THE FUTURE IS PARADOX: NAVIGATING THE FUTURE OF WORK

BY JOLINA KAHN, TALA OCAMPO AND ELMO ALFORQUE

Rapid technological advancements and evolving employee expectations are causing a seismic shift in the nature of work, the workforce and the workplace (Schaninger & Sharma, 2021). As leaders navigate the evolving future of work, they must also reconcile competing forces and embrace paradoxes that define the path forward.

Insights from global thought leaders, industry professionals, and academics were gathered to explore the shifting dynamics of the workforce, workplace, and work itself. A strategy formulation with Management Strategies' Futures Council was conducted, and these were validated through a global survey with 213 participants from 35 countries on six continents.

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THE PARADOX OF THE FUTURE

The results of the study reinforced the concept of whitewater worlds of work — an era where careers and workplaces are increasingly unpredictable and fast-changing (Kellerman and Seligman, 2023). Baby Boomers experienced linear career progression across calm seas, Generation X and early Millennials adjusted to occasional storms while today's workforce faces a relentless and turbulent pace of change (Kellerman and Seligman, 2023). More than a challenge for the present, it signals an even more complex future ahead:

"We are alone in our kayaks, riding the currents of our immediate environment, but we are also all sitting downstream of significant global events that will impact millions at a time" (Kellerman & Seligman, 2023, p.45).

This metaphor underscores the tension of balancing immediate demands with future uncertainties. The following specific tensions and signals of change are what was unearthed:

SIGNALS OF CHANGE: INDIVIDUAL VS. COMMUNITY

A key tension that emerged is the balance between *individual fulfillment* and collective *action*. Workers are navigating a world that demands autonomy, self-expression, and personal flexibility — like kayakers *steering* through rapids on their own. The signal is clear: the future will demand even more individualized work patterns and career paths, driven by personal goals and values.

At the same time, navigating future complexities requires collaboration. The message for leaders is to design environments fostering a strong sense of community, empowering individual initiative while synchronizing efforts to drive success.

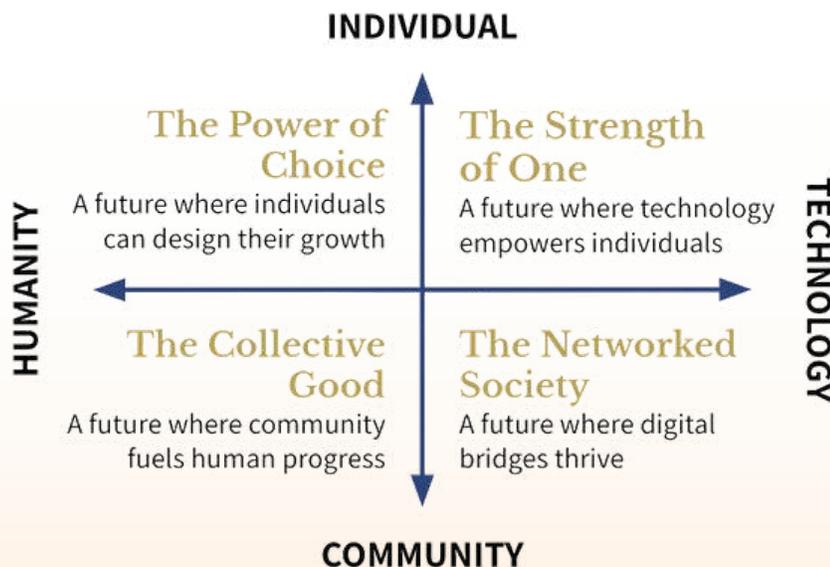## SIGNALS OF CHANGE: HUMANITY VS. TECHNOLOGY

Another central tension discovered is the balance between *humanity and technology*. Technology continues to rapidly evolve, offering tools for efficiency, speed, and productivity, like kayaks *enabling* rapid movement through rough waters. This indicates a future where technological advancements accelerate, reshaping industries and work processes.

However, this rise in technology coexists with signals of *humanity* becoming more essential. Leaders must ensure that technology enhances, rather than detracts from, the human experience, so that they may focus on creativity, emotional intelligence, and personal growth. The future will demand organizations to integrate technology and foster environments where workers thrive.

Image Source: Canva

COMPASS

FOUR WORLDS OF WORK: POSSIBLE FUTURES

With these signals of change, four worlds of work emerged as possible futures:

1. The Power of Choice -- This future centers on personal autonomy. Flexibility in how and where work is done defines this world, with individuals integrating personal and professional lives. Life paths take precedence over traditional career progression, emphasizing wellbeing, work-life balance, and personal fulfillment.

2. The Strength of One -- In this world, professionals are empowered by personal branding. The rise of the gig economy means that individuals rely on their unique talents and self-promotion to succeed, with greater independence but less traditional job security.

3. The Networked Society -- This future envisions close collaboration between humans and artificial intelligence, where they form "Super Teams" to drive rapid innovation. Digital networks enable widespread collaboration, blending the creative power of humans with the computational efficiency of machines.

4. The Collective Good -- Focusing on community and purpose, this world is driven by organizations that prioritize social responsibility. Collective wellbeing and shared goals are at the forefront, with environments that foster belonging and meaningful work through purposeful learning circles.

INDIVIDUAL

HUMANITY

The Power of Choice
A future where individuals can design their growth

The Strength of One
A future where technology empowers individuals

TECHNOLOGY

The Collective Good
A future where community fuels human progress

The Networked Society
A future where digital bridges thrive
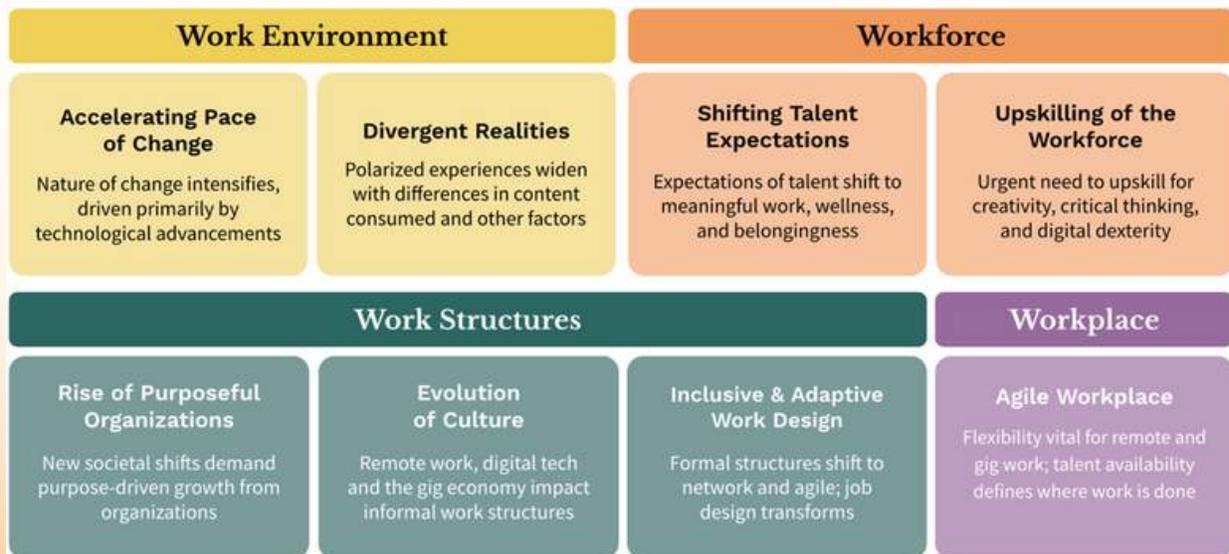
COMMUNITY

The value proposition that organizations need to have to thrive in each world was explored. The crucial elements that are shaping the future work environment are wellbeing, flexibility, DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & *Belonging*), culture, empowerment and meaningful work. These provide organizations, leaders and individuals with multiple pathways for success.

Value Proposition	The Power of Choice	The Strength of One	The Networked Society	The Collective Good
	Life Paths vs. Career Paths	Personal Branding enables Gig Work	Super Teams of AI and Humans	Purposeful Guilds or Learning Circles
Wellbeing	✔			
Work Life Integration	✔	✔		
Flexibility	✔	✔	✔	
DEI & Belonging	Equity	Diversity	Inclusion	Belonging
Empowerment		✔		✔
Culture			✔	✔
Meaningful Work			✔	✔

THE KEY DRIVERS OF CHANGE: PROBABLE FUTURES

The Four Worlds of Work, all share common underlying forces that will drive the future of work. These forces emerged from conversations with a global panel of leaders, validated by a global survey, and are what leaders and organizations need to prepare for to navigate the future of work.

Work Environment

Accelerating Pace of Change

Nature of change intensifies, driven primarily by technological advancements

Divergent Realities

Polarized experiences widen with differences in content consumed and other factors

Workforce

Shifting Talent Expectations

Expectations of talent shift to meaningful work, wellness, and belongingness

Upskilling of the Workforce

Urgent need to upskill for creativity, critical thinking, and digital dexterity

Work Structures

Rise of Purposeful Organizations

New societal shifts demand purpose-driven growth from organizations

Evolution of Culture

Remote work, digital tech and the gig economy impact informal work structures

Inclusive & Adaptive Work Design

Formal structures shift to network and agile; job design transforms

Workplace

Agile Workplace

Flexibility vital for remote and gig work; talent availability defines where work is done

1. Accelerating Pace of Change

The rapid pace of technological advancements, economic pressures, and societal shifts are reshaping how work gets done. More than 40% of respondents perceived the pace of change as accelerating rapidly, with nearly 43% viewing it as happening somewhat quickly. To manage this acceleration, businesses should:

- **Foster agility** by promoting continuous learning and rapid adaptation to new technologies.

- **Develop resilience** in teams to thrive amidst ongoing transformation.

- **Encourage collaboration** to leverage diverse perspectives amidst complexity.

2. Divergent Realities

"[The] main concern is the huge difference in the world right now" said one of the panelists that sums this dimension. As the workplace becomes more diverse and globalized, differences in political views, cultural contexts, and generational expectations can lead to tension and misunderstanding within organizations (Gino & Minson, 2022). Leaders are faced with the challenge of creating cohesion in an increasingly polarized world – including within the workplace. To manage divergent realities, organizations should:

- **Seek common ground** by identifying shared values and goals.

- **Promote empathy** to strengthen relationships and improve understanding.

- **Facilitate open dialogue** to create space for diverse perspectives and constructive discussions.

3. Shifting Talent Expectations

The evolving workforce seeks purpose, flexibility, wellbeing, and belonging in their work. With the rise of remote work, gig economies, and flexible hours, the traditional employer-employee relationship is being redefined. To meet these shifting expectations, leaders should:

- **Start with purpose** by aligning jobs with a broader mission.

- **Prioritize inclusion** to ensure employees feel connected and valued.

- **Co-create workplace environments** that offer flexibility and reflect employees' needs.

4. Upskilling the Workforce

As the nature of work changes, roles that didn't exist a decade ago are now critical, and by 2030, 85% of the jobs we will need have yet to be invented (World Economic Forum, 2023). "There will be an increase of value in skills like creativity, adaptability, etc. When AI has all the answers, isn't it time that employees start asking the questions?" says one of the panelists. To foster continuous learning and development, leaders should:

- **Enhance digital skills** across their workforce to keep up with technological shifts.

- **Support continuous learning** through personalized development programs emphasizing creativity and critical thinking.

- **Create a culture of upskilling** to keep teams agile, adaptable and ready for the future.

5. Rise of Purposeful Organizations

Purpose is emerging as a core driver of organizational success and purpose-driven organizations are becoming more attractive to both employees and customers. Companies are increasingly expected to have a purpose beyond profitability, contributing positively to society and the environment (EY, n.d.). To drive purpose within their organizations, leaders must:

- **Clearly define organizational purpose** and communicate it across the company.

- **Align individual roles** with that purpose to foster commitment.

- **Measure the impact of purpose** to ensure alignment with broader social goals.

6. Evolution of Culture

"It will be extremely challenging for companies to survive unless they keep striving to change and transform for the future," said one of the panelists. For organizations to thrive in this era of rapid change, leaders must cultivate a culture that actively supports transformation — one that encourages continuous learning, innovation, and agility (Rose Hollister, 2020). To evolve work culture, organizations must:

- **Design a clear, adaptable culture** that aligns with the organization's vision, purpose and values to drive performance and transformation.

- **Foster inclusion, learning, and voice** to empower employees and support adaptability.

- **Embed culture** across all levels of the organization, ensuring it is lived and reinforced through every interaction and process.

7. Inclusive and Adaptive Work Design

"We want agility and pace but we're built for control." This is one of the cornerstones of the current challenge with this theme. Organizations must move beyond hierarchical systems and create work designs that are inclusive, adaptive, and responsive to changing demands (Verzera, 2020). To create adaptive work designs, leaders should:

- **Challenge traditional job structures** to support flexibility and agility.

- **Redesign work systems** to be more inclusive, dynamic and responsive.

- Integrate diverse talent models that reflect the needs of a multigenerational workforce and emerging technologies.

8. Agile Workplace

The future workplace is no longer limited to physical office spaces, and this shift to remote work will continue to escalate, especially as it relates to engaging talent. Organizations now have access to a global workforce, enabling them to tap into diverse skills and expertise from anywhere in the world. To thrive in this environment, leaders must design agile workplace strategies (Meschuk, 2022). To build agile workplaces, leaders should:

- **Foster cross-group collaboration** across teams and locations.

- **Shift to results-driven performance metrics** that emphasize outcomes over hours worked.

- **Invest in digital infrastructure** to support seamless communication and productivity across distributed teams.

NAVIGATING THE FUTURE OF WORK

The tensions between individual and community, humanity and technology, are shaping the future in unpredictable ways. Leaders who can navigate these paradoxes with agility and foresight will be the ones who thrive. The future is paradoxical, but it offers immense opportunities for those willing to adapt and innovate. Leaders who can balance these tensions, cultivate resilience, and drive purpose will be well-equipped to lead their organizations into a prosperous future.

Note: The full white paper of the Future of Work study may be accessed here: https://mgtstrat-asia.com/leadership-dialogues/.

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Jolina Kahn, APF, is a strategist, futurist, and designer shaping futures that nurture potential and growth. As Chief Futurist and Partner at Management Strategies, she brings 25 years of global HR experience, including leadership roles at Unilever and Microsoft across Asia Pacific, Africa, the Middle East, Turkey, Puerto Rico, and Ireland. She has led HR teams, served as Head of HR, and managed workforces of up to 40,000 employees. A Hodges Scholar, she holds an MBA from Hult International Business School, a double degree from De La Salle University, and certifications from Parsons New York and Harvard Business School. A member of the Association of Professional Futurists (APF), Jolina integrates foresight, strategy, and design thinking to help businesses and people toward growth and future-ready solutions.

JOLINA KAHN

TALA OCAMPO

Tala Ocampo, APF, is committed to nurturing human potential and weaving it with meaning, fostering a more free and proudly Filipino future. As a Senior Consultant at Management Strategies and an Assistant Professor at UP Diliman's Virata School of Business, she bridges the gap between academia and real-world HR leadership. With over 20 years of experience in human resources, organization development, and talent management, she has held leadership roles at USG Boral Philippines, Fonterra Brands Singapore and Sri Lanka, and L'Oréal Philippines. Tala holds an MA in Industrial-Organizational Psychology from Ateneo de Manila University and is pursuing her PhD in Psychology at the University of the Philippines Diliman. A strategic thinker with a heart for people, she combines responsibility, learning, and empathy to drive organizational growth and leadership development.

Elmo Alforque, APF, PMP, ICF-PCC, is a Senior Consultant and Lead Researcher at Management Strategies, specializing in strategic foresight, strengths-based leadership, and organizational transformation. With 25+ years in people management and 20 years in the technology sector, he has led global operations, technical support, and project management. A Project Management Professional (PMP), ICF Professional Certified Coach (PCC), WIAL Certified Action Learning Coach, and Gallup Strengths Coach, he has also completed CIFS Applied Strategic Foresight and a Postgraduate Certificate in Business and Management Consulting at the Asian Institute of Management. He is a member of the Association of Professional Futurists (APF), integrating foresight, analytics, and leadership to drive meaningful change in organizations.

ELMO ALFORQUE