Challenges and opportunities
for the savvy business leader

by Dermot Duff

Work, life and other four-letter words: How the new world of work will affect our work and personal lives. The world changed radically in Spring 2020, when the digital world of work finally arrived with a bang, and the pandemic accelerated nascent changes we knew were imminent.

Not alone did this pandemic change the nature of certain kinds of work fundamentally, it changed the nature of life itself, for work is an integral part of life: often a drudgery, essentially a way of earning one's daily bread but also a way to find meaning in life - a vehicle for achievement, for belonging, for comradeship (and, yes, conflict, jealously and resentment).

By improving connectivity and untethering employees, it also undermines the nature of management and the fundamental concept of the modern corporation. In this landscape, lie huge threats - and huge opportunities. Accounting firms, large and small, cannot just increase productivity, but must also offer new services (such as predictive analytics, real-time analysis and bespoke accounting).

According to the OECD, almost one-third of all jobs worldwide will be transformed by technology in the next decade. (Saadia Zahidi, "We need a global reskilling revolution—here's why," World Economic Forum, January 22, 2020, weforum.org).

The Forces at Work

The seismic shift, accelerated by the pandemic, is driven by some relentless forces, fundamentally changing the nature of work and even the concept of the corporation:

Dramatically improved connectivity	Automation, AI, IoT Industry 4.0	Low transaction costs undermine the concept of a company	New social and managerial paradigms
• Reduces the constraint of geography and time zone • Aids disruption, promotes innovation • Ubiquitous • Instant	• Office automation • Productivity tools • Robotics • Virtual assistants • End of privacy • Work & ome intertwined	• Companies moved away from perennial sub-contracting to reduce transaction costs in the 1930's: these are now dramatically reduced	• The untethered employee • Remote working • Greater work specialisations make management more difficult • Digital natives seek autonomy, flexibility, meaning

As Ronald Coase explained, the modern corporation only became the standard organisation model a mere century ago, when the transaction costs negated the value of subcontracting.

Despite expectations to the contrary, work that is transactional (and that can largely be done by individuals alone), productivity has increased substantially.

An employee's output is now more visible and measurable, with less administrivia and social loafing. There are fewer meetings, but more Zooms – which ironically are better structured and more easily scheduled than physical meetings.

The working day has no beginning nor end. Some of the time spent commuting is now spent productively. There is less inter-personal conflict. There is also less social interaction, less spontaneity, less genuine collaboration, less juicy gossip (and no office romance), less opportunity for ego-gratification, but more fatigue, ennui and isolation.

A year in lockdown is hard to bear: the pre-existing relationships (with colleagues, friends, wider family but also with clients) that have supported us through the first year will erode in the "new normal" of endless partial lockdowns. What then?

Organisations traditionally devote substantial time and money to foster engagement, collaboration, culture formation, goal alignment: does this now mean that these prized intentions are no longer valid?

That the increased productivity (in certain occupations) has achieved more than those prized initiatives? Or is it a false dawn, and the "ties that bind" will gradually loosen, and corporations will become loose associations of foot-loose, resentful, disassociated task-fulfillers?

Or will the needs of Man, reputedly social animals, be met in other ways? Will the winning organisations find ways to overcome these challenges, and get the vaunted "best of two worlds" – the old, analogue one and the new, digital, post-Covid one? Where the winning companies find ways, in a new hybrid world, to succeed in increasing engagement, enhancing collaboration, generating innovations and, yes, satisfy Man's search for meaning, as articulated by Viktor Frankl in his book Man's Search for Meaning:

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

"Work is a must that hopefully, in the right setting, becomes a joy. Something we all need, but that so often is treated in principle as anathema" according to prominent accountant Patrizia Künzel.

As St Paul proclaimed: "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat." That approach still holds sway today – though people naturally have different opinions of it. Rather than being viewed as a cross to be borne, it's now often a source of social status and pride and indeed it often forms the basis of one's personal identity, giving meaning to lives and boosting self-esteem.

The Old Pillars of Society are Diminished but New Pillars will Arise

The old pillars of society are already weakened: the church, the pub, the extended family, and now the workplace is potentially diminished.

Clubs, professional networks, charities, physical conferences, music venues and large events are now all utterly changed. What will replace them, if anything?

The answer, of course, is that something will: human ingenuity will see to that. Human needs remain unchanged, and will be met, in some form – eventually.

As Prof. David Ulrich explains, an "abundant" organization enables its employees to be completely fulfilled by finding meaning and purpose from their work experience. This meaning enables employees to have personal hope for the future and create value for customers and investors.

This is the opportunity, ironically, for organisations to step into the void, and provide a means for engagement, a crucible for innovation and a vehicle for productivity – especially "cognitive productivity" – smarter working, frictionless, flexible and meaningful.

Ralph Waldo Emerson says "the purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honourable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well."

Success
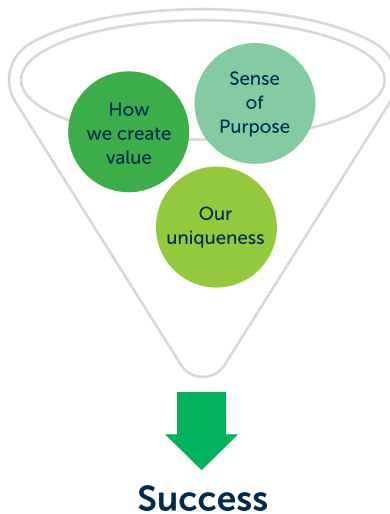
Three Keys: Purpose, Value and Uniqueness

More than ever, future-ready organizations (of all sizes) improve their chances of this in **three ways**: they get clear on their **purpose;** they know **how they create value** and

why they're unique; and they create distinctive cultures that help retain the best people.

So, refine your sense of purpose and develop a unique affirmation of your corporate identity—in Simon Sinek's famous words, first develop your **why** of work, before you go on to develop the **way** or the **what** of work.

Simon Sinek, Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action, New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2009.

We all know that "where your talents and the needs of the world cross, there lies your vocation."

Organizations will benefit from clear expression of what they stand for, why they exist, and will use purpose as the human glue to create a sense of purpose and a sense of the collective, even when people are mainly working in splendid isolation.

The 7 Levers to Benefit from the New World of Work

While transactional office-type work can and perhaps should mainly be done remotely, the greater challenge lies in building a sense of collective purpose, shared destiny, strategic alignment, and conscious culture formation. More problematically, it also involves the oxymoronic sharing of tacit and implicit knowledge (to be addressed elsewhere). Innovation, previously seen as serendipitous, now can be assisted, even remotely, by Design Thinking and related techniques.

The 7 Levers are illustrated below:
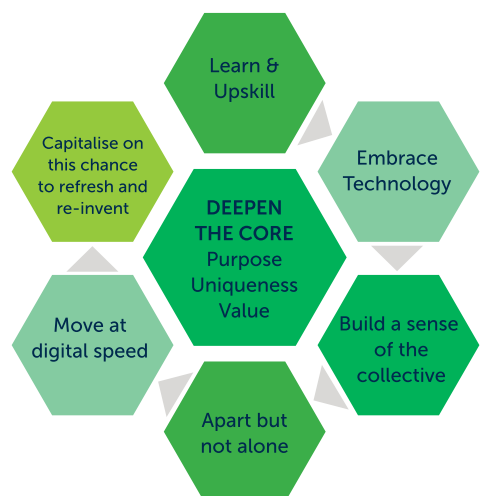
Ten Steps Towards Success:

First, reap the current benefits: higher transactional productivity, lower office costs, less conflict.

Second, embrace the digital age – use the technology to reduce the wasted effort in coordinating work, to minimise delays, and – most of all – to make some irksome tasks less onerous.

Third, realise you can now recruit talent and labour from across the globe: companies are already hiring (with seeming success) people they have never physically met. A person's track record (and proven work ethic) remains the best predictor of success. Social media tells you much more than the candidate (or referee) ever would.

Fourth, realise trust between colleagues is not just affective, but effective: yes, it still remains the case, in Prof Robert Cialdini's, a question of "Liking" – we like people who are like us, and who like us, too. However, action is more powerful – trust is built on effectiveness: people doing what they say they will. Delivering quality work on time. Doing unselfish actions, contributing discretionary effort. Paying forward. Being a good citizen. All these remain timeless, regardless of place.

Fifth, cultivate culture. Your culture, and your values, need not change, simply because people are more physically remote. They need to become less emotionally remote. It will require clearer articulation of your culture, values and norms, with less reliance on the old "osmosis" method of unplanned culture formation.

Sixth, realise cognitive productivity (the work of professionals of all kinds, such as lawyers, through legal tech), unchanged for years, can now dramatically increase. Knowledge that was previously tacit and unstructured can now be codified through technology and, more significantly, through coaching and "teaching moments" in which the art of the professional is made more scientific.

Seventh, realise that the early stages in the process of innovation are rooted in shifting perspective (to finally see what was previously hidden in plain sight), diversity of work & life experience (which can be increased with the new global workforce) and especially the creation of new ideas through the fusion of two or more pre-existing ideas (such as happened in the creation of the iPhone). Yes, the opportunity for serendipitous creativity is diminished – but that serendipity was essentially unplanned fusion which can now be sparked by the generation of torrents of ideas that may coalesce, the inclusion of far-flung experts, easier access to distant clients, computer-enabled anthropology (to explore clients).

Eight, don't leave the seminal moments to chance – don't rely on serendipity entirely in pursuit of new ideas, services or markets: instead, follow an innovation process, have deadlines to create a sense of urgency, invite fresh perspectives (outsiders, industry observers, clients). You can access experts from across the world – often inexpensively, because travel is not involved, and the time commitment is low.

Ninth, let's all be adults, not employers and employees. All must lead, all must follow.

Martin Seligman's book, Flourish claims that employees can acquire a more positive outlook on their work by having "PERMA" - Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments. When employees take personal accountability for creating these attributes they do not depend on the leader, but on themselves for their work experience. The mature employee becomes the agent of change for their own development.

Tenth – Celebrate! Mark the successes, honour the milestone events, be as happy as you can be.

As Frankl observed, "Humour is another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation".

He says that, more than anything else in the human make-up, it can afford an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds. The attempt to develop a sense of humour and to see things in a humorous light is some kind of a trick learned while mastering the art of living. Yet it is possible to practice the art of living even in a concentration camp, although suffering is omnipresent.

Reduce groundhog days. Maintain curiosity. The phone is your friend: talk, don't always Zoom. Hold the conversation. End the solitary confinement.

Most of all, don't waste this particular crisis, because it transforms work and creates opportunity for the strategically savvy: note Albert Einstein's cry that "in the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity." This is the opportunity for organisations to recognize that a brave new world is upon us – but only the brave will prevail.

Dermot Duff

Dermot Duff is a Module Leader in International Business Strategy and in Operations Strategy in Trinity Business School, where he also manages student consultancy projects for the MSc degree portfolio.

An Electronics Engineer from UCD, he held senior engineering management positions in ITT Alcatel in The Hague and was later European Transformation Manager for Digital Equipment Corporation (later HP) in Geneva, subsequently joining the Irish Management Institute in a senior role.