

Work Without Jobs

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and organizational agility.

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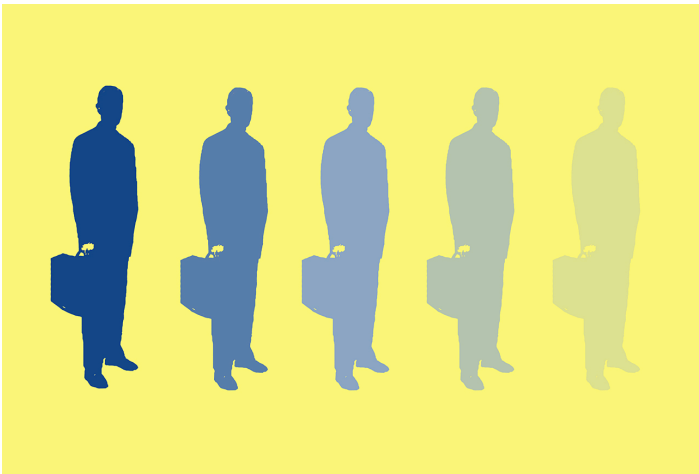


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Leaders need a new operating system for work — one that better supports the high degree of organizational agility required to thrive amid increasingly rapid change and disruption, and that better reflects the fluidity of modern work and working arrangements.

In our last two books, we’ve argued that this new system must enable leaders and workers to increasingly — and continually — deconstruct jobs into more granular units such as tasks, and that it must identify and deploy workers based on their skills and capabilities, not their job descriptions.¹ Deconstructing work is essential to implementing new options for sourcing, rewarding, and engaging workers, and to understanding and anticipating how automation might replace, augment, or reinvent human work.

The rapid evolution of work is making it increasingly urgent for leaders, workers, organizations, and society to master

deconstructed work. These shifts have been accelerated by responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has underscored the critical importance of enabling agility and flexibility.

Deconstructing Jobs and Jobholders

Organizations are held back by the obsolescence and stubborn inertia of a traditional work operating system that was built for the Second Industrial Revolution, with *work* defined as “jobs” and *workers* defined as “job-holding employees.” The inadequacy of that legacy system has long been recognized — for example, in the 1994 *Fortune* article “The End of the Job,” by William Bridges. Its persistence is a primary obstacle to successfully navigating challenges such as digitalization, work automation, alternative work arrangements, global economic and social equity, and the future of education and learning.

Despite decades of research examining the elements of jobs, and despite long-standing systems (such as O*Net) that helped to combine those elements in support of job design, most organizational work systems remain built upon work as a “job” and workers as “jobholders.”

What happens when your organization tries to digitize, automate, or implement alternative work arrangements? If the work is bound up in a job, and the worker is bound up as a jobholder, then your options are limited, and many solutions are obscured. Equally obscured are the specific skills gaps, because trying to match a job to a jobholder obscures the relationship between changing work and the

specific skills of those who might perform the work.

Deconstruction Is Vital to Organizational Agility

How do organizations, workers, and societies pivot from this legacy work operating system? The principle of agility both motivates this pivot and reveals how to implement it.

The notion of agile processes is well established in the arena of software development. It is supplanting the legacy system of the waterfall approach, which requires that each stage of software development be completed and then sent “down the waterfall” to the next stage, with little opportunity to move backward to earlier steps. The agile approach, in contrast, approaches a project as a simultaneous collaboration across the different stages, with the software being continually tested against user behaviors and requirements, and updated versions rolling out on an ongoing basis.

Many organizations have adopted the agile methodology to transform their mindsets and work processes beyond software development, guided by agile’s core values. These prioritize individuals and interactions over processes and tools, prioritize customer collaboration over contract negotiation, and prioritize responding to change over following a plan.

Those principles are particularly vital for pivoting to the new work operating system, yet agile process redesign alone cannot overcome the constraints imposed by traditional ways of thinking about jobs. A major consumer goods organization implemented agile, but despite its thoughtful approach to redesigning its processes and even upskilling its employees, the company faced major difficulty in getting its employees to *swarm* — to collectively work on and actively engage with challenges that spanned job titles or departments.

For example, customer complaints received by call center employees revealed needed product improvements that could be implemented by product designers/developers. The agile process design revealed an obvious solution: The call center representatives and the designers/developers would swarm to this challenge, working together to meet it.

However, in reality, the call center representatives who received customer complaints did not see it as their job to convey feedback to product designers/developers. Similarly, the product designers/developers did not see it as their job to ask call center employees about customer complaints or to listen to them to learn about their experiences. The legacy work system relied on job descriptions to represent the work, and jobholders to represent the workers’ capabilities. Thus, much of the pivotal value of the agile process design was squandered because the workers were trapped in a system of jobs that offered no mechanism to swarm to the goal of product improvement.

The organization lacked the capacity to deconstruct the jobs into discrete tasks that clearly supported its goals, so its employees struggled with work that reached beyond their jobs. They were challenged to understand how projects fit with their day jobs, how to find space to contribute, and how to respond to direct supervisors who felt that projects were unrelated to the employees’ functional areas.

Principles of the New Work Operating System

The new work operating system is based on four design principles:

1. Start with the work (current and future tasks) and not the existing jobs.
2. Combine humans and automation.
3. Consider the full array of human work engagements (such as employment, gig, freelance, alliances, projects, or other alternative work arrangements).
4. Allow talent to “flow to work” versus being dedicated to fixed, permanent jobs.

Let’s drill into each of these principles and contrast them with the current work operating system.

1. **Start with the work.** The traditional work operating system starts with jobs and employees within the

organization, creating several major challenges.

Consider the challenge of implementing new process automation. The typical operating system must frame the work design through questions such as the following:

- What jobs will be eliminated due to automation?
- What training will keep my existing employees relevant?
- What do I need to pay to get the needed skilled employees?

These questions take a myopic view of work and thus will overlook important opportunities and challenges. The new work operating system that we propose starts with different sorts of questions:

- What are the current and future work tasks (regardless of current jobs)?
- What are the required capabilities to perform these tasks?
- Which current and potential workers have or might develop those capabilities (regardless of their current jobs)?
- What are the best work arrangements to engage those capabilities (including options beyond regular full-time employment)?

2. Combine humans and automation. The traditional work operating system assumes that automation substitutes for human workers. The actual relationship is far more nuanced, and this must be captured by the new work operating system. In our 2018 book, *Reinventing Jobs*, we showed that, depending on the characteristics of the tasks and your objectives, automation can either substitute for, augment, or transform the human worker's role. The new work operating system provides a framework for managers to answer questions such as the following:

- What are the elemental tasks within the job/process?
- What are the characteristics of each task?

- What is the objective for each task?
- Does automation substitute for the human, augment the human, or create new work?
- What are the available types of automation?
- What is the optimal way to combine human and automated work across jobs and processes?

3. Consider the full array of human work engagements. In addition to optimizing combinations of humans and machines, it is essential to also consider the full range of human work engagements available. Such options might include dedicated employees in full- or part-time jobs at your location; dedicated employees at other locations; employees in other parts of your organization who you could tap for a project or assignment; or independent contractors, freelancers, or talent provided by an outsourcer, or even the talent employed by a business partner.

Traditionally, when work is needed, managers write a job description and then find an employee to do the job, perhaps by recruiting and hiring a new employee or by upskilling, transferring, or promoting a current employee. In the new work operating system, managers will be encouraged to think of work in terms of its deconstructed elements, such as tasks or projects, and then choose the best way to engage workers for each of those elements. This requires a support system that offers the managers options beyond hiring a job-holding employee.

Some organizations create general contracts and alliances with external labor providers, such as temporary agencies and freelance platforms, and then offer managers the option of tapping those vetted sources within the contractual arrangements. Another arrangement is for businesses to establish alliances with partner organizations that allow them to borrow talent from each other for specific projects or tours of duty. Finally, organizations are increasingly turning to volunteers to spark innovation through crowdsourcing or to promote their products on social media.

The manager would then proceed with the work planning

process by identifying which of the available engagement options makes the most sense for each task/project, also considering how the different tasks/projects must integrate and coordinate. Only then would the manager consider whether the best approach is to combine all the deconstructed elements into a job. More likely, this system will reveal that the majority of the tasks actually are best performed if bundled into a job, but the rest are better done with one or more alternative engagement options.

4. Allow talent to “flow to work” versus being dedicated to fixed, permanent jobs. Flowing to work requires workers to look beyond their strict job descriptions and apply their capabilities where they are most pivotal.

Recall the consumer goods company with the challenge of incorporating customer feedback into product design. Managers realized that to gain the benefits of agile, they needed to embrace job deconstruction as a core capability; this helped them to redefine the two roles to enable collaboration and the free flow of information. The key is to optimally and perpetually reinvent work by combining options such as the following:

- Talent in fixed roles with regular full-time employees, perhaps due to a convenient volume of work that fits a regular job, or unique or difficult-to-acquire skills that justify offering a fixed full-time assignment.
- Talent that swarms to tasks and assignments or projects, perhaps because their capabilities are required in short-term bursts by several different work processes (such as a freelance or project-based data scientist who moves among projects in marketing, HR, and operations as needed).
- Hybrid roles that are partially fixed because of work volume or skills dedicated to a job, but who can also swarm to specific challenges as needed. (Such roles often emerge from internal *talent marketplaces*, where regular jobholders take on additional project work.)

The rapidly evolving world of work calls for a fundamentally different operating system. Leaders, workers, and organizations can already detect where this is needed.

Consider the work being done or planned in your organization. Where is that work changing so quickly that your job descriptions, hiring, training, and career paths simply cannot keep up? Where are the elements of your traditional jobs being pulled apart, with automation able to do some tasks but not all of them? In which areas are the best candidates for the work increasingly unwilling or unavailable for full-time jobs and instead available on platforms or as contractors?

Answering these questions will reveal the work in your organization that can be done most effectively outside of the confines of traditional jobs and jobholders. You will find that this future is unevenly distributed, *as novelist William Gibson famously said*, and that much of the work in your organization can still be adequately managed within the traditional system. However, you are likely to find that over time, more and more of your work will evolve to being best organized using alternative ways of engaging with human resources and automation.

So now is the time to adopt the new work operating system where you most need agility, and to develop the organizational systems required to support the new operating system and apply it where it is most pivotal today. Then you will be prepared as other areas of work inevitably evolve toward this new operating system of “work without jobs.”

About The Authors

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