but I haven’t lost hope”.

I haven’t lost hope for the workplace, either. I’m a pessimistic optimist, in that order: I see the problems in a very clear-eyed way, but I believe that we are on the cusp of another seismic change, one which puts technology in its place.

This change is, of course, to do with people, and the way organisations hire, manage, teach and treat their people. It’s not the technology, people: it’s us.

“I was working all day because I was answering Slack messages’ is not different from saying ‘I was working all day because I was answering email’ neither involve deep thinking which can hopefully lead to more innovative, value-add solutions.”

*Cassandra Knight, VP,
Chief Litigation Counsel
of PayPal*

⁴⁸ CAT Syndrome: Complexity, Anxiety & Time Management ©Julia Hobsbawm 2019

“In an unpredictable world, reorganisation is a way of life. All leading companies must have three elements – they must be organised for agility, for platforms, and networks for meaning”

Ram Charan, Dominic Barton and Dennis Carey
Talent Wins: The New Playbook for Putting People First

HUMAN REMAINS: The Future of People, Talent and HR

Most people have no idea what Human Resources Management is or does, or that, according to the new book quoted left, the CHRO should be part of a top trio dubbed “The G3” (the other two being the Chief Executive Officer and the Chief Finance Officer).

For many, this will seem a stretch. Not for nothing has Human Resources been called ‘Human Remains’ behind it’s back. The explosive revelations in 2017 of Uber’s Human Resource department’s consistent turning of a blind eye to sexual harassment⁴⁹ and the extraordinary admission in the company’s own IPO filing that “*Our workplace culture and forward-leaning approach created significant operational and cultural challenges that have in the past harmed, and may in the future continue to harm, our business results and financial condition*”⁵⁰ was a low watermark in an industry which is as likely to criticise itself as to receive criticism from others.

The main charge against Human Resources has been that it is there for management and not employees. The Uber disaster only served to highlight this. However, the truer picture of the current state of HR can be seen in its efforts to rebrand itself⁵¹ with words like “Talent” and “People”. For my money, I like the word “Human”.

However, the fact is that, as the authors of “Talent Wins” correctly identify, HR (or whatever you like to call it) matters hugely. Because the people in an organisation make or break its ethos, its ability to innovate, serve, create, ideate, and flourish.

More than this, the HR department has been in the frontline of the new 4th Industrial Revolution, the pinhead through which every byte and nanotech has to pass in order to reach employees, customers and stakeholders.

The APPLIED Human Resource Department

As recently as ten years ago, data showed stratospherically high amounts of administrative time and tasks were dominating HR⁵².

The arrival of task-management apps was rightly seen as a lifeline and current predictions show that, indeed, much employee time at both a senior leadership level and within teams is freed from routine tasks: 70% of companies using collaborative work management systems report better work performance⁵³.

Time, efficiency and convenience are key. As one senior people leader put it to me: “*The 98,000 people I’m looking after want a process which works 100% of the time, and they only regard human intervention as relating to a problem.*” Another added this rider: “*It’s about being omni-channel. Yes, the customisation and complexity is exhausting and challenging. The technology, however, is entirely positive in what it can do for the workplace and marketplace.*”

Someone else put the challenge like this to me:

“In the past, if you could manage a process you were considered a leader. Whereas today it is about embracing that what you will do this year will probably look different next year, and just because something worked in the past doesn’t mean that you should assume it is a formula for the future ... change and flexibility have to be the watchwords.”

⁴⁹ Reflecting on one very, very strange year at Uber, Susa Fowler Blog, February 2017 <https://www.susanfowler.com/blog/2017/2/19/reflecting-on-one-very-strange-year-at-uber>

⁵⁰ Uber’s IPO is a lesson in the true cost of toxic culture - Sarah Todd at Quartz, April 2019 <https://qz.com/work/1593845/the-uber-ipo-filing-admits-workplace-culture-is-a-risk-factor/>

⁵¹ Rebranding HR: Let’s get real. HR Drive, September 2015 <https://www.hrcloud.com/blog/rebranding-human-resources-lets-get-real/>

⁵² Transforming HR Through a Multitiered Approach to the Delivery of HR Services - Barbara Levin, Employment Relations Today, Spring 2009 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/ert.20232>

⁵³ See Computerworld article, April 2019 by Matthew Finnegan on task management apps <https://www.computerworld.com/article/3386418/task-management-apps-collaborative-project-tracking-tools-for-the-digital-workplace.html>

Humanity at Work

So far, so ‘ferocious flux’⁵⁴. It is laudable to see Human Resource departments rising to the challenge, acknowledging the scale of the task they face to reduce workplace stress. All of this change can be too sudden, too huge, too complex. Here’s what GeekWire quoted a tech entrepreneur specialising in workplace wellbeing as saying:

*“Work is broken ... Employees are disengaged, isolated and exhausted and don’t feel a sense of purpose or support from their company. HR tools create siloed, demoralizing experiences and remote populations aren’t seeing communications, much less participating”*⁵⁵.

I am not sure that this is actually the case. From the People leaders I spoke to I would say that preventing burnout and isolation is at the absolute top of their list, not least because of its impact on cost: absenteeism remains a massive burden to business. The cost of retaining and motivating an employee is an awful lot lower than losing and replace one: 16-20% of a low or mid-range employee, rising to over 200% for a CEO.⁵⁶ But more than this, I see the new generation of HR leaders being motivated by something very profound: true leadership and change. These people, I have found, are motivated less by the twentieth century dominant “Taylor’s Scientific Management” model⁵⁷ which holds that employees are mere economic units who are themselves motivated chiefly economically, and more by a commitment to creating a sense of engagement and connection in their workforces.

One of the most influential papers on the shift towards people-focused HR was entitled “The future of HR is RH: Respect for Humanity at Work”⁵⁸. The authors wrote that “*Modern Human Resource Management thinks of employees as a critically important asset to the organisation. Taylor’s Scientific Management represented an early attempt to develop these assets that treated employees more like tools than like individuals.*” The authors go on to say that “*Successful organisations are ultimately built upon the foundation of successful individuals.*”

This, in other words, is HR’s moment. Precisely because of all the ferocious flux, the overwhelming challenges to keep up with evolving kinds of workers and workplaces and customer-centric technology, People leaders are in the front line as never before.

Network of Teams

Catherine Lynch, Chief People Officer of Virgin Media, very kindly shared some of her internal presentation decks with me, including one which looks at the modern organisation as an evolution of four phases: *The Industrial Corporation; Hierarchical Leadership; Collaborative Management; and today, Network of Teams.*

Catherine has identified a shift across these four phases from top-down “Corporation is King” through to today, in a Network of Teams, where “*The Teams and Team Leaders are Kings*”. This concept of a quantum shift in the workplace is part of Virgin Media’s internal programme entitled “*Connecting Our People*”, which puts developing the “digital workforce” and “people journey” side by side as a strategy.

To underscore this, the wellbeing programme she has established at Virgin Media, called Pulse, has a new element called THRIVE. I was particularly impressed by their walking tours around the London Hammersmith HQ, called ‘*Thrive Trails*’, established to encourage internal meetings which talk on the move, but mainly I am impressed by the way in which this kind of HR is upending the old norms for good.

Inside Out

You can’t legislate to create change beyond a certain point. It’s all about the culture. Aron Ain, CEO of Kronos Incorporated (publishers of this paper), who describes himself as an “Un-Leader” and his 6,000-strong global workforce which serves 35,000 customers in 110 countries, affectionately as “Kronites”, understands all too well that an engaged employee exists in a virtuous circle alongside a satisfied customer.⁵⁹ As he says in his autobiography, *WorkInspired*: “*work with the culture you have, and move steadily towards the culture to which you aspire. Let your people fly.*”

⁵⁴ See chapter one and also reference to Caitlin Moran column, The Times, April 2019 on the pace of change in society

⁵⁵ Geekwire sept 18 <https://www.geekwire.com/2018/work-broken-limeade-acquires-sitriion-company-aims-boost-employee-engagement-work/>

⁵⁶ Employee Retention: The Real cost of Losing an Employee. Christina Mehrar. PeopleKeep. February 2016 <https://www.peoplekeep.com/blog/bid/312123/employee-retention-the-real-cost-of-losing-an-employee>

⁵⁷ https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMM_Taylor.htm

⁵⁸ The Future of HR is RH: Respect for Humanity at Work. Jeanette N.Cleveland, Zinta S.Byrne and T.M.Cavanagh, Human Resource Management Review 25 (2015)

⁵⁹ As he says in his autobiography, *WorkInspired*: How to Build an Organization Where Everyone Loves to Work by Aron Ain: “*Work with the culture you have, and move steadily towards the culture to which you aspire. Let your people fly.*”

Absenteeism remains a massive burden to business. The cost of retaining and motivating an employee is an awful lot lower than losing and replace one.

A recent European judgement around how to capture working hours underscores the shift towards a sense of Social Health amongst policy makers.⁶³

These days, the internet is one place disgruntled employees can go, and there are plenty of rankings of good and bad places to work. That Kronos consistently ranks as one of the top recommended places to work with its employees⁶⁰ says something about action speaking louder than words.

Of the “People people” I interviewed, the role of an HR leader involves a key concept: Enabling.

More than this, the HR leaders I encountered understood that their workforce are often, quite literally, also their customers: Claire Head, People Director and Deputy HR Officer of the Spanish bank Santander, told me: *“Our customers don’t want to come into branches anymore. They want to be able to do things on their phones and on their apps. We need to be able to mirror that. We have to replicate in our workforce what our customers want, mirroring what customers want in our workplace, to be credible.”*

Trust

Which of course brings us to the ever-present question for all workplaces: Trust. Workforces needs to feel faith and trust in their employees that they will be safe, engaged, heard, skilled, and trusted. Employers want their workforces and their customers to trust them. The enlightened HR leaders know they need to taste their own medicine and upskill⁶¹ alongside their workers. The enlightened HR leader knows that if they are to become a member of the G3 of CEO, CFO and CHRO, truly leading an organisation, they can only do so with the trust of their ‘network of teams’.

At the time of this report going to press, an important European ruling happened around how to capture working hours inside the workplace with the objective of ensuring better protection of the safety and health of workers⁶², which underscore the shift towards a sense of Social Health amongst policy makers. The challenge is on for HR and People directors to embrace this change and be on the front, not the back foot.

Conclusion

The average human brain has 100 billion neurons firing in it at any time. The fastest supercomputer outpaces us in measurements so large many of us don’t even know they exist: if you knew what a Petaflop is I would be surprised⁶³. That is a thousand trillion “floating point” operations per second.

If we are measuring speed and scale, the human is at a disadvantage. But the history of humanity is that we create extraordinary tools and use them to develop and build something which can’t quite be measured: society.

Neuroscience shows that the default position of the healthy human brain at rest is to concern itself with one thing and one thing alone above all other thoughts and tasks: love. The social condition of the human is our defining speed, scale and strength.

So when we look at the human in the era of applications, algorithms, robotics, machine learning and that wonderfully-named limitless ‘cloud’ it’s important to remember the tension which is that the human is ground-based, non-flying, limited and irreplaceable.

From my own research for this report, the landscape of work is one, in the main, of freedom alongside complexity. So only 3% say that “all technology does is complicate tasks”, with 54% agreeing with the statement that “Technology speeds up how quickly you can do things”. That said, 61% felt that work-related time is affected by technology with “pluses and minuses equally spread”.

I asked people to comment freely after they had ticked the data boxes and they did. One said this: *“Technology is no substitute for leadership, innovation, entrepreneurship and good management at work”*, wrote a company director. *“Technology is like office space: It can divide people or unite them . . . don’t force people to run around in circles, climb over furniture, and crawl through a maze to get a task done.”*

Let that be the last word: if your organisation is a maze, albeit a cloud-based one; or if your office and technology divides instead of unites, if you expect your humans to think in petaflops rather than neurons: think again. And celebrate the resource which is not - with careful conservation, sustainability and management, going to match the digital with a strange, wonderful, analogue power: the power of being human.

⁶⁰ Relevant ranking reference https://www.glassdoor.co.uk/Overview/Working-at-Kronos-Incorporated-EI_IE2196.11,30.htm

⁶¹ Also C-suite upskilling: <https://www.hrdiver.com/news/does-the-c-suite-need-upskilling/552660/>

⁶² <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2019-05/cp190061en.pdf>

⁶³ Measuring ‘Flops’ <https://kb.lu.edu/d/apeq#measure-flops>

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“Julia Hobsbawm is one of the most important public intellectuals in the UK” — James Harding, Founder, Tortoise Media (former Editor, The Times, former Head of News, BBC)

Julia Hobsbawm OBE is a leading commentator on modern connectedness and its discontents, the future of work, technology and digital distraction and how we cope in an Age of Overload. Julia has been described by the digital and tech broadcaster and writer Andrew Keen as “The Marshall McLuhan of our Always-On age” and by the broadcaster and historian Sir Simon Schama as “there is no-one like Julia Hobsbawm. She is the wizard of connection”. Julia founded the content and connection business Editorial Intelligence in 2005. She is Hon.Visiting Professor in Workplace Social Health at London’s CASS Business School, City, University of London; Editor-at-Large for Arianna Huffington’s well-being portal THRIVE Global; a columnist for Strategy + Business Magazine, and presenter of the podcast The Human and Machine. A member of the board of the European Workforce Institute her book Fully Connected: Social Health in an Age of Overload was shortlisted for both Business Book of the Year and Management Book of the Year. Julia has presented two series for BBC Radio 4 and has given keynote speeches to audiences including the OECD, European Commission, as well as numerous private clients in corporate banking, think tanks, ideas festivals and international symposiums such as the Global Drucker Forum in Vienna and Full Circle in Brussels. She was awarded the OBE for services to business in the Queen’s Birthday Honours List In 2015.

About The Workforce Institute at Kronos:

The Workforce Institute at Kronos Incorporated is a think tank that helps organizations drive performance by addressing human capital management issues that affect both hourly and salaried employees. Through education and research, we empower organizations with practical ideas for optimizing the 21st century workplace.

“Technology is like office space: It can divide people or unite them...don’t force people to run around in circles, climb over furniture, and crawl through a maze to get a task done”

Anonymous feedback through Editorial Intelligence Survey (April 2019)

About Kronos

We believe that great businesses are powered by great people. That’s why our solutions are purpose-built for your industry and all your employees.

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