



Working

NAVIGATING THE
EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF
LEADERSHIP AND WORK



In a world transformed by the pandemic, over half of all employees feel they're not giving their best at work. The traditional work model, relatively unchanged for fifty years, suddenly faced a challenge. New remote and hybrid working models emerged, granting workers flexibility and autonomy like never before. Yet, companies stumbled to measure their performance, especially as labor costs soared while productivity dipped.

The corporate landscape is diverse, and one-size-fits-all doesn't cut it anymore. The belief that all employees experience work similarly is outdated. The pandemic didn't just introduce a virus—it introduced a new perspective on work. For decades, a significant number of workers felt disconnected, unengaged, and without purpose in their roles. Then came the "Great Resignation". The message? Workers wanted more.

It's alarming: while **78%** of leaders believed they were offering a fulfilling work experience, only **54%** of employees agreed. The mismatch was glaring. People started voting with their feet, seeking jobs that resonated with their needs and values. Companies faced an unprecedented challenge—how to attract and retain talent in an age where engagement is at its lowest in half a century.

The path forward? It's high time businesses recalibrate their approach to work. The message from employees is loud and clear, but old notions still hinder progress. Leaders have a golden chance now to drive change from within, to challenge old assumptions and discover new ways to create meaningful work experiences.

A critical challenge is an immunity to change at the senior leadership level. **Few are making shifts in how they approach work themselves, making it difficult to impossible to move to a new model for employees.** It is essential that leaders understand their own assumptions, and test, rethink, and be open.

We're at a crossroads. Let's redefine the way we view and do work. Let's create workplaces where everyone feels valued, engaged, and purposeful. The change starts now.

The Problem:

Employers are struggling to adapt to the changing nature of work, leading to a significant disconnect between leadership perceptions and employee experiences, resulting in decreased engagement, productivity, and retention.

The Question to be Addressed:

How can leaders foster a deeper understanding of the modern workforce's aspirations and values to redefine workplace practices and culture, ultimately driving renewed commitment and enthusiasm among employees?

Outdated Assumptions in a Modern World: The Leadership Disconnect in Today's Workplace

Leaders have historically operated under a set of assumptions influenced by past cultural, industrial, and societal norms. These include the belief in a strict 9-to-5 workday as the only productive window and the idea that employees must be physically present in the office to be effective. They've often equated long tenure with loyalty, sidelining the value of those who seek diverse experiences.

Decisions have traditionally been made from the top, without much input from those at the grassroots. There's been an expectation that employees should compartmentalize their personal lives from work, and a one-size-fits-all approach has been favored in policies and training, not accounting for individual needs.



Many leaders believed that the promise of job security alone could motivate employees, sidelining factors like satisfaction or balance.

Organizations were often structured rigidly, with information flowing in a linear fashion from the top. This structure also supported task specialization, with employees pigeonholed into specific roles, and monetary rewards seen as the primary motivator. An aversion to change and a preference for uniformity over diversity have also been prevalent. However, as work dynamics and societal values shift, modern leaders are realizing the importance of challenging and updating these outdated beliefs to stay relevant and effective.

The employee value proposition inherent in the traditional assumptions still held today in leadership circles:

*Join us: we value stability, structure, and tradition. Work in a consistent **9-to-5** role in a well-established environment where longevity is rewarded, decisions are streamlined from the top, and dedication to specific tasks ensures efficiency. Benefit from uniform policies, clear role definitions, and monetary incentives, all within a cohesive, tried-and-true system. Here, job security and a clear hierarchical structure offer you a predictable and steady career path. Choose us for a time-tested approach to work.*

Probably not a popular offer, yet this is the premise still believed and followed by many employers.

The insight that stands out is that many traditional assumptions leaders have held about work are outdated and misaligned with today's employees' desires and values. As the nature of work and societal values evolve, successful leaders need to challenge and adapt these long-held beliefs to better align with the modern workforce's expectations and aspirations. While the pandemic pushed forward much-needed changes in approaches to work, in the post-pandemic period the beliefs have shifted back.

It is no wonder that **47%** of employees do not enjoy their work – the root of why people stop contributing their best and look for other opportunities to find meaningful jobs.

Traditional assumptions about work have been influenced by historical, cultural, and industrial contexts. Many of these assumptions have been challenged or have evolved in recent times. Here are the top five assumptions still being held by many employers.

1. 9-to-5 Workday: The idea that work should strictly adhere to a set schedule, usually from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and that productivity is confined within these hours.

2. Physical Presence Equals Productivity: The belief that employees are most productive when they are physically present in the office, and that "face time" is crucial for effective work.

3. Longevity Equals Loyalty: A presumption that employees who stay with a company for many years are more loyal and valuable than those who change jobs frequently.

4. Top-Down Decision Making: The notion that decisions are best made at the top and then cascaded down, with little input from lower-level employees.

5. Work-Life Separation: The belief that employees should keep their personal lives separate from work and that personal issues shouldn't affect job performance.





Traditional Leadership Positions on Work

Historically, leadership positions on work have been deeply ingrained in industrial settings and societal norms. **Leaders often took an authoritarian stance, making decisions without seeking team input and expecting obedience.** They maintained control through strict rules, viewing the relationship between employers and employees as primarily transactional: wages for labor.

Centralized decision-making was another dominant position, where the company's top tiers made most decisions. Those lower in the hierarchy were tasked with implementation, rather than contributing to the decision-making process. **This emphasis on top-down control often sidelined innovation in favor of stability, with leaders sticking to tried-and-true methods over new ideas.**

Task orientation was a primary focus, **putting productivity ahead of employee well-being or personal growth.** Success was gauged by the achievement of specific, clear goals. Workplaces operated within well-defined hierarchical structures, where information flowed from the top down, often with limited feedback mechanisms in place.

Communication in such environments leaned towards formality, with leaders relying on official channels like memos or structured meetings. There was little room for casual interactions or open-door policies. Another distinct position was the clear demarcation between work and personal life, with leaders expecting personal challenges to remain outside the workplace.

Motivation strategies largely centered on extrinsic rewards, like bonuses or promotions. **The potential threat of job loss was another tool used to drive performance, often overshadowing intrinsic motivators such as job satisfaction.** Work processes, training, and policies were standardized, reflecting a position that prioritized uniformity over individual or team-specific needs.

Lastly, traditional leadership often displayed risk aversion, favoring established methods, and sidestepping potential risks, even if they promised significant rewards.

However, with the modern workplace's evolution, emphasizing adaptability, innovation, and employee welfare, many leaders are reevaluating and shifting from these traditional positions, opting for more progressive and inclusive approaches.

These positions **prioritize hierarchy, stability, and uniformity over innovation, adaptability, and employee well-being**. The mind-boggling position that needs rethinking is the reliance on these outdated approaches in an era that values inclusivity, adaptability, and employee welfare. As the modern workplace changes, it's crucial for leaders to challenge and adapt these traditional stances to stay relevant and effective.

Staying to these positions is behind the dramatic misalignment within organizations, where **43%** of employees disagree with the decisions being made about the direction of the business.

Hopes for the Post-Pandemic Workplace

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees' expectations for the workplace have shifted dramatically. **There's a strong desire for greater flexibility and autonomy**, with many hoping to blend office time with remote work based on their tasks and preferences.

The pandemic's challenges have underscored the importance of mental and emotional well-being, leading to a call for more robust employer support in these areas. As some employees return to physical workspaces, there's anticipation for offices designed for safety, collaboration, and creativity. The reliance on digital communication during remote work has highlighted the need for a robust technology infrastructure that supports collaboration regardless of location.

Additionally, global events during the pandemic have amplified discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion, with employees expecting more inclusive work environments. The rapid changes brought about by the pandemic also spotlighted the importance of continuous learning, adaptability, and growth. Clear and transparent communication from leadership, especially in uncertain times, has become paramount. With health concerns still present, there's an expectation for ongoing safety protocols in the office.

There's also a hope for revised performance metrics that focus on impact over traditional measures like hours worked.

Lastly, the pandemic revealed gaps in many organizations' crisis preparedness, leading to calls for better contingency plans and support structures. At its core, the post-pandemic vision revolves around workplaces that prioritize well-being, flexibility, inclusivity, and resilience.

The employee value proposition as reframed by the employee experience people want:

Join us, we recognize that the world of work has transformed. Be part of a team that values your autonomy, providing the flexibility to merge office and remote work, tailored to your tasks and preferences. Your well-being is our priority. Benefit from our robust support system, emphasizing mental and emotional health. Thrive in our redesigned workspaces, optimized for creativity, collaboration, and safety. With our state-of-the-art technology infrastructure, stay connected and productive wherever you are. Be part of a community that champions inclusivity, valuing diversity, equity, and genuine representation. Embrace opportunities for continuous growth, adaptability, and learning. Experience transparent leadership communication, focused on clarity and openness. Trust in our commitment to your safety, with ongoing health protocols. With our company, you're not just a number; you're a valued member of a future-forward team, where impact matters more than hours. Together, let's navigate the future, equipped and resilient.



Our research shows that the key factors of quality of work **are seeing a future that is worth staying for, and a present that respects the mental health and wellbeing of people**. Opportunities to learn, develop careers, and have a voice are critical. And support in managing stress is the highest priority.

Redefining the Workplace: Aligning with the New Employee Value Proposition

The COVID-19 pandemic was more than just a global health crisis; **it became a catalyst for reimagining the traditional workplace**. As we've navigated these uncharted waters, it has become evident that the long-held leadership positions on work, deeply rooted in industrial settings, no longer align with the aspirations of the modern workforce. To attract and retain talent, employers need to recalibrate and redefine their approach, aligning with the evolved Employee Value Proposition (EVP).

Understanding the Shifted Landscape

The post-pandemic workforce seeks flexibility, autonomy, and a firm emphasis on well-being. They anticipate innovation in their physical workspaces, robust technological infrastructure, and a workplace culture that prioritizes inclusivity and continuous growth. Clear communication, revised performance metrics, and proactive crisis management have also emerged as non-negotiables.

This evolved EVP is not just a list of demands. It's a reflection of the broader societal shifts and the redefined boundaries between personal and professional lives, facilitated by technology and catalyzed by global events.



Bridging the Gap

To address the question at hand: How can leaders foster a deeper understanding of the modern workforce's aspirations and values to redefine workplace practices and culture?

1. Open Dialogue: Leaders must initiate transparent conversations with their teams. This means not just communicating top-down but actively listening to employee feedback, concerns, and aspirations.

2. Continuous Learning: The rapid pace of change requires leaders to be lifelong learners. This involves staying updated with industry trends, technological advancements, and organizational psychology research.

3. Embrace Flexibility: The success of remote work during the pandemic has debunked many myths. Leaders should be open to hybrid work models, allowing employees the autonomy to choose what best suits their productivity and well-being.

4. Prioritize Mental Health: Beyond just offering resources, leaders should cultivate a culture where mental well-being is discussed openly, removing stigmas, and encouraging early intervention.

5. Inclusive Leadership: Today's workforce seeks representation and inclusivity. Leaders should champion diversity, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued.

6. Invest in Technology: The right tools not only facilitate work but also foster collaboration, creativity, and connection. Leaders should be proactive in adopting and training their teams on relevant technologies.

7. Rethink Performance Metrics: It's time to move beyond hours clocked to more qualitative metrics, focusing on outcomes, impact, and value addition.

8. Crisis Management and Preparedness: Leaders should have clear contingency plans, ensuring that both the organization and its employees are equipped to navigate unforeseen challenges.



In Conclusion

The future of work is here, and it's dynamic, diverse, and digital. Leaders who can tap into the aspirations and values of the modern workforce, aligning with the new EVP, will not only drive renewed commitment and enthusiasm among employees but also ensure their organizations are resilient and future ready.

Critical Takeaway for Leaders: The future of work is shaped by the aspirations and values of the modern workforce. To thrive, leaders must recalibrate their approaches and redefine workplace practices and culture to align with the evolved Employee Value Proposition. The post-pandemic landscape demands flexibility, inclusivity, a focus on well-being, and adaptability in response to rapid changes.

Single Best First Step: Measure the employee experience today and the mindset of how people see quality of work, how they think, feel, and take action that fits their world today. Initiate open dialogues with their teams. By fostering transparent conversations and actively mapping employee feedback, concerns, and aspirations, leaders can gain direct insights into the needs of their workforce.

Why this step? Understanding is the foundation of change. Before implementing new policies, tools, or strategies, it's essential to know what the employees truly want and need. Measure the employee experience of people today, gaining objective data to not only help leaders make purposeful decisions but also build trust, showcasing that employee voices are valued and heard. This forms the foundation for any subsequent steps and changes that leaders decide to implement.

Partners At WorkInsights



With over twenty years of experience, Michael, a seasoned consultant, is dedicated to guiding organizations towards a brighter future by challenging assumptions and revealing opportunities through data and incisive questioning. He founded The WorkInsights Project in 2015, a research initiative focusing on entrepreneurs and wellness, which positioned him as an industry thought leader. Michael developed a series of disruptive and innovative growth programs, all grounded in data-informed insights. His next venture, WorkInsights, is a business analytics and consulting platform designed to enhance understanding of workplace environments and foster quality of work and financial performance.

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