

End of the 40-Hour Workweek?

Command and control will no longer be the currency in the workforce of the future.

Interview by Alice Andors

Despite an explosion in technologies to support new ways of working, many employment and management practices are stuck in 19th- or 20th-century models. In *Future Work: How Businesses Can Adapt and Thrive in the New World of Work* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), Alison Maitland and Peter Thomson call for radical change in the way work gets done—discarding hierarchical time- and location-focused practices in favor of measuring and rewarding people on performance and results. Maitland, a business author, speaker and conference moderator, explains.

How do you define “future work”?

Future work is driven by business goals and led from the top. It gives people autonomy over where, when and how they work. It’s about treating people as adults and trusting them. Start from the assumption that all jobs are flexible, and only limit

that flexibility based on logical requirements about time and place.

In other words, all jobs will have some elements of discretion about how work gets done. This is not just for particular categories of employees. It’s for everyone, including senior leaders. Some call this agile working or smart working. We call it future work.

Are some types of organizations better suited to future work than others?

Organizations with knowledge workers who can work anywhere, anytime, will find it easier to adapt. Yet we found examples of autonomy in many sectors, like manufacturing, retail and health care. Nurses have to be with patients for a large part of their jobs, but other parts—record management or giving telephone advice—can be done anywhere. Future work is applicable in all kinds of environments where there is mutual trust and accountability.

The kind of organizational culture most likely to encourage future work is democratic, assumes that people are self-motivated and will do the right thing, and truly empowers people.

What obstacles prevent leaders from overhauling how employees work?

There’s fear of stepping into the unknown, of letting go of the control button. There’s also concern among some managers about losing status if they’re not visibly in control of a team sitting around them.

There’s a lack of serious commitment from the top. Senior leaders often think the way they got to the top is still the right way, though the world has moved on. They expect others to give their lives to the organization, as they did.

There’s also a poor understanding of the business case. Unless you can measure and report on the business benefits, it’s hard to sell this kind of change.

What are some of the benefits?

Increased productivity, lower costs—often through reducing office space or cutting wasteful business travel—faster access to markets, extended customer service, improved employer reputation, and lower risk of business disruption. Other benefits include lower absenteeism and attrition and greater motivation.

Will managers need different skills?

Managing will be more like leadership. You will be successful if you can inspire and motivate. Being a great communicator is important, as is being good at delegating and time management and being open to change. Managers attached to the trappings of power—the corner office ... controlling people—they’re not going to be successful in the new world of work. **HR**

Online Resources

For more information about the future of work and workplace flexibility, see the online version of this article at www.shrm.org/hrmagazine/0712Andors.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RON AIRA FOR HR MAGAZINE



Alison Maitland

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