

Workplace Transformations in a Post Pandemic Era

New Realities to Consider and Act Upon



S. Charles Malka
Helen MacLennan
Robert H. Tiell

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Praise for Workplace Transformations in a Post Pandemic Era

This book offers a lively and thoughtful review of the many changes and opportunities within today's workplace. Leaders who want to stay ahead of the trends rather than get flattened by them should take notice and read this today!

—*Beth Kuhn, Workforce Futurist (and former workforce system leader)*
Stonegate Strategies

The world of work has always been fast—the most successful can not only keep up but they are the pacesetters. Lately our workplaces seem to be moving not just fast—but at the speed of light. Anyone who is leading an organization, managing others or formulating strategy needs help to keep up. In this book's chapters, S. Charles Malka, Helen MacLennan and Robert H. Tiell have done an excellent job curating a list of the most important workforce shifts relevant to leaders today. In these chapters, the reader will gain insights into technology and AI, power shifts and post pandemic work life.

—*Cynthia Knapek, President and CEO*
Leadership Louisville Center

Workplace Transformations in a Post Pandemic Era

**New Realities to Consider
and Act Upon—For Managers,
Policymakers and Practitioners
in the Field**

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To my beloved mother Georgette and my dear sister Vivian—with much love!
S. Charles Malka

To my daughter, Lauren, who continues to be my cheerleader!
Helen MacLennan

To all my clients, business colleagues, and referral sources over the years
You have greatly enriched my professional career!
Robert H. Tiell

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PREFACE

The workplace has changed remarkably in the aftermath of the 2019 pandemic. The transformation is profound and is still evolving as this book is being drafted. The Big Resignation that commenced in 2020 in the wake of Covid-19, unleashed a wave of voluntary resignations that negatively affected the business landscape and triggered unprecedented labor shortages. This in turn, played well into labor unions' hands leading in 2023 to historical gains for millions of workers across various industries. And while digital technology has enabled remote work for yet more employees than ever before, employers were hard pressed to offer their workers flexible work arrangements in an effort to adapt to radically changed work behavior. Topping it all, the explosion of AI in the last two years promised to introduce an innovative revolution in our places of work and usher in a new era, albeit contentious, in the marketplace. Needless to add that with the new opportunities that opened up, a host of challenges surfaced compelling company managers to consider new ways for tackling them.

Indeed, it may well be that we are fast approaching a tipping point in the new post pandemic office where a shift in power continues to gain traction by strengthening workers' hand. Employees may overplay that hand but companies are advised to recognize the possibility that such a transition in bargaining power can potentially be explosive. The conditions for a contentious workplace are ripe. Consider that the change in work behavior in the aftermath of the pandemic, coupled with strong economy and tight labor market in some sectors, are likely to turn the workplace into a collision course between employee and employer. Premier conflict areas involve remote work, compensation transparency, and productivity related expectations. How employers approach each of these conflict areas, and how deep is their understanding of the need for a new reset in the relationship with their workers, that ultimately leads to a new employer-employee "social contract," will determine to a large degree the future and viability of their organizations. Addressing such conflicting views while urgent, also calls for companies to revisit the way they view their employees in the new workplace.

A reset in employer-employee relationships, perceptions, and employment arrangements is today a new must. Employers are advised to account for and be sensitive to employee related ambivalence to in-person work. The spread of hybrid work models is one solution. More meaningful is meeting the expectation shared by millions of employees for a new workplace that is more accommodating and supportive. Thus, transformational leaders are presented with a unique opportunity to make the workplace a much healthier and a happier one. Employers must seize the moment to improve the workplace and the work climate. Wartzman and Tang, of the Drucker's Institute, contend that the pandemic has changed some of the most critical qualities that characterize leaders of the best-managed companies. Within the context of post pandemic leadership, more recent data suggests that emerging top executive competencies include managing ambiguity and installing trust (Wartzman & Tang, 2022). Both qualities are currently necessary ingredients for proper navigation of any collision course.

Our book focuses on these very developments and on the resulting consequences and their immediate and long-term effects on employer and employee alike. But before we touch, in a cursory manner, on the thrust of the book's nine chapters, the curious reader is advised to reflect on the impact of several recent developments that have been reported in the written media; while some may be less favorable for our places of work, they surely have the potential of reshaping the post pandemic workplace as we know it. We briefly mention next a mixed sample of five such trends with no particular order.

Consider first a noticeable observation made by employers relative to the glaring deficits characterizing many members of the current cohort entering the workplace. Such reported shortcomings are reflected in their lack of general knowledge, particularly insufficient mastering of basic math, and poor soft skills. The gaps result in more spending on training by employers, difficulties filling open positions, and lowered hiring expectations. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, this in turn has contributed to the fallen national productivity rate in 2022 and 2023, suggesting the longest contraction since 1948 (Belkin et al., 2023). The dire reality compels employers to modify their hiring strategies—rather than seek candidates with required skills, hire those who are open to and are willing to learn. A risky and costly option that is worth exploring.

By some estimates, the switch to virtual learning during and after the pandemic has accelerated the drop in knowledge scores of graduates in various skills. One particular field that has experienced a recent drop in scores is engineering. The National Council of Examiners for Engineering and Surveying estimates that this trend is likely to result in fewer eligible engineers in the workplace, coupled with lower degree of competency for those who have joined the labor force (Belkin et al., 2023). Similar deficiency

is reported in high schools across the US High school graduation rates fell and scores for college admission exams dropped to the lowest level in three decades highlighting high school graduates' gaps in academic skills required for both college and the workplace.

Consider next the mounting evidence that work today has less appeal to many individuals. Four years after the pandemic, employees still prefer remote work while surveys continue to suggest a drop in productivity level for employees who fully work from home (Ip, 2023). According to the Society of Human Resource Management, nearly two thirds of employers offer flexible work arrangements that allow remote work for part of the week, and the US Census Bureau report 40% of workers are teleworking from home. Post pandemic evidence also suggests that Americans are giving priority to the "life" part of the "work-life" balance, thus compelling companies to extend paid time off and paid parental leave according to the Society of Human Resource Management. And the Labor Department's annual American Time Use Survey shows that the share of employed workers who actually work on a given day dropped from roughly 68% in 2019 to 66% in 2022, a sharp drop during the last two decades (Ip, 2023). This trend does not bode well for employers and the economy at large.

Also consider the changing face of the bottom tier of the American labor force as it continues to evolve. Low-skilled American workers have been particularly harmed by influx of cheap foreign labor. E. J. Antoni, a research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, commented in a recent interview, that the recent surge in the number of legal and illegal migrant workers is causing a dramatic shift in the US jobs market by making it harder for low-skilled, native-born Americans to begin their employment careers (Lee, 2024). According to Antoni, native-born Americans have lost 1.2 million jobs over the past year, while foreign-born employment has risen 1.3 million. Furthermore, while the recent migrant influx helped ease labor shortages, it also contributed to higher jobless rates among native-born workers. The massive importation of low-skilled labor, has also depressed wage growth. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) figures suggest that the US has gained a net of over nine million immigrants since the end of 2020, only 2.6 million of which are lawful permanent residents. The CBO expect the number of illegal crossing to continue to climb through the end of 2026, when close to nine million 'foreign nationals' will be present in the US (Lee, 2024). Bureau of Labor Statistics data estimates that about 30 million foreign-born workers are currently employed in the US which is about a quarter of the current workforce of roughly 131 million native-born workers (Lee, 2024). The impact of this trend is particularly worrisome given its absolute effects on the US work force in the near and distant future.

And consider still the hype surrounding AI, the newest innovation in our places of work, which may profoundly change the way work is done.

Undoubtedly, we stand at the midst of an accelerated adoption wave of AI by companies large and small, a trend that has triggered mixed predictions of workplace transformation; on one hand are those who fear disruptive job losses, and on the other hand are optimistic views of AI as an accelerator of innovation that promises to improved health care and quality of life. Yet, aside from the ongoing hype, companies are starting to consider the cost of adopting AI models, their impact on corporate life, and the timing—how and when—to adopt, introduce and use them (Cutter, 2024). Employees are concerned about their positions and the uncertainties involving AI, and labor unions are pushing back against the introduction of AI in the workplace. A report by Accenture suggested that 60% of workers fear AI could eliminate their jobs (Cutter, 2024). And with AI packages priced at \$30 per employee a month, many executives question AI related benefits as they may be spending more on AI software than the anticipated gains from higher productivity.

Finally, consider the ongoing pushback taking place against the spread of diversity programs in our places of work. It appears that Corporate America's diversity initiatives are being modified in the face of public pushback, lawsuits, and mere scrutiny. In particular, companies are abandoning legally risky practices including stated numerical targets and biased employee training that emphasizes blame. According to a Conference Board's survey of about 200 corporate heads of human resource departments, released in December 2023, companies plan to scale back diversity initiatives following the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the case of Harvard's affirmative action (Vanderford, 2024). During the first half of 2024, the legal pushback against corporate diversity practices gained momentum. Attorneys general, in several states, publicly warned businesses against utilizing what they consider racial quotas and preferences in hiring and promotion. A few specific court actions are worth mentioning: The U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit voted to block Fearless Fund, a philanthropic arm of a venture capital fund, from continuing to pick Black women grant winners while considering an appeal against the legality of its program that has excluded Whites. Also, in January 2024, a federal judge refused to throw out a case that challenged Pennsylvania State University's diversity related training that is claimed to defame Whites. And consider \$25 million that a federal jury awarded a fired white Starbucks regional manager in Philadelphia following what they found as racial discrimination. And America First Legal, a conservative group, filed federal complaints against numerous corporations over alleged quotas that are claimed to discriminate against white employees. Among the companies were Nike, Hasbro, Mattel, American Airlines, Southwest Airlines and United Airlines (Vanderford, 2024). Consequently, more companies were distancing themselves from DEI initiatives with Caterpillar being the more recent one to do so. Caterpillar's DEI rollback initiatives

follows similar moves at Molson Coors, Lowe's, John Deere, Ford and Tractor Supply. In a memo to employees, Caterpillar executives stress that DEI changes require that corporate training must focus first and for most on business operations. Specifically, "that all training, formal and informal, must be focused on the company's business and aimed at fostering high performance and execution of Caterpillar enterprise strategy" (Revell, 2024).

So, what should the curious reader make of the minuscule sample of noticeable trends in our workplaces? They may justifiably ask—Is work less secure for some employees? Does innovation carry a promise as well as a challenge? Is tension brewing in our places of work between labor and employers? Does workers' training and upskilling more vital today than ever before? These are all open questions that are worth addressing as they are hotly and publicly debated by practitioners in the field and by policy makers alike. The message within our brief introductory comments is that along with the challenges our places of work currently face, meaningful opportunities for change are also emerging that should not be wasted.

For instance, reflect for a moment on the relatively sudden digitalization of work during and after the pandemic that has turned into a significant disruptor. It shuttered a decades long traditional work pattern that has been confined to a centralized physical workplace. Yet, the resulting remote and hybrid work arrangements that are still evolving, offer us the unique opportunity to revisit a whole host of work-related issues ranging from the meaning of work itself and employee-employer labor relationship, to how work should be structured, monitored and managed (Bailey et al., 2022). Also consider that these very new flexible work arrangements stretches the boundaries of organizations in a way that require a redefinition of a company's essential "building blocks" such as organizational culture, and employee productivity, teamwork and training. Onsite, offsite and hybrid arrangements, while generating tensions in the new workplace, they also call for a redefinition of space and timing of work as they continue to affect personal life experiences. And as critical, the mix of "good and the bad" technologies currently utilized ought to be carefully assessed and accounted for. On one hand such technologies tends to "smoothen the rough contours" of organizational hierarchy by making it less noticeable and by facilitating collaboration across space and time. On the other hand, calls for addressing emerging drawbacks of using such digital technologies are growing, particularly the blurring of work-life balance, isolation, impact on career advancement, and unequal access to either flexible work arrangements or related technology (Hill et al., 2022; Kossek et al., 2023).

In drafting this book, we hoped to ignite a fruitful discussion amongst practitioners, academics and policy makers for the purpose of filling noticeable theoretical and practical gaps. Surprisingly many conceptual and empirical works have dealt to a lesser degree with some of the topics

contained within our book. Specifically, many related works have focused almost exclusively on technical, financial and marketing facets of digitalization while devoting little attention to possible implications of post pandemic new work arrangements on labor relations, power dynamics in the workplace, and on organizational and management related implications (Gradillas & Thomas, 2023; Teubner & Stockhinger, 2020). Our book attempts to shed some light on these very topics.

We follow with a cursory mention of each one of our nine chapters, touching briefly on their topics, key arguments, practical implications, and core message to related parties—be it employers, employees, policy makers, the public at large, and our curious reader.

Chapter 1. We titled our first chapter *The New Rise of Organized labor: A Power Transition*. As the title suggests, the chapter touches on recent labor wins that have reached a historical height during 2023. Key labor demands and strikes in numerous industries are discussed and the impressive results for workers are assessed. Possible explanations for labor gaining the upper hand are briefly discussed, along with lessons learnt for employee and employer alike. Chapter one core argument is that in the aftermath of the pandemic, new power related vulnerabilities have surfaced in the new workplace that have been fully exploited by organized labor, and with the pendulum tilting in favor of workers, a real power transition has taken root in favor of the worker. Unions unprecedented historic wins during 2023 are perhaps the clearest indication yet of a newly formed power equation within which workers enjoy the upper hand. 2023 was indeed a turning point for organized labor in the US A central question that is left open is the ability of labor to hold on to their newly found power in the upcoming years.

Yet, as 2024 is ending, restive labor at other large employers continued their march and gained meaningful concessions in their favor. In October 2024, labor union power and clout was once again shown after a three-day strike that has shot down shipping on the U.S. East Coast and the Gulf Coast in early October, coupled with labor's push back against automation across U.S. sea ports. Dock workers and port operators reached a tentative contract for wage hike of 62% over six years; the hike translates to an increase in wages to \$63 an hour from \$39 an hour over the life of the contract! And while the wage rate has been resolved, the union's demands relative to automation remain unresolved. The International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) union with its 45,000-port works launched the three-day strike, its first major work stoppage since 1977, in an opportune time for labor as the U.S. approaches an election period and as businesses and consumers are preparing for the holiday season. Both considerations compelled the White House to intervene in favor of the striking Dock workers (Oladipo, 2024). And still in October 2024, Boeing was compelled to meet many of the demands of its 33,000 striking employees in its Seattle, WA facilities.

Hourly rate increased from Boeing's initial offer of 25% to about double that rate, and various work bonuses were tripled in size up from the original offer to the striking employees.

Chapter 2. We titled our second chapter *The New Post Pandemic Workplace: Shedding Light on More Recent Developments*. The focus is on several significant trends, mostly unfavorable, that have emerged and settled in the new workplace. Taken together, those recent developments present employers with significant challenges, yet at the same time they also offer ample opportunities for meaningful change. The core argument is that more openness and accountability from all parties at the workplace are necessary. It calls for revisiting and redrafting of a new psychological contract that resets employee and employer mutual expectations. It also calls for accepting change as a continuous phenomenon that requires continuous reinvention. It necessitates putting the employee at the center and investing in training and mentoring, particularly of Gen Zs in light of apparent deficits in their readiness for the rigors of a new workplace. And as various other facets of the new workplace are explored, the chapter addresses in other sections the emerging new attitudes and behaviors that are symptomatic of unhappy workers, and the emergence of a favorable “new normal”—flexible work arrangements. The chapter concludes with the current state of two early promising workplace related movements—the environmental, social, and government (ESG) and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) movements. Both approaches sought to reshape companies' public image, as well as the dynamics and exchanges within the workplace, but both movements have stalled and are currently in retreat.

A recent study linked two of the developments that Chapter two addresses, namely flexible work arrangements and sense of inclusion at the workplace and offer some insights as to the dynamics taking place between these two work-related constructs. [Schertler et al. \(2024\)](#), argue that the two megatrends that define today's working world are remote work and the heterogeneity of the workforce; the latter establishes the need for inclusion. Inclusion is perceived as a sense of belonging and authenticity by the authors. One the study's key finding is that employees who worked remotely tended to experience reduced sense of belonging and authenticity with an increase in remote work. Such finding calls for formalizing new policies that are designed to increase the sense of inclusion of remote employees given the spread of work from home options in today's workplace.

Chapter 3. The title of our third chapter is *AI Does not Have Kids to Feed: You Wouldn't Lose Your Job to AI...But to Others Who Mastered It!* As the title suggests, the chapter focuses on the most recent innovation that promises to change the way we work. With much of the talk on AI-related effects still unfolding and in a state of flux, and with much more to be explored and learned about the ‘revolution’ it is predicted to introduce in our lives and

the marketplace, the chapter chose to focus on one specific aspect of this novel technology: Its impact on workers' current and future employment prospects. The author briefly touches on what appears to be AI's widespread adoption, its promise and drawbacks, along with the technology's threats and opportunities. The chapter goes on to present a few observations concerning AI's particular threat to the white-collar worker and concludes with a few proposed ways to mitigate AI related job displacement risks.

The key argument that the author makes is that AI should not be perceived as a threat to one's employment; being an innovative tool, it can turn to being "an ally" if properly mastered. Thus, the real threat is from others in the workplace who are upskilled and have learned what AI applications have to offer. Yet, there is little doubt about the "mixed bag" of goodies inherent in it. Elimination of some jobs is inevitable. While the chapter focused exclusively on the US, the effects of AI are global. For instance, consider the recent news concerning the social media platform TikTok, owned by China's ByteDance. It is laying off hundreds of employees from its global workforce, including a large number of staff in Malaysia as it shifts focus toward a greater use of AI in content moderation (Latiff, 2024). At the same time, consider some beneficial uses of AI at work; researchers foresee the future of human resource management as one of algorithmic management whereby human resource decisions are being automated for the benefit of making them more objective, and less administratively work loaded for HR managers (Scheibmayr & Reichel, 2024). Similarly, a new thinking envisions AI as a vehicle that increases employee efficiency by assessing employee emails, meetings and videoconference sessions to provide timely and accurate performance assessments in real time. Such an approach allows employees to be aware of "the good and the bad" more often, gain insights on what they can do better, and provide the opportunity to implement change year around, thus making them more efficient and more productive. Above all, by one view, there is less feeling of fear and/or shame of getting it wrong with a chatbot (Lukpat, 2024).

And yet, while many companies seek to fast integrated AI into human roles in our places of work, through what has been coined as algorithmic management that governs the execution of employee tasks by algorithms, such integration and use can also carry negative effects that can lead to disparity in the way teams are being treated at work. For instance, in a series of experiments, Schweitzer and De Cremer (2024), have studied the perceptions of employees that have been managed by such algorithms. They found that top managers consider employees who work under algorithms as less capable of creative capacities, which also resulted in those employee teams being less deserving of resources for innovation compared with human-led teams. The message cannot be clearer as to need to carefully study possible effects of any technological innovation prior to a widespread adoption of that tool.

Chapter 4. The title of Chapter 4 is *Organizational Decline by Micromanagement: The Implications of Over-Controlling Remote and Hybrid Employees*. As the title suggests, this chapter provides an interesting take on unfavorable consequences of micromanaging the workforce that is primarily employed remotely. Given that flexible work arrangements are the new normal, a proposed set of “do-and-don’t” is designed to increase managers awareness to potential drawbacks of a commonly used dysfunctional practice and provides managers with an approach that facilitates the effective supervising and monitoring of company employees. The key argument made in our fourth chapter is that as employees seek greater flexibility in their work, what is needed is an agile and flexible approach to management that fosters a sense of belonging and community. Specifically, when employees aren’t physically in the office, there’s a tendency for managers to overcompensate through closer scrutiny and monitoring measures. This micromanagement style can be beneficial in the short term for new employees who need training or are struggling to perform. However, for reasons the author explains in further detail, it’s an approach that, in the long term, is toxic—unproductive for the manager, frustrating for the employee, and costly for the overall organization. In a detailed manner, the chapter touches on several aspects of such destructive tendencies and offers numerous remedies. The reader will notice a list of toxic micromanagement behaviors, a discussion in length of their costly implications in both the employee and the organizational levels, and their financial costs to the organization.

Yet, a diagnosis without a prognosis carries little value. Thus, strategies for reducing harm and for addressing such toxic behaviors are detailed next—both at the managerial and the organizational levels. The chapters contains lots of visuals in the form of charts, tables, and various figures that enlightens the readable and practical content.

Chapter 5. We titled our fifth chapter *I Hate it Here! The Big Quit Is Not Over*. Chapter five shifts the reader’s focus to another unfavorable workplace trend—voluntary turnover. While the rate at which employees are choosing to quit their jobs appears to have stabilized, it has shown an overall steady increase over the last ten years, aside from a record low in April 2020 and a record high in April 2022 ([Trading Economics, 2024](#)). Needless to add that what has been coined as an “employee retention-crisis,” is a phenomenon that is remarkably costly to employers large and small. It carries financial and knowledge losses and it affects productivity. In addition, there are several direct costs, such as advertising, hiring and training, and overtime for employees who have to take on additional work. Combined together, the related costs can be equally devastating to affected companies.

Aligned well with observations made in previous chapters, there is a notable shift in the post pandemic era as to what employees expect from their employers and organizations. Thus, a key argument is that a successful new workplace calls for a more targeted and strategic organization’s wide effort

to create a culture that is conducive for attracting and retaining talent. Accomplishing this approach requires first a clear understanding of the reasons why employees are leaving. Next, it requires crafting a retention strategy that, if effective, carries several benefits capable of better managing the retention crisis. The chapter details some of the direct and indirect costs of high voluntary employee turnover, touches on the primary reasons why so many employees quit their jobs and proposes practical guidelines for developing an effective employee retention strategy. The message contained in our fifth chapter is that while completely eliminating voluntary turnover is hard to achieve, reducing its scale and better managing its consequences is doable. With the curious reader in mind, noticeable in this chapter is the continuation of the “hands-on” practical approach used in preceding chapters. Indeed, the recommendations presented at the tail end of chapter five may well constitute an action plan suitable to all employers. This chapter contains lots of visuals in the form of charts, tables, and various figures that capture key points and summarizes the essence for easy comprehension and reading.

Chapter 6. The title of our sixth chapter—*The Gig Economy’s Emerging Trend: How the Fractional Employment Model is Reshaping the Workplace*—sheds light on a trend that has been slowly developing for years yet gaining momentum and speed in the post pandemic years. What is of particular interest is the unprecedented increase in numbers of C-suite executives who depart their current companies in favor of gig work. Consider for instance, the latest CEO Turnover Report published by a large outplacement firm that suggests an unprecedented number of CEOs who have announced their departures during 2024, making it the highest on record ([Challenger, 2024](#)). The CEOs of several large corporations, including Boeing, Starbucks, Nike, and Hertz stepped down from their roles in 2024, bringing voluntary turnover across the entire C-suite to a new level. Of special interest is a survey of 150 company directors conducted in early 2024; it reported that 23% of board members stated that their company is highly likely to have a top executive depart voluntarily and unexpectedly in the next year, and many say they have not prepared for it ([Corporate Board Member, 2024](#)).

Why is this trend taking place now and is it indeed accelerating? Chapter sixth attempts to wrestle with these questions. Reads as an extension of the preceding chapter, the focus here is on voluntary departure of high-level executives who substitute long-term employment with self-selected short-term contractual work with other companies—termed fractional employment. One can assume that such fractional employment provides more flexibility and less stress and yet being satisfactory enough despite possible monetary loss and reduced job security. Certainly, an area ripe for further empirical investigation.

Our chapter’s key argument is that given the cost of replacing a departing C-level executive, which can be exceedingly high for some employers,

coupled with the risk of getting it wrong altogether, makes the adoption of the fractional model more economical and practical option. And as a consequence, a successful early adoption has the potential of turning the practice into a newly emerging and rapidly growing trend. The model enables organizations to hire experienced C-level executives on an as-needed basis—a fraction of full-time permanent employment. The author suggests that with the rise in the number of high-level executives who are willing to offer their skills, knowledge, and expertise on demand, organizations are increasingly leveraging fractional or temporary leadership as an option for leadership continuity. Furthermore, this fractional employment model is likely to accelerate the changes shaping the traditional employer-employee relationship in the new post pandemic workplace.

And while the model appears to provide a host of potential benefits for executives and employers alike, it also introduces some challenges and potential drawbacks. Chapter six describes various types of fractional employment models, touches on common services provided on a fractional basis, and explores the drivers behind this emerging trend. It concludes with an overview of the benefits and potential challenges for both the fractional executive and the organizations that utilize this increasingly popular strategy. Similar to the preceding chapters, the reader is presented with numerous tables and charts that lightens up the content and makes the digestion of ideas and the reading much easier.

Chapter 7. We titled our seventh chapter—*Higher Education in Search of a New Direction: Recalibrating the Value of a Degree*. As the title suggests, the chapter touches on some of the changes taking place in the marketplace that promise to reshape higher education in the post pandemic era. The author views the pandemic as a key inflection point for higher education that necessitates adapting to the new realities it created on one hand, while capturing the awesome opportunities it offers for continued growth and development on the other hand. But before turning to current challenges and implications, the author reminds the reader of the constraints higher education faced prior to the pandemic. Ranking high were the increases in college tuition and ancillary costs, the reduction in college funding by state governments, the remarkable decline in enrollment numbers due to overall low birth rates, and the rapidly growing trend that heightened the devaluation of the college degree as more consumers began looking at online, vocational, technical, and apprenticeship programs as viable options for achieving stronger earning power and job security at less cost. Combined together, these developments have led to a skills-based hiring movement whereby employers begun looking at candidates more through a skills lens in addition to a degree lens. One emerging implication: Higher education institutions find their constituencies demanding more marketable majors to the detriment of liberal arts/humanities majors.

As compelling is the author's focus on relevant post pandemic challenges and their impact on college leadership, operating business model, college degree marketability, intra-institutional collaboration, and the reliance on adjunct faculty. The calls for change forced colleges to experiment with a multitude of strategies but with mixed results, thus presenting our author with the opportunity to offer a few pathways for moving forward. Gaining a rich experience through years of advising parents and college-bound students and being an adjunct faculty himself at several institutions of higher learning, the author proposes nine recommendations worthy of consideration that potentially might help colleges in negotiating the "obstacle field" created by some of the challenges they are facing today.

We encourage the curious reader to keep in mind the following four US related trends that add weight and urgency to the author's arguments and recommendations on subject matter.

- The national birth rate fell 23% between 2007 and 2022, resulting in a sharp drop in college enrollment that is likely to manifest itself beginning in 2025 through 2037.
- The number of students in degree granting institutions of higher learning fell by 15% from 2010 to 2021, and only 62% of high schoolers today go to college.
- The cost of tuition, fees, books, room and board in a private college averaged \$58,000 in the 2024–2025 school year, which translates to nearly \$250,000 for a four-year college degree for one child. Such related costs continue to escalate compelling many parents to question the value of an academic degree.
- More than 500 nonprofit private colleges has shut down in the last decade according to the Wall Street Journal, nearly three times more than during the prior decade (Jenkin, 2024).

For publicly funded colleges and universities, a combination of escalating operating costs and state-imposed restrictions on tuition increases also means an increase in the likelihood that many more institutions might shut their doors for good. One should keep in mind that ceasing to exist is a blow not just to a university's student body, faculty and staff but it is also a blow to the ecosystem of businesses and communities that flourished and prospered around it. By one estimate, an institution of higher learning that closes its doors also impacts about 265 jobs and nearly \$14 million of labor income (Jenkin, 2024).

Chapter 8. Our eighth chapter—*Talent Recruitment and Retention: How Cities Now Compete*—sheds light on one of the most challenging and essential tasks organizations struggle with—recruiting and retaining promising employees in today's marketplace. Using cities as unique entities and his own past working experience in the field, the author provides a vivid account on cities' effort in developing original initiatives for luring talent. Focusing on

Louisville—the largest city in Kentucky as a model, the reader is acquainted with a myriad of local organizations that have committed to pooling and leveraging resources for promoting joint initiatives aimed at recruiting talent that benefit local economic and workforce development. Notable is the personal touch the author flavors his writing with that showcase numerous projects he was involved with throughout the years for strengthening recruitment and retention effort in the city.

The chapter's key argument is that talent is crucial for economic development, and yes, cities like companies do compete for talent. This is particularly critical given that companies rank high a city's human capital when considering re-location or expansion into another market. The author further asserts that site selection consultants are often enlisted to scope out a city and assist businesses on these important talent decisions. And while additional factors help determine business decisions, the quality of the workforce and a sufficient talent pipeline is generally near the top of the list. The practical implications for city governments must lead to an action-driven agenda, parts of which are concisely proposed by the author.

Referring back to Louisville as a possible model to be emulated, the chapter details a formal structure that facilitates such an action-driven initiative. At its core are talent focused organizations which can be viewed as falling primarily into four spheres: organizations that are actively involved in economic development; institutions of higher learning; the employer and business community; and less traditional organizations that nevertheless play a talent role. Of great value are examples of organizations in Louisville that operate within these four spheres and contribute to the city's talent output. This is perhaps one of several insightful contributions of chapter eight.

Yet, only through the coordinated effort of all these organizations can a talent ecosystem be created for the sake of enhancing the quality of the city workforce. The challenge, argues our author, lies in the ability of such an ecosystem to act in unison and engage in a concentrated effort in pursuit of one goal: To attract and retain talent. Louisville fared well in its efforts. The city's edge in competing with other cities for talent is rooted in its ability of marshaling and leveraging all of its talent partners and resources into a cohesive, unified game plan. For that to continue taking place, a list of recommendations, largely based on the author work experience, is detailed and proposed.

Chapter 9. The book's closing chapter—*From Personal Agency to Thriving in a Turbulent Economy: A New Career Management Paradigm*—builds on previous chapters by integrating key concepts mentioned earlier ranging from power shift in the workplace to Gen Zees work expectations and attitudes, and from remote work arrangements to the expansion of the gig economy. Such developments along with many others are used as a backdrop to the unfolding changes taking hold in a new workplace. At the chapter's core are societal and workforce changes that have further altered and increased the challenges that individuals face as they try to address career and employment decisions.

And since career planning today occurs in a radically difficult work context, the author argues that it necessitates developing and employing a new career management model. Drawing on his extensive experience in this very field, the author introduces the reader to a brief review of the career planning field and elaborates in length on related expectations and aspirations of the workforce today with an emphasis on recent cohorts that have entered the marketplace. The reader is introduced to VUCA, an acronym that stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. We now live in a VUCA driven world that makes career planning and development for individuals much more challenging, and this in turn, contends our author, calls for a higher level of personal agency and new thinking that ultimately leads to a new career management paradigm. General features of the proposed model are presented, “tips” for testing the model are provided, and recommended steps for facilitating the adoption of the new approach are offered.

Anchored in the author’s impressive work experience as a career and vocational consultant, the chapter reflects original thinking, sound synthesis of workplace dynamics and developments, and keen understanding of gaps and new needs that led to the newly proposed career management model.

In closing, reflecting back on the book’s nine chapters, we attempted to capture what we perceived as a workplace-related content that is both meaningful and applicable. At its core are topics that portray key dynamics in play that continue to shape our places of work in the post pandemic era. We consider the topics being presented herein to be essential for both employee and employer alike. Their cumulative impact promises to stay with us far beyond the immediate term and well into the years to come. How well we have succeeded in conveying our intent is left to the curious reader to determine.

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CHAPTER 1

THE NEW RISE OF ORGANIZED LABOR: A POWER TRANSITION

Introduction

We are witnessing a continuous transfer of power from employer to employee that promises to reshape employment relationships between both actors in the workplace. This transition gained traction as the recent pandemic was waning down and accelerated during 2023. The new power equation still holds as we approach the tail of 2024. The following review sheds some light on power related dynamics at play, yet the reader is advised to view the unfolding content as a collection of reflections, rather than an in-depth analysis of organized labor, or as a historical treatise on subject matter. Guided by our key argument, the author attempted to identify a common thread that runs through a large pool of recent data and media news concerning organized labor and recent unions' victories. Unions unprecedented historic wins during 2023 are perhaps the clearest indication yet of a newly formed power equation within which workers enjoy the upper hand. 2023 was indeed a turning point for organized labor in the US.

A slew of union member activities during 2023, led to remarkable wage gains through work stoppages, tough bargaining and contract negotiations. As impressive, union efforts were not limited to any one particular industry; aside from automakers plants, activities spread to numerous sectors including healthcare, manufacturing, nonprofits, retail, higher education, and even to museums! Historically, workers tended to deal with existing power

2 *Workplace Transformations in a Post Pandemic Era*

imbalance in their workplace through strikes, or threats of work stoppage, as they bargain with their employers over wages and work conditions. Data provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics suggests that about half a million workers took part in “major work stoppages” during 2023, an increase of 280% in that year alone (Poydock & Sherer, 2024).

While there was no surprise in the traditional demands for higher pay by the converging workers on the picket line, the timing of the widespread “discontent” is telling. Workers’ collective action in 2023 reflected the growing confidence triggered by labor shortages that weakened employers’ hand and created new realities in the post pandemic workplace. Data concerning the scope and scale of work stoppages and worker gains suggested a change in the status quo with the rise of organized labor. Consider that about three-quarters of the 25 major work stoppages in 2023 took place in the private sector, with over half occurring in a healthcare setting. State government accounted for five work stoppages, with three of those involving public colleges and universities. Local government accounted for three major work stoppages involving public elementary schools (Poydock & Sherer, 2024).

Timing was indeed critical. The 2023 labor victories happened in an opportune time; a confluence of forces that included a favorable public support, labor shortages, high inflation, and soaring company profits combined to awaken “dormant” unions and fueled an accelerating transition of power to organized labor even in traditionally less restive sectors like banking and Hollywood studios. A case in point, 2023 saw all three Detroit automakers riding a multiyear run of soaring profits; eyeing that cash pile, UAW President Shawn Fain repeated his mantra that “record profits mean record contracts” all throughout the union’s negotiations with the Big Three (Colias & Eckert, 2023). Consider that while in the auto industry CEOs now make about 300 times what rank-and-file workers make, data from the U.S. Labor Department suggests that wages and benefits for union workers rose about 3.8% in July-through-September of 2023, from a year before (Harrison, 2023).

The United Auto Workers’ gains marks the greatest labor victory yet in a year of multiplying record wins, enabling other unions to ride on a similar wave, thus, cementing a transition of power that ensured unionized workers more leverage at the workplace. An integral part of the ever-changing landscape of the global marketplace, the current power shift from employer to employee promises to be a transforming phenomenon. The undergoing convergence of additional forces, including restructuring, layoffs—largely in technology sector, and the introduction of disruptive new technologies—primarily AI, combined to reshape the post pandemic workplace in a manner that necessitate the crafting of a new social contract between employer and employee. And as significant

is the role economic shifts play in the balance of power between companies and their workers. Conventional wisdom suggests that marketplace uncertainty, global competition coupled with higher unemployment rate tends to tilt the power pendulum toward the employer. Consider, for instance, the role competition from foreign automakers played in the calculus of the Big Three when negotiating with their workers' union. Yet, when the labor market is tight, economic growth is strong, and the ranks of the unemployed dwindle, employers are compelled to compete for talent, hence tilting the power pendulum toward the employee. It appears that market conditions in 2023 and 2024 were well aligned with such conventional wisdom which may explain the recent organized labor victories. How long these market conditions last will determine the balance of power in the marketplace, and the nature of the post-pandemic employer-employee relationships.

Moving forward, we turn to the literature as we seek to anchor labor related observations and reflections on solid grounds. We briefly touch on power dynamics at work, how they shape employment relationships, and explore their potential effects on workers. We follow with a concise review of key unions wins in 2023 and reflect on the roots of organized labor success. This chapter concludes with final thoughts aimed at workers and employers alike.

A Few Relevant Nuggets from the Literature

On Worker Power Dynamics

Power has been defined as the ability of an individual or group to control their physical and social environment, and the capacity to influence decisions which are and are not taken by others (Hyman, 1975). Power can be exerted by an individual or a group for the purpose of protecting specific interests, and/or for advancing specific issues. Ultimately, power directly or indirectly influences decision making and outcomes. A seminal work by French and Raven (1959) identified six power bases that can be leveraged to influence a specific entity. Power can be exercised through coercion, or alternatively via rewards, expertise, or by exercising legitimacy. Two additional bases include information-based power, and referent-based power that solicits respect from others based on rank, role, or stature.

Now reflect for a moment about organized labor victories throughout the year 2023; there is little doubt that power played a major role in contract negotiations. Actual strikes, or threats of imminent strikes—i.e., *coercion*—served as a backdrop for the give-and-take between workers and employers.

4 Workplace Transformations in a Post Pandemic Era

Exerting coercion-based power forced employers' hands in most negotiations. While striking threats have always been a power play by organized labor, coercion is only one element for either party to consider. A more useful framework for assessing employer-employee power dynamics suggests that employee influence pivots around seven core elements of work and employment relationships (Dundon et al., 2017). These include legal aspects, work contract, technology, institutional governance, union participation, non-union voice, and external actors. The multitude of dimensions further highlights the complexity of forces at play that shaped the employee-employer power equation. While commenting on each one of these seven dimensions is beyond the scope of this chapter, we do reflect next, albeit briefly, on some of the mentioned dimensions. And as meaningful, the framework also proposes a fourfold schema for analyzing potential changes in the power equation in terms of *form*, *scope*, *level*, and *depth*. *Form*—relates to changes in employee/union voice, introduction of technology, current or new legal issues, or changes in standing of external players. *Scope*—relates to the host of issues at stake, whether minor or core and central in nature. *Level*—refers to the 'location' where change in influence takes place—local workplace, companywide, national, or global. Finally, *depth*—relates to the magnitude of the actual influence—whether shallow, strategic, or over encompassing.

Applying the fourfold schema to, say, the United Auto Workers Union's 2023 contract negotiation with the Big Three may help us see its usefulness. It appears that *Form* wise, the UAW voice was loud and sound, stressed specific technology related demands, and touched on far-reaching implications for other external parties including other labor unions, and foreign auto companies in the US. *Scope* wise, the multitude of issues on the table were remarkable and beyond customary wage related negotiations. Listing key wins, they included unprecedented raises of at least 33% for all workers, the elimination of a two-tier wage system, re-opening of a previously closed Stellantis plant, a commitment to a fair transition regarding electric vehicles, and annual bonuses for retirees. *Level* wise, the signed contract and agreed on terms affected the autoworkers, of the Big Three, in all the automobile plants across the country. And *Depth* wise, the agreement changed the status quo that existed for years in the auto industry by strengthening the power and influence of autoworkers and their union. The contract terms extend such influence well into the upcoming four years. Furthermore, its effects have spilled over to other foreign automakers in the US who rushed to increase wages to their unionized workers—as we discuss in next section. And as remarkable, the UAW's wins resulted in a successful union drive at Volkswagen plant in Alabama in early 2024. This is a U.S. based foreign automaker, operating in a Southern Right-to Work state (Maher & Campo-Flores, 2024).

Approaching the employer-employee relations from a different angle, Fox's seminal work (Fox, 1966) is as useful for understanding power dynamics at the workplace. Fox offers three frames of reference that are applicable to management choice and worker's influence. First is what Fox calls *Unitarist typology*. This frame stresses open communication, common goals and shared interests, all key building blocks at the center of the employee-employer relationships. Thus, the belief that managers should not be influenced or coerced by third parties. In other words, unions should not intervene or disturb the manager-worker relationship. Unions should stay clear and stay out! The unitarist frame reflects the attitudes of companies that claim to know better what is good for their employees and that they are treated well and fairly. As such, they squash workers attempts to organize. Large employers like [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and Starbucks who fight workers attempts to organize share this frame of mind. Second is the *Pluralist typology*. This frame support choices that encourage agreement making, collective voice, and ultimately—a balance between worker voice, equity, and performance. Fragmented employee power is likely to negatively affect such a balance, and hence unions are viewed as being part of the collective voice along with other institutional forms. This view is largely shared by organized labor and employers who seek to balance worker equity with performance and productivity, while also understanding the role of worker voice in the process. We contend that most labor campaigns mentioned in the next section share this view with their respective employers. Third is what Fox refers to as *Radical typology*. This view considers market and political forces as threatening to workers and unions alike, hence reducing their influence in the marketplace. Furthermore, shareholder economic muscle is also a threat to managers' power. Strengthening employees and unions positions is thus encouraged, as a balance to threatening forces. Fox typology highlights the role various actors play in shaping employment relationships over time and space, and the capacity of employees to influence working conditions, as well as managers capacity to shape their own choices.

Reverting back to the useful framework for assessing employer-employee power dynamics at the marketplace, we find it beneficial to reflect on three particular change-related dimensions—marketplace changes, technology changes, and change in union participation. Further rooted in the literature, our reflections on these dimensions serve well as a backdrop to understanding employee influence or lack thereof.

Think Marketplace Changes

A common view, albeit simplistic, contends that periods of economic growth, low unemployment, and strong demand for workers tend to lead

to an increase in employee power. Yet, during economic recessions and the swelling of the unemployed ranks, power shifts to the employer. Globalization, foreign competition, and offshoring of work contributes to employment uncertainty and to fragmentation of labor. In such times, knowledge employees, more so than any other work group, are likely to bring to bear their skills and expertise and secure favorable working terms and conditions. Further exacerbating labor force fragmentation are members of another related group—the gig economy. Largely unorganized and without a voice, this group with “in-demand” higher skills is on a growth trajectory since the end of the recent pandemic (Malka, 2024; Malka & Tiell, 2022), and by some estimates may represent as much as a third of the labor force by 2035. Despite being unorganized and lacking collective voice, members of the gig economy draw on their power-based *expertise* in influencing their own individual contracts with employers. The growth in the size of the gig economy also suggests the growing acceptance of self-contracted work by employers. For this practice to continue, flexible working arrangements must also bear some benefits to companies. Tapping into the independent contractor pool, as well as into other worker pools like the disabled and retirees, and relaxing hiring credentials are ways employers are currently coping with labor shortages.

The literature provides an interesting perspective with regard to the changes mentioned. Two theories are of particular interest. The Labor Market Fragmentation theory (Craig et al., 1982; Rubery, 1978), and the Insider-Outsider theory (Lindbeck & Snower, 2002; Rueda, 2005). The first theory points to distinct labor force subgroups—based on skills, and productivity, as well as demographics, which were created and shaped by socio, economic and political forces. The second theory considers skilled, knowledge-rich, experienced workers—referred to as insiders—as having more bargaining power given their marketplace contribution and replacement costs. On the other end are workers with far less skills and experience, and with sporadic employment track—referred to as outsiders—as having little or no influence, thus enjoy no leverage in shaping their contract in the marketplace.

Given their distinct characteristics as a subgroup within the labor market, their entrepreneurial drive, skills and expertise, members of the gig economy can be seen as “insiders” despite being unorganized, lack collective voice, and are not part to any union-employed labor contract. It is likely that members of the group, as well as other high skilled “established” workers in much knowledge-based companies, prefer the status quo that benefits them more than it benefits the “outsiders.” By the same token, should low-paid employees be considered “outsiders?” Consider that in early 2023, workers in low-paying industries gained leverage and obtained significant pay increases; but that leverage weakened toward the tail end of that year.

One possible explanation argues that a tight labor market following the pandemic led to disproportionate wage growth at the bottom (Omeokwe, 2023). For example, the average hourly wages in leisure and hospitality, a typical low-paid industry, were up 7.0% from a year earlier at the start of 2023, according to Labor Department data. However, by October 2023, that level dropped to 4.5%. Similarly, workers at the bottom quarter of wage distribution received a 5.9% raise in October 2023, compared with a 7.2% increase in January of that year, according to data from the federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta (Omeokwe, 2023). Why is it that leverage fades for low-wage workers? Are they really being “outsiders?”

Consider Technological Changes

We are well in to a “second machine age” or a “fourth industrial revolution” as suggested by several thinkers (Mason, 2016; Schwab, 2016). New technology and automation are necessarily linked to possible worker displacement, with a negative impact on employee voice. Any wonder as to why unions are so leery of new technology? Consider that technologies-related demands featured prominently as prime position issues during the recent negotiations of unions with employers (see Table 1.1). Both the spread of AI tools and the remarkable reduction in technology costs serve as impetus for employers to consider automation for possible reduction in their employee ranks. And as alluded to, potential worker replacement also affect worker power in the workplace. Automation has traditionally predominated organized labor in the automobile industry, and given recent UAW wins, one may assume that automakers have strong incentives for further expanding automation across their operations or moving some operations to countries with low labor cost. Table 1.1 suggests in the case of the UAW that the union is “on top” of it, thereby making new technology, particularly EVs, an integral part of any contract agreement.

The effects of the emerging “labor-light economy” have been long suggested by some economists (Ford, 2015; McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2014), affect both low and highly skilled workers who may be replaced by automation and AI-driven smart machines. Early research on the U.S. economy has long predicted that nearly half of all jobs might be at risk of exposure to smart machines within the next decade (Frey & Osborne, 2017). While such a prediction is seen as real by current data, it also appears that along with the possible elimination of jobs, the introduction of new technologies is likely to create many other new ones.

The reader may correctly conclude that when considering workplace power dynamics, technology favors the employer; it transfers power away from the employee due to their exposure to displacement, which consequently results

Table 1.1**2023—A Historic Year: Key Union Wins**

	Auto Workers	Hollywood Writers	Hollywood Actors	Airline Pilots	Delivery Workers—UPS	Las Vegas Casino Workers
Union	United Auto Workers	Writers Guild of America	Screen Actors Guild	Airline Pilots Association	International Brotherhood Teamster	Culinary & bartender
Strike Length	40+ days	148 days	118 days	No strike	No strike	0 days
Worker Affected	145,000	11,500	140,000	45,000	330,000	40,000
Agreement reached	October, 2023	September, 2023	November, 2023	December, 2022	July, 2023	November, 2023
A KEY GAIN	25% base pay increase	12.5% gradual pay increase	14.78% gradual pay increase	34%–40% pay increase	Raise of \$10.25—current workers	Largest pay increase ever
AI/Technology	Add EV plants/contract	Won't lose w/AI entry	Gain actor permission first	N/A	No in-ward cameras in vehicles	Advance notice/ New technology
Final note	Keep Big-3 guessing	Minimum writers per show	Creation of a bonus pool	snap up' provisions/rivals	Drivers will make \$170,000/year	Deal forged at midnight hour

Source: [WSJ](#) (2023, December 12, B6).