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The Future Of Work Is About The Future Of Customer



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As we try to grapple with rapid changes in customer behavior and the technology enabling these changes, it is often left to leaders to

first decode complex constructs before they even try and apply them. The future of work is one such area on which so much discussion is taking place.

The future of work is a state of being a highly customer-centric company. One way to approach the future of work is by building an agile organization, which starts with embedding agility into your business strategy. It's highly unlikely that a single-industry-thinking, rigid strategy is agile enough to achieve the customer-centricity required. In my experience consulting companies, and as I've previously written, [agility is more about how you do things](#) than how you are organized.

It Is Always About The Customer

Future-of-work discussions should be anchored in a business strategy that innovates without the boundaries of industries, technologies or expertise areas. It involves acquiring capabilities that are dissimilar or unnatural to your business. This can mean the difference between thinking like a siloed industry or thinking like a customer, because in a customer's mind there are no boundaries.

Companies spend enormous time and effort on strategic planning. While most of this is necessary and sometimes works, one area that often lags is strategic workforce planning. Most companies are still focused on productivity games like sales per headcount or revenue-growth-based hiring plans, but this can be done by a finance person sitting in an isolated room on an Excel sheet — or in today's world, by a bot.

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Changes in work methods should only take place if they truly, directly and positively impact your customer. We need to fundamentally understand that the design of the future of work begins with the design of the future of your business. As companies innovate to deliver platform-centric ecosystems and experiences, they must reimagine how the work they do delivers the desired customer outcomes.

The temptation to redefine work is understandable with many low-hanging fruit technologies like chatbots and process automation, but the patience and imagination needed to build the full customer impact case is essential to realize the true value of redefining work or methods. Automating marginal activities may give you one-time productivity gains, but it does not give you a competitive advantage with your customers.

Redefining Organization

The future of work is disruptive to the existing organizational model. Companies struggle between product-centric, functional expertise-centric and strategic business unit-centric models. What if we looked differently at what it means to be customer-centric? The tribes and squads model, [made famous by Spotify](#), is one example of how exploring new organizational structures can support you in your goals of keeping pace with customer demands.

There are seven elements of an organization that experience the impact of future-of-work thinking:

1. **Organization capabilities:** It helps create go-to-market capabilities that have no functional boundaries.
2. **New work models:** Determining the right mix of full-time, gig, flex or remote teams, shared jobs etc.
3. **Automation versus automation:** Creating the right balance between automated tasks to independent decision-making technology.
4. **Design and simplification:** Applying similar design thinking and principles externally and internally.
5. **Performance management:** Reassessing the value of jobs, performance and reward when value delivered is through new work methods.
6. **Employee experiences:** Creating experiences that eliminate organizational friction to become more customer-centric.
7. **Insights and analytics:** Defining key metrics to drive the shift in how work is done and the changes that the customer experiences.

Redefining Jobs

As you map out the impact on those seven elements of your organization, the focus then shifts to how jobs themselves could be done in the future. Don't change how work is done just because you can. It is easy to automate marginal activities or tasks as tax on labor is higher than tax on automation in many countries, but this

may not necessarily provide deep value to your business.

In a [previous article](#), I detailed how your organization should consciously adopt at least four of these six future-of-work elements to be considered to be in the future of work:

1. Traditional full-time work.
2. Gig talent.
3. Robotics.
4. Robotic process automation.
5. Smart interfaces.
6. Physical augmentation.

What if we were to ask all managers to plan how jobs could be done with these six elements in three to five years from now? It would give employees a greater understanding of the work, methods and change required of them. This shift in examining jobs is critical to shaping new workforce capabilities. It's probably safe to assume your organization has leaders who use curiosity, imagination and design as the foundation of your business. Why not let them help guide these critical developments?

Many jobs are poorly designed. Employees frequently do tasks or responsibilities outside of their defined job descriptions. What if we could have a job framework in which employees could customize their at least 30% of their own jobs?

What Does This Do To Your Strategy And Organization?

1. Innovation Without Boundaries

Significant barriers to innovation are more internal complexity, the organization model and how information flows through traditional structures. Companies that are equipped for the future of work are not only able to do things faster, but are also able to learn from dissimilar experiences and apply them to their context.

2. Pivot Capability

Organizations need to have the ability to pivot. This is about understanding and building deep capabilities that allow you to be a forward-thinking, purpose-driven company. This pivot capability could lead companies to enter new industries or just reimagine how they deliver to their customers.

3. Organization Model

Companies have product-centric units while some have continued to be functionally organized. Either way, these companies are in pursuit of the next big idea or are following their customers across a maze of applications, behaviors and interfaces. The future of work questions several conventional management norms and radically changes the role of people managers.

Imagination Needed

All of this needs real imagination, and I do firmly believe that unimaginative leaders are the greatest threat to the future of a company.

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