

NEW APPROACHES TO  
FLEXIBLE WORKING

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# NEW APPROACHES TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## RATIONALE FOR THE SERIES

The business environment continues to change ever more rapidly. Established practice is constantly challenged in our post-Covid, climate changing, technology-driven world leading to the further proliferation of digitalisation, new flexible ways and places of working, leadership styles, diversity, etc. All areas of business and management are finding that traditional frameworks for organisation design, marketing, HR and other functional disciplines no longer provide models for best practice. Not only driven by such changes in the external environment but together with the differing value systems of younger generations there is an urgent need to provide new frames of reference that can help formulate new business strategies while synergising with the career aspirations of the labour market.

'The New Business Culture' is a series of micro-books with each addressing an area of business and management that seeks to demonstrate how and where established traditional models and frameworks are no longer providing optimum frameworks for the purpose that informs the range of subject areas discussed. The authors offer new approaches that transcend convention.

In this series of volumes, each distils the essential elements of a key topic and retains focus and purpose and seeks to offer new approaches to overcome the limitations of existing practice.

The content and new concepts therein originate from the synergy between the authors own fundamental research (including supervision of PhD students) triangulated with evidence and application from their extensive client base in their consulting practice (THT Consulting, Amsterdam).

Purchase of each volume in the series includes exclusive access to a corresponding companion App. Each App enables readers to explore the application of specific concepts in further detail for individual volumes and what it means for them and/or their organisation.

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## THE NEED FOR AN EVIDENCE-LED FRAMEWORK

In this volume, we consider the changing values of employees and how the opportunity and consequences for many people to work flexibly had been thrust upon them. And for employers, quantum shifts in how to manage staff working remotely and accept flexible working to help retain good employees.

While COVID-19 suddenly forced many workers (who could) to work from home which prompted many rapidly produced anecdotal publications about the effects, there has been little or no organised evidence-driven assembled body of knowledge leading to a conceptual framework to inform the evolving future of flexible working. There remains a conspicuous absence of a rigorous understanding for both employers and employees to provide a framework for identifying best practice and how the opportunities can be best synergised.

We continue to see politicians ‘pleading’ workers to get back to the office as their default location. UK Cabinet Office minister Jeremy Quin<sup>1</sup> told the House of Commons that there were ‘real benefits’ in being in the same working environment.

*We are encouraging people to go back. There are benefits in civil servants working together, as there are for those in other areas of the economy, in terms of innovation, teamwork and being able to bring on new members of a team. I welcome the fact that people are returning to the office and that they are working collaboratively in Government buildings across the country.*

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1 Proceedings of the UK House of Commons: Hansard, volume 734, 22 June 2023.

And in another sphere, under 50-year-old laws, UK local councils are required to hold certain meetings, such as planning and full council, in person. This legal requirement to hold full council meetings in person was temporarily dropped during the COVID-19 pandemic but reintroduced in May 2021.<sup>2</sup> A survey by the (UK) Local Government Association (LGA) in Spring 2023 found 1 in 10 councils had seen members stand down since then due to the requirement being reinstated.

The LGA, which represents councils in England, said that the recruitment and retention of councillors, especially those who were disabled or had other jobs or caring responsibilities, would be hampered if councils were not able to hold hybrid meetings.

*The UK government said, 'in-person meetings were important for accountability'.<sup>3</sup>*

A Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities spokesman said:<sup>4</sup>

*While remote meetings gave councils the necessary flexibility to support businesses and communities during the Covid-19 pandemic, we believe physical attendance at meetings remains important, not just to build strong working relationships but to deliver good governance and democratic accountability.*

*It is right that councillors regularly meet and debate in person so that communities can hold their council to account.*

But such dictums are without any rationale or rigorous evidence why or how this should be. Why and how are face-to-face meetings important for accountability? Notice the use of the word 'believe' above, rather than 'we have evidence that shows that ...'

Recall that, real evidence-driven visionary leaders such as Martin Luther King<sup>5</sup> never said, 'I have a mission statement'.

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2 Local Government Association (LGA) survey June 2023 as reported by *BBC News*.

3 Local Government Association (LGA) survey June 2023 as reported by *BBC News*.

4 Local Government Association (LGA) survey June 2023 as reported by *BBC News*.

5 Cited by Simon Sinek, [www.happimettters.com](http://www.happimettters.com).

Based on our extensive professional practice over many years together with fundamental rigorous research (including supervision of doctoral candidates) which has included corporate culture and ways of working, we seek review-established practice and offer new opportunities of new approaches from flexible working by proposing a new integrating framework.

But first, we need to review current practice ....

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## CHANGES IN HOW WE VIEW WORK

### 2.1. FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Imagine you have recently moved house and have invited your new neighbours round for a friendly drink to get to know them. How might the conversation start?

*You say: 'Hello and thanks for coming. I'm Peter a defence lawyer and my wife Jackie is a kindergarten teacher'.*

*Neighbours one side of you say: 'Welcome to our community. I'm Ben and I am a civil servant in the department of transport and my wife Emma runs a flower shop'.*

*Neighbours on the other side of your house say: 'Hi, I'm Ahmed and own the corner shop convenience store and my wife Sarauniya does all our paper work and helps serve sometimes'.*

Or how about this alternative:

*You say: 'Hello and thanks for coming. I'm Peter and my passion is gardening in my spare time. I'm looking forward to redesigning our garden. My wife Jackie designs and makes all her own clothes'.*

*Neighbours one side of you say: 'Welcome to our community. I'm Ben and I'm an amateur cycling fanatic – out most days on my bicycle in all weathers when not working. My wife Emma is an amateur star gazer forever looking through her telescope at the moon and planets when it's a clear night'.*

*Neighbours on the other side of your house say: 'Hi, I'm Ahmed and at weekends I play the saxophone with a couple of my mates for fun in a*

*club downtown. My wife Sarauniya has a great singing voice and often does vocals to our tracks'.*

But work is what pays the mortgage and other bills, the car, vacations and evenings out in our favourite restaurants. Because work takes up so much of our energy and time, there is a tendency to overestimate its value and the value of relationships at work with colleagues and even the value of work itself and our perception of the value of the contributions we make to our employer. It's easy to think you are indispensable and you are doing a great job.

As Michael Foley says,<sup>1</sup> 'The great victory of work religion has been to increase the pressure to conform whilst removing any awareness of conformity'. Once people worked in order to live, now working is living! Your job is your identity and status.

Many employees having experienced flexible working and even those who haven't as yet may feel the desire for a better quality of life more strongly and leave their workplace in order to fulfil their passion and longing, wanting their time here on this planet to leave an imprint in some way.

Others may feel that working life is not fully satisfying them in many ways and are simply waiting for the pain of staying where they are at work, to be greater than the worry of leaving, having to then face uncertainty and the unknown.

However strong these feelings are, we observe this restlessness about how unfulfilled and disengaged people are at work is on the increase.

And while many are suffering in silence, this predicament of ambivalence can be to the detriment of business growth and success and future sustainability.

Recall the expectations of the 'paperless office'<sup>2</sup> and the rise of office technology that we would all be frustrated because we would all have too much leisure time as work would be either mechanised or at least more highly productive. Arendt<sup>3</sup> agonised over a society where the workforce had no work to do as portrayed in H.G. Wells' Time Machine future society. Yet in the middle ages, most people only worked half of the year (harvest time, etc.). Pundits didn't predict today's problems would be the reverse with workers suffering burn out, stress and mental health issues from too much work.

This paternalism of the religion of modern work has led corporations to appear loving and serving employees' needs to the full. So, corporations now

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1 M. Foley, 2010, *The Age of Absurdity*, Simon & Schuster, London.

2 'The office of the future', *Business Week*, 48-70, June 1975.

3 H. Arendt, 1958, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

provide shops, cafes, gyms, hair salons and health care. The corporation's campus is now the new village.

Part of the pressure to conform is visibility and hence open plan offices where we can see everyone else has their head down working.

## 2.2. THE JOB LIFE CYCLE

As early as 1982, Richard Boyatki<sup>4</sup> described his observations that once appointed to a job, the employee would move through several phases in the way they worked and thought of their job:

### **Phase 1: Performance Mode:**

When first starting their job, they sought to 'perform' and demonstrate they were capable of doing the job well and that the person (manager or HR) made the right decision in appointing them.

### **Phase 2: Development Mode:**

After a few years, they would reflect that the tasks they were doing in their job likely had little resemblance to original job description provided to them at the time of their appointment. Things had changed. Even more, if they could work differently, and on different tasks, they could fulfil the work that needed to be done for the benefit of their organisation in their role(s) and have more job satisfaction.

In some cases, they could make these changes themselves and for wider changes seek the approval of their line manager. These were exciting times and job satisfaction increased.

This phase can continue for some time unless:

- a) Suddenly there is some reorganisation or you have a new boss. This usually results in the job holder to return to Phase 1: performance mode – so they can demonstrate to their new boss they can deliver performance.
- b) If there is a continual lack of recognition such as promotion, salary increase, or even just supporting praise, the job holder will likely switch to Phase 3.

### **Phase 3: Retirement Mode:**

The job holder asks themselves, 'why am I working so hard?' 'Why am I doing all this if nobody cares and I never get even a thank you?' Or 'why have my

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4 R. Boyatki, 1982, *The Competent Manager: A Model for Effective Performance*, Wiley.

efforts not been rewarded – when others have been promoted or had pay rises and I haven't?’

Rod Gray<sup>5</sup> explored many workplaces and found nine key perspectives for personal motivation and achievement:

- I know what I am expected to do
- I want to do it
- I have the ability to do it
- Someone (who matters to me) will notice I do it
- I know how well I am doing
- Processes help me to do it
- I have the resources to do it
- The environment is right
- I can do it better next time.

If the above aren't in place, the common reaction is to slow down and 'work to rule' and be less pro-active. If the job holder becomes really frustrated, they may resign and move to another employer – where they then have to operate initially as per Phase 1 – performance mode again.

Referring back to our initial scenarios of meeting our new neighbours, there are signs that not just neighbours are beginning to include the second scenario early in the conversation. People all over are beginning to question who they are and what they want out of life and what they are prepared to do with their time over and above work.

At the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs<sup>6</sup> is 'self-actualisation', but this had become to mean making good progress in your chosen career with a lot of visible material gains – house, flashy car and even a trophy partner!

Not just because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but additionally prompted by it, people have suddenly been reflecting more on their life and have realised how much time they spent commuting, away from their children and other loved ones in order to afford the lifestyle they have – but not necessarily want anymore.

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5 R. Gray, 2004, et seq, *How People Work*, Prentice-Hall, London.

6 For example: Saul Mcleod, PhD, October 2023, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.