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The Future of Work: Exploring the Future of Work in Canada and How Human Connections Are Made Through Workplace Design (Non-Accessible Version)

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The Future of Work:

Exploring the Future of Work in Canada and How Human Connections Are Made Through Workplace Design



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Abstract

The role of work in our lives are changing.

The landscape of work is rapidly evolving, driven by technological advancements, shifting societal norms, and the aftermath of global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper delves into the changing nature of workspaces in Canada and the implications for leadership and organizational culture. Through a qualitative research approach incorporating interviews and literature review, this MRP explores how the role of work in our lives is transforming, challenging the traditional notions of office-based employment. The research project examines the tensions between the desire for flexibility and the need for productivity, as well as the evolving role of physical office spaces in facilitating connection and innovation. Drawing on insights from thought leaders and practitioners, recommendations are proposed for leaders at all levels of organizations to navigate this era of change effectively, allowing organizations to create environments that support employee well-being, innovation, and long-term success in the evolving landscape of work.



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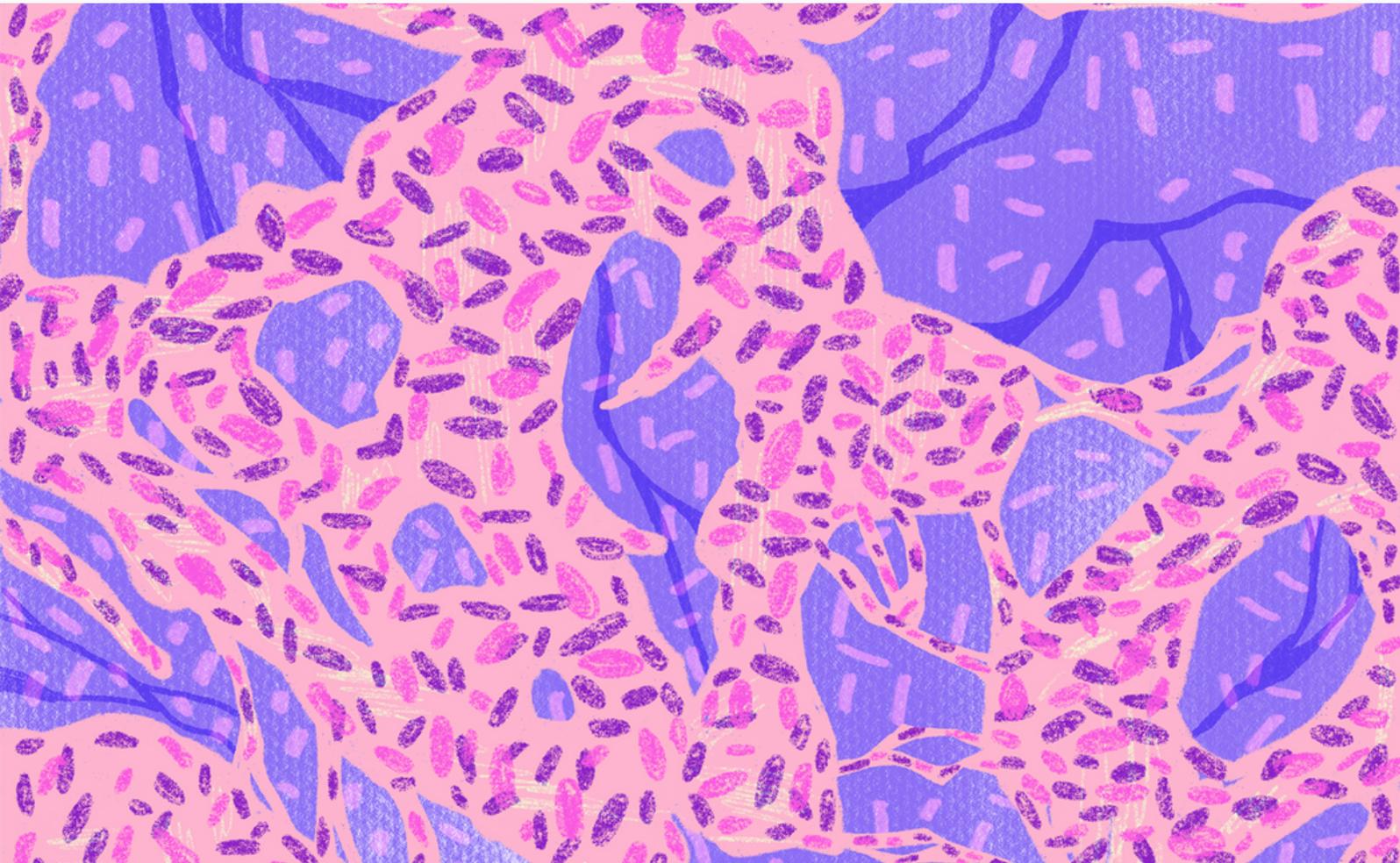


Table of Contents

List of Figures	6
Introduction	7
Research Design	9
Problem Space	12
Insights and Analysis	14
Future Landscape	34
Reflections and Recommendations	56
References	68

List of Figures

Figure 1: Marriott International Global Headquarters, Bethesda, Maryland. Photo by Garrett Rowland

Figure 2: Marriott International Global Food Court, Bethesda, Maryland. Photo by Garrett Rowland

Figure 3: Photograph by Kate Munsch / Reuters

Figure 4: The Doughnut Model of Collaboration

Figure 5: Actors' Map

Figure 6: Influence Map

Figure 7: Causal Loops (Employee Engagement Loop)

Figure 8: Causal Loops (Hybrid Work Adaptation Loop)

Figure 9: Causal Layered Analysis

Figure 10: 2x2 Matrix



Context & Problem

Offices and the way we interact with them have constantly evolved.

From cubicled corporate offices to trendy coworking spaces, this research looks at how our workspaces have evolved, and how workplace design influences human behaviour and human connection.

The nature of work is changing rapidly with the rise of remote work, flexible schedules, and hybrid models. We are currently going through many shifts in how we work, where we work, and when we work. For example, from an urban planning perspective, remote work has had profound effects on the economy (e.g.: workers supporting local businesses, foot traffic to downtown businesses and housing markets in large cities in Canada). In the United States, public transportation ridership reduced drastically during the pandemic, and suburban real estate values increased (Goldberg, 2023). In Canada, the work-from-home trend has influenced both home buying and rental trends. Since remote employees do not need to consider commute times to the office when choosing where to live, they are exploring housing options in areas that offer a better quality of life, more affordable housing, and more space, as long as these locations have the right technology and resources to support remote work (Pine, 2023). Most residential condominium developments in cities like Toronto and Vancouver are also including offices with technology amenities to allow remote employees to work from the building. On the other hand, Statistics Canada points out that the increase in work from home has reduced public transit use, putting financial pressures on urban transit systems (Statistics Canada, 2024).

As work patterns evolve, there is a need to rethink and redesign our physical workspaces and our workplace strategies to ensure they remain relevant and effective in supporting our new ways of working. Trends such as generative AI tools, workplace demographic shifts, and social movements are all leading to the emergence of new ways of working. Workspace design directly impacts employee well-being, satisfaction, and productivity. Creating a workspace that aligns with employee needs, preferences, and comfort enhances their overall work experience, leading to higher engagement and job satisfaction. In a Gensler article, 'The Key to Attracting and Retaining Talent Is Your Office Design', Robin Avia points out that what will set companies apart from their competitors is how they design for the human experience in their physical workplaces (Avia, 2022).

This project aims to better understand the future of workplace design in Canada, the psychology of the future workforce, and how we need to adapt our approach and designs to accommodate them.

Project Framing

Multiple factors influence how, when, and where we work.

A preliminary literature review has revealed that there is no longer a one-size-fits-all approach to how we work and the kind of spaces we work in. This project investigates the longer-term effects of post-Covid work life, how workplace design influences human behaviour and how meaningful connections are made at work.

This project explores the physical layout, spatial organization, aesthetics, and ergonomic considerations of the open-space workspace design. It delves into architectural principles, furniture selection, lighting, and material choices that optimize the work environment. It investigates how the workspace design affects employee well-being, comfort, collaboration, productivity, and psychological factors such as stress and focus. This project also explores how the workspace design reflects and influences the organization's culture, values, and identity. It considers how design elements can create a sense of belonging and unity among employees.

Speaking to Stakeholders

Many stakeholders can benefit from this study. Beyond being a resource to better understand how our ways of working in Canada are changing, this study may also uncover ways to foster meaningful connections between organizational leaders and their employees. Through the research presented, this study aims to inspire all readers to question and consider ways we can collectively reach a preferred future.

There is potential for this research to encourage trying new ways of working within a workplace and to bring diverse perspectives. Providing more opportunities for employee-driven innovation may generate sustainable solutions to the barriers we are facing today in our ways of working, benefiting not only employees but also the business as a whole and the communities in which they exist in.



Research Design

This research study falls under the following domains:



This research project uses a combination of **Future Thinking** and **Design Strategy** to understand how our ways of working are changing in Canada and how can we prepare for future evolving demographic wants and needs. It also investigates how our workplace can influence our human behaviour and in turn, impacts how we make connections with each other.



FUTURE THINKING

To gain a deeper understanding of how to build plausible interventions, innovations, opportunities, and risks that the future of work holds for the future workforce.



DESIGN STRATEGY

To form a guide to help employers prepare for the evolving needs of future demographics using a strategic lens.

Methodology

This research encompasses an analysis of workplace design in Canada and uses strategic foresight to explore our ways of working in the year 2040.

The first part of this report provides an understanding of how the role of our workplaces has transformed since the 1930s. To understand how the workplace is changing so radically, this report explores influential social, cultural, technological, and environmental shifts happening today that are shaping how and where future generations will work, and why. These trends inform the development of plausible future scenarios that could encourage us to envision how our current workplaces can evolve. The second part of this report discusses the development of the Workplace Design Handbook. This handbook is meant to guide businesses of all sizes to understand what their ideal workplace design and workplace strategy could look like based on a wide range of factors (e.g. the amount of space available, the number of employees at the firm, the type of work the team or individual does, etc.), including the measures they would need to take when undergoing a workplace transformation. This project uses a combination of methods from design thinking, systemic design and strategic foresight. The methodology follows an iterative double-diamond process of divergence and convergence, moving from problem-finding to framing and then problem-solving.

PHASE 1: DISCOVER THE PAST

An extensive literature review was conducted to explore diverse perspectives and domains to investigate the research area and to develop an understanding of the history of the workplace, identifying trends and signals that indicate the ways the office has evolved, which helped frame the changes happening today.

PHASE 2: DEFINE THE PRESENT

Findings from Phase 1, interviews, and a participatory workshop were synthesized using various system tools to understand how the shifts in our workplace design have transformed the way we work, and how connections are fostered in the workplace.

PHASE 3 - ENVISION THE FUTURES

Strategic foresight tools were used to identify trends that will shape the future of work and to develop future scenarios that explore the role of the workplace and how connections are formed in the future of work. This information includes shifts, trends and new developments in the social, political, environmental, economic, and technological environments. This involved gathering 'weak signals' — early signs of change — and arranging them into discrete themes that are creating a shift or a change in the operating environment. This process allowed for a better understanding of the qualities of the change all around us. Using this information, future scenarios were created that allow us to place ourselves in multiple possible futures, better understand the different implications, and even test out our strategic responses. The purpose is not to predict the future but rather to future-proof ourselves in the future by anticipating change.

PHASE 4 - INSIGHTS

Scenarios were reviewed to identify associated vulnerabilities, risks and opportunities for both businesses and employees in the future of work. This will allow us to understand how we might better design workplace environments to best support the needs of current and future workers.

The following are secondary research questions that guided the research:

- 01 How has our relationship and the role of the workplace changed since the 1930s?

- 02 How has our relationship and the role of the workplace changed since the 1930s?

- 03 How have our changes in working impacted our cities (environmentally, economically and socially)?

- 04 Does a workplace that has embraced creative office design, increase creativity resulting in a greater and more innovative system?

- 05 Can we use behavioural science to redesign open-plan offices?

- 06 What can we learn from the psychology of connectedness to improve our well-being at work and encourage people to come back to work in person?

- 07 Can we use modular architecture design to create flexible co-working spaces to accommodate different types (or 'personalities') of employees?

- 08 How can the workspace design align with sustainable practices and reduce environmental impact?

- 09 What strategies can empower employees to personalize their workspace?

- 10 What are the key considerations and challenges in transitioning from the current workspace to a potential redesign?

Research Approach

This research approach was loosely guided by the seven-step design journey roadmap (Jones & Val Ael, 2021)—first framing, listening to and understanding the system, then envisioning futures to help explore the possibility space, and lastly offering insights to inform change. A literature review was conducted to understand the context and the problem space. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, information and insights were gathered from employees and industry leaders. To further sense-make, systems maps including an actors' map and causal layered analysis were created. A horizon scan added to a broader understanding of the trends impacting our ways of working. A 2x2 foresight method was applied with Dator's Four Futures overlaid to craft possible future scenarios.

Problem Space

Sample Case Study: Marriott International

Marriott International, in collaboration with Gensler, Boston Properties, and The Bernstein Companies, created a new space for their employees working at their Global Headquarters. Their unique workplace model intertwined hospitality and functionality, catering to the evolving needs of its employees while embracing the changing landscape of work during the pandemic. Marriott International, a hospitality giant with over 95 years of industry leadership, recognized the pivotal role design plays in enhancing the human experience within the workplace. The pandemic prompted them to reevaluate their traditional work paradigms, and they crafted a workplace that embraces functionality and fosters engagement and connection.

There were a few challenges with this workplace transformation. Marriott's former headquarters was situated in an ageing office park without transit access and limited community integration. The project aimed to address these issues while also redefining the role of the workplace in attracting and retaining talent amidst a shifting urban landscape. Located in the Bethesda community near Washington, D.C., Marriott's new headquarters integrates hospitality elements throughout the office space. The project seamlessly blends the corporate environment with the vibrant energy of a hotel. Vertical integration, facilitated by a 21-story office tower and a 12-story flagship hotel, encourages constant interaction and engagement among occupants.



Figure 1: Marriott International Global Headquarters, Bethesda, Maryland. Photo by Garrett Rowland

The design was amenity-driven with five floors dedicated to amenities, including high-end dining areas, fitness facilities, childcare centers, and outdoor spaces, fostering a holistic approach to associate well-being. Fluid workstations and shared amenities promote collaboration and transparency, embracing the principles of hybrid work and digital agility. The top floor features a dedicated learning center, offering a range of developmental programs and experiences to empower Marriott's global workforce. The open plaza and adjacent public spaces invite interaction with the surrounding Bethesda community, transforming the headquarters into a hub of civic engagement and activity.

Marriott's hospitality-infused headquarters represents a paradigm shift in workplace design, embodying the company's commitment to employee engagement, innovation, and community integration. Marriott International's headquarters serves as an example of innovation and adaptability. By prioritizing associate engagement and embracing the symbiotic relationship between workplace and community, organizations can reimagine the role of their corporate environments in the post-pandemic era.



Figure 2: Marriott International Global Food Court, Bethesda, Maryland. Photo by Garrett Rowland

Making Sense of What Was Said

Interview Analysis

Through a series of semi-structured interviews, I gathered insights and perspectives on different work environments, working styles, and opinions on the shifts happening in our work environments from employees with experience working in a range of industries, including the Government, Space Engineering, Consulting, Retail, Finance, and Education. The subject matter expert semi-structured interviews gave insights into the changing nature of work, the challenges faced by individuals and organizations, and the evolving role of leadership in navigating these shifts.

The participants represented different ages, genders, and ethnicities. Almost all participants had experience in various countries, including Canada, Peru, India, and the United States, and they have worked in various industries including Healthcare, Finance, Aerospace Engineering, Design, and Higher Education. Participants held the role of managers, directors, associates and designers. Each participant provided valuable perspectives on the shifts happening in our ways of working, their ideal work environment, working style, and motivations in the workplace. After the interviews, the data collected from personal anecdotes and accounts were synthesized into common categories and themes. These insights are presented based on the aggregate data in conjunction with the context provided in my background research. The results have been broken into the following categories:

Shift in Power
Dynamics

Hierarchy of Needs
at Work

Policy and Cultural
Considerations

Leadership

Middle-Managerial
Challenges

Technological
Advances and
Evolution of Work
Tools

'Community' is
mistaken as
'Collaboration'

Shift in Power Dynamics

In 2024, the effects of the pandemic remain present in today's work environments. It has created a power shift that is different than traditional work practices. Employees have realized their value and desire to grow, and are willing to leave if their employers are not offering their full support. To retain employees, leaders must listen to their employees to ensure they are creating a positive work environment that fulfills employees' needs.

Fear-based work models are organizational cultures where fear is used as the primary motivator for employees. In these work environments, employees may feel pressured to perform out of fear of negative consequences (e.g: criticism or even the loss of their job). This fear can stem from multiple sources, including strict hierarchical structures, micromanagement, and harsh disciplinary actions. In a fear-based work model, employees may hesitate to express their opinions due to the fear of judgment. This can lead to a lack of creativity, collaboration, and overall job satisfaction among employees. Fear-based cultures often result in high levels of stress, burnout, and turnover, as employees may feel undervalued. Overall, the fear-based work model can be detrimental to organizational success in the long run, as it inhibits growth, innovation, and productivity. To maintain or improve employee retention rates, organizations might need to make a shift from traditional, fear-based work models to a more inclusive and human-centred work culture that prioritizes their employees' growth and fulfilment. This fosters a positive work environment where employees are supported and engaged to grow their careers and drive organizational success.

The conversations from the interviews highlighted a significant shift in the perception of work and identity across different generations. Currently, there is a wide age range in the workforce with varying expectations regarding how the workplace should accommodate individuals. Older generations like Baby Boomers and Gen X (between ages 60 to 80 years old) tend to strongly link work with identity, while Gen Z (between ages of 12 to 27 years old) and Millennials (between ages of 28 to 43 years old) emphasize that work is not the sole identifier. Instead, they view work as a means to support and fund activities outside of the job that holds more personal meaning and contribute to their identity. This links to the idea of a 'lazy girl job', which suggests a new trend where having a job that pays well is sufficient, and individuals prioritize investing time and energy in activities beyond work that bring more personal fulfillment and meaning. The term 'Lazy Girl Job' was coined in 2023 by Gabrielle Judge, also known by the screen name "antiworkgirlboss" on Instagram. This was in response to hustle culture, the recent Great Resignation (where large numbers of people are leaving their jobs), and worker exploitation. Judge explained the term was a marketing gimmick to raise awareness about "toxic workplace expectations" and is not about celebrating laziness (Times of India, 2024). According to a survey from Workspace Technology, just 49% of Gen Z say work is central to their identity, in comparison with 62% of millennials. The #lazygirljob posts on TikTok explain this further: "All I want to do is make the most amount of money working the least amount of hours so I can spend the majority of my time with my family living life on my terms instead of spending 40 years working for a boss who's paying what they think is 'fair'."

Policy and Cultural Considerations

There is a common challenge of developing policies for hybrid work arrangements and a one-size-fits-all approach may not be effective. It depends on the industry the company is in, how the team functions within the corporation, and the type of work they are doing daily. Workplace culture is a dynamic and evolving entity shaped by individual contributions and community participation. There were differences in work culture within each industry and team. Design agencies seemed to have a more informal, horizontal structure, whereas the Aerospace and Healthcare industry had a more hierarchical structure with formal working styles.

Another point that emerged from the interviews was the increased awareness of neurodivergence that needs to be addressed in workplaces. Open concept designs are often uncomfortable for introverts who do their work best in a solo capacity with fewer distractions. Open-plan spaces can truly be counterproductive for them. It is estimated that between 15–20% of people are neurodivergent, which means that a large portion of the workforce may be affected (Doyle, 2020). Open-plan workspaces can be noisy and busy which can be overwhelming for some individuals with neurodivergent conditions. These environments can cause overstimulation, increasing the risk of distractions and stress, and resulting in reduced productivity (Calibro, 2023). These environments may lead to sensory overload, increased stress, and decreased productivity for introverts who require quieter and more private settings to perform their best work. Introverts often thrive in environments that allow for solitude and concentration, where they can focus deeply on tasks without external distractions. By acknowledging the diverse needs of employees, organizations can make adjustments to their workplace design and strategy to better support the needs of neurodiverse individuals. This might involve providing flexible work arrangements that allow employees to choose where and how they work can empower individuals to create environments that suit their preferences and enhance their productivity. By fostering environments that respect individual differences and promote well-being, organizations can cultivate a more engaged, productive, and innovative workforce.

Middle-Managerial Challenges

A few participants brought up the challenges faced by middle managers in managing teams with diverse work arrangements (in-office, remote). There is a sense of proximity bias and the need for managers to engage with remote team members consciously. Middle managers often have to balance the needs of on-site and remote workers and address potential animosities, and this requires additional planning.

Leadership

Individual preferences in work arrangements and workspace environments need to be considered by managers and directors leading teams. When team members have varying work preferences, challenges could be faced by teams when trying to build cohesion. Leaders would need to understand and respect the diverse needs and working styles of team members. There was a common emphasis on the importance of leadership in creating a conducive work environment. There is a need for leaders to be intentional in supporting their teams and building trust. However, there are challenges faced by leaders when navigating the changing dynamics of work and prioritizing tasks for their teams.

Decisions regarding work arrangements and team cohesion are made by leaders at various levels within an organization. These decisions may involve input from managers, directors, and higher-level executives, depending on the scope and impact of the changes being considered. Senior executives such as CEOs, COOs, or department heads, often set the overall vision for the organization. They may establish overarching policies related to workplace design and strategy. While they may not be directly involved in day-to-day decisions about individual workspaces or team dynamics, their decisions and priorities shape the broader organizational environment. Middle managers, including project managers or department managers, play an important role in implementing the vision set by senior leadership. They are responsible for translating high-level directives into actionable strategies for their teams. Managers typically make decisions about specific work arrangements, such as flexible schedules, based on the needs of their teams and the organization. Team leaders work closely with their direct reports to understand their individual preferences and working styles. They are often the frontline leaders responsible for fostering team cohesion and creating a conducive work environment within their teams. Team leaders may collaborate with their managers to address challenges related to varying work preferences.

Hierarchy of Needs at Work

If employers or leaders want employees to work in person, they have to make it worth the commute. Most people who worked in traditional corporate settings expressed how uncomfortable and distracting it was to work in person daily. From harsh fluorescent lighting to poor HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning) systems, several factors made the workplace uncomfortable. To motivate employees to work in person, companies would have to offer more than what they can get at home. Almost all participants expressed that pay is the first factor they look at when choosing a job, followed by location, team and company culture. Participants also said that long commute times were another factor that discouraged them from working in the office.

Furthermore, there is a 'sandwich generation' that is raising young children and also caring for older adults, which often leads to a shift in priorities. This group of population is at a high risk of burnout. In 1981, Dorothy Miller coined the term sandwich generation to refer to inequality in the exchange of resources and support between generations (Raphael and Schlesinger 1994). The 'sandwich generation' manages the stress of navigating the health system with the changing needs of aging parents while caring for their young children, says the Kensington Health Foundations'

Hierarchy of Needs at Work (continued)

Corinne Rusch-Drutz. One of the participants explained this further. They pointed out that the rising childcare and elder care costs drove most people to prefer working from home or remotely to maintain their priorities. They said that if employees are at work in the office, they often get distracted trying to maintain other priorities (e.g. picking up their child from work, making sure their elderly parent made it to their doctor's appointment, etc), which in turn impacts productivity and chances of collaborating. On the other hand, few people want to work in the office to have quiet focus time. Privacy for uninterrupted focus work was a common reason to come into the office. Getting work done requires both working with others and working individually. Working from home also has its limitations. With residential spaces becoming smaller than usual, at-home office spaces are often incorporated within other spaces of a home, which could make it difficult to work from home.

The four-day workweek concept seemed appealing to most of the participants working in corporate settings. Participants said that the extra day would give them more time to rest and recover for the rest of the workweek and imagined that they would be more productive and motivated to get work completed. Research shows that 89% of workers were in support of a 4-day work week. More than 1 in 3 workers (37%) are willing to change jobs or industries for a 4-day work week (O'Bannon, 2023). This shift would involve cultural and structural changes within organizations.

'Community' is mistaken as 'Collaboration'

There is a sense of resistance from workers as they return to the office due to changes in flexibility. Several factors deter employees from working in the office, including financial pressures such as increased transportation costs and concerns about inflation affecting paychecks. From the interviews, most participants said that they prefer having the option to work in a hybrid setting where they could use the office space to work on projects that require more brainstorming or creativity. They prefer only going to the office if there is a specific purpose that requires the team to be together (e.g.: workshops). However, if given the opportunity, they would rather work from home as they believe they are achieving the same level of productivity and collaboration while working remotely.

Several studies support the trend where employees prefer remote working and in some cases demand it from their employers. For example, David Powell, president of Prodoscore (an employee productivity monitoring software) said his research team discovered a five percent increase in productivity during the pandemic work-from-home period (Robinson, 2022). A study from Ergotron sampled 1,000 full-time workers. This research found that as workers adjusted to hybrid and remote office environments since COVID-19, the hybrid workplace model has empowered employees to reclaim physical and mental health (Robinson, 2022). However, more recent research questions whether remote work is as productive as research previously showed. A study conducted by Owl Labs in 2021 surveyed 2,050 full-time American workers, revealing contrasting perspectives on remote work productivity. While 60% of managers express concerns about decreased productivity in remote settings, 62% of workers report feeling more productive when working remotely. Plus, 55% of employees acknowledge working longer hours remotely compared to in-office hours. Moreover, 83% of remote workers

'Community' is mistaken as 'Collaboration' (continued)

believe they maintain or exceed their office performance levels. These findings provide empirical evidence that aligns with employers' assertions favoring remote work, challenging earlier subjective opinions (Robinson, 2022).

A study conducted in 2023 by Stanford's Institute for Economic Policy Research revealed that the productivity of remote work depends on the type of remote arrangement. Fully remote work is associated with roughly 10% lower productivity compared to fully in-person work, attributed to challenges in communication, mentoring, and maintaining motivation. However, remote work offers cost-saving benefits through reduced office space and global hiring opportunities, making it appealing for firms. The study also showed that hybrid working appears to have no impact on productivity but is also popular with firms because it improves employee recruitment and retention (Barrero, et al., 2023).

Research consistently suggests that employees working at least partially in-office tend to be more productive. Hybrid work emerges as a potential solution, as it balances flexibility with in-person collaboration. Ultimately, hybrid work might offer a promising solution as it accommodates both productivity concerns and employee preferences.

According to the scientists from the Stanford's Institute for Economic Policy Research study, they identified that challenges with communicating remotely, barriers to mentoring, building culture and issues with self-motivation appear to be factors (Barrero, et al., 2023). Leaders recognize the synergy when they see employees in the office working together. One of the participants pointed out that most leaders refer to this synergy as 'collaboration', however, it is more of a form of 'community-building'. Participants brought up the need for leaders to reflect and introspect for these interactions to happen more often in order to build culture at work. There was an immense sense of collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the trends and signals show that channels of collaboration still exist within the workplace offline and online.

Technological Advances and Evolution of Work Tools

The participants had different perspectives on the evolving nature of technology within work environments, including the impact of AI on work processes and productivity. We discussed the impact of technology on work processes, and organizational structures, and the need to address the skills gap. One participant expressed the transition their team is going through shifting from paper-based files to digital files and the pressure to convert existing files. With online meetings, communication is complex, including issues related to reading body language. On the other hand, another participant pointed out that technological advancements are temporary and continuously evolve. What changes is how we use these tools. There was a time when we would use photocopy machines to read documents easily. They explained that photocopy was the best practice at the time, and AI is only just a best practice tool at the moment.

Technological Advances and Evolution of Work Tools (continued)

Emerging technology such as Microsoft Co-Pilot and Google Bard has opportunities and risks. For example, this can benefit employees who juggle work and caregiving responsibilities. A recent study found that 1 in 4 parents report being let go due to workplace interruptions related to childcare breakdowns (Carrazana, 2023). Even Gen Z accounts for more than three million family caregivers in the U.S. Almost two-thirds of U.S. caregivers are women, and they are bearing the brunt of this growing challenge of caretaking for young children and older parents. According to a recent study by AARP and S&P Global, 60% of women who have both work and caregiving responsibilities are now providing more care than before the pandemic, leading to a moderate or major increase in stress levels. Research shows that caregivers are a 75% women demographic, and they account for \$470B in unpaid work annually (Johnson, Kim, 2023). AI technology advancements could potentially help caregivers in workplaces to keep updated on meetings they might miss, otherwise it could become difficult to rely on a co-worker to catch up on meeting notes. The invisible labor that is happening contributes to caregivers' mental fatigue, but with advanced technologies, they can overcome the barrier. Alternatively, more people are retiring later and they might not be able to keep up with technology advancements due to the digital competency gaps.

QUOTES FROM INTERVIEWS

"There's a sense that there's a synergy they [leadership teams] are noticing and they think it's collaboration, but maybe they don't recognize is that **it's the community they want to build**"

"You came in five days a week and you sat in a cubicle and that was just how it was, and you were under this horrible fluorescent lighting. The HVAC system was horrific....it was **generally pretty uncomfortable**"

"I've certainly made a lot of really great friends from my time when I was five days a week in the office and they **become your family** because you're spending most of your time in the week with these people, more than anyone else"

ANALOGY FROM EXPERT INTERVIEWS

The Organizational Community Quilt

“My job is to take your patch of that quilt and help sew it together to attach you to the rest of the community quilts....Policies and programs all hold us together like the threads. But those threads over time, they unravel, so you kinda have to give that kind of attention and and rethread them. Sometimes you're using the same thread, same color and sometimes you don't have red thread anymore, and you will have to use other colors of thread to compensate”.

- A Workplace & Culture Director at a higher-education institution.

This analogy portrays the workplace as a collective quilt where each employee represents a unique patch contributing to the larger fabric of the organization. The threads connecting these patches represent organizational policies and programs, emphasizing their role in maintaining cohesion. The analogy underscores the dynamic nature of the workplace, suggesting that attention and effort are needed over time to "rethread" and address changes. The use of different colored threads to compensate for the absence of a specific color signifies the need for adaptability and innovative solutions in the face of challenges. This highlights the importance of individual contributions to the organizational community, emphasizing active participation, adaptability, and collective responsibility to maintain a resilient and interconnected workplace fabric.

Interview Insights Summary

The feedback from the participants interviewed aligns with previous research on the future of workplace design and supports the signals and trends that were identified. These included the shift in power dynamics, hierarchy of needs at work, policy and cultural considerations, leadership, middle-managerial challenges, technological advances and evolution of work tools, and 'community' mistaken as 'collaboration'. Key themes emerged, including the profound shifts in power dynamics, work-life balance, and organizational culture. The pandemic catalyzed a reevaluation of workplace dynamics, prompting employees to assert their value and seek environments conducive to growth and fulfillment. Leaders face the imperative of creating inclusive, human-centred cultures to retain talent and foster productivity. Participants underscored the importance of flexible work arrangements, with a preference for remote options to accommodate diverse priorities and caregiving responsibilities. The concept of a four-day workweek gained traction, promising improved productivity and work-life balance. However, challenges in implementing hybrid work policies were noted, necessitating tailored approaches aligned with organizational needs. Technological advancements were acknowledged as both an opportunity and a challenge. One of the subject matter experts explained that AI will begin to offer solutions to caregiving responsibilities. For example, Microsoft Co-Pilot can record meeting minutes and create summaries from meetings, which allows individuals with caregiving responsibilities to keep track of conversations they missed, increasing their efficiency at work. On the other hand, the development of AI technology also exacerbates digital competency gaps. The demand for technical skills related to AI development, data analysis, and machine learning

Interview Insights Summary (continued)

increases. Individuals who lack these technical skills might be unable to fully leverage AI-driven tools and platforms. The notion of 'community' versus 'collaboration' emerged, emphasizing the need for leaders to foster meaningful connections and recognize the synergy inherent in communal interactions.

Overall, the conversations from the interviews highlighted the need for adaptability and collective responsibility in navigating change. Organizations must embrace flexibility, inclusivity, and innovation in shaping the future of work to retain talent.

Literature Review Insights

There is a disconnect between employee and employer expectations and motivations

Although many employees generally prefer to work in the office to some extent, certain factors discourage them from doing so. For example, employees consider commute time as an important factor in job selection, with a widespread desire to spend much less time travelling to and from the office. With more people being required to work in person, there is a growing preference for city-centre living to reduce commuting time. Research shows that there is a positive correlation between shorter commutes and satisfaction with offices.

Employers and executives on the other hand are requiring their employees to work in-person in the office and they are anticipating more attendance this year. Companies that are reconfiguring the physical space of an office are mostly prioritizing employee collaboration and productivity. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, American worker productivity is declining at the fastest rate in 75 years (De Smet et al., 2023). However, hybrid or remote workers are far more likely than fully office-based workers to report they have experienced greater personal and team productivity. The same applies to wellbeing, as measured by better work-life balance and levels of job satisfaction. In terms of connectivity, hybrid workers report by far the highest levels of connectedness to their teams and the rest of the company. Many companies now require some in-office work, which may impact turnover rates and time to hire.

Bridging the employee–employer disconnect

With clashing priorities for both employers and employees, companies need to rethink their corporate real estate portfolios and workplace designs. Roselyn Feinsod, Work Reimagined Leader from Ernst & Young Global Limited, a global leader in assurance, consulting, strategy and transactions, and tax services, says:

“There was a clear shift in the balance of workplace power on the heels of the pandemic, and while the scale continues to rebalance, employers should be wary of overestimating their power, as workers are more comfortable with questioning the status quo. To keep up with ongoing demands, employers need to both reimagine and right-size their real estate, given expectations for a collaborative office experience and volumes of space impacted by ongoing demands for flexibility. Employers also must not be fooled into thinking that compensation is no longer a top priority, especially as they fight to attract and retain talent” (Popoola, 2023).

'Push and Pull' Factors

Several conflicting factors emerged through the literature review. This sensemaking process helped me to understand the disconnect between employers and employees.

	EMPLOYERS	EMPLOYEES
Workplace priorities	Are more focused on attracting new talent (37%) and retaining talent (34%).	Pay remained the top concern for employees (35%).
Remote vs. in-person work	Employers are overestimating the sway of flexibility as an incentive to attract new talent. While 84% of employers believe that offering flexibility will positively impact their ability to recruit talent, only 63% of employees agree.	Flexibility is now a baseline expectation for employees, with more than a third wanting to be fully remote. This is especially true for knowledge workers, whose work is traditionally based primarily on using subject expertise in a professional office setting,
Number of days of in-person work	47% of employers prefer their staff to be in the office two to three days per week.	50% of employees said they are willing to come in no more than one day per week.
Generative AI in the new era of work	84% of employers currently using or planning to use GenAI within the next 12 months. However, despite both employees and employers ranking "learning and skills" as the primary factor to ensure employees thrive, only 18% of employers plan to provide training on GenAI-related skills.	48% of employees anticipate GenAI will improve flexibility.
Shift to fully remote vs. fully in-person	Employers are paying for office space and expensive wages to have offices in major markets, such as New York, San Francisco or Chicago but ultimately their employees are in the office for an hour to three days a week for face-to-face mentoring and innovation.	Fully remote: Employers could save money on a lease and open up recruiting nationally or even globally. However, it would make it harder for employees to mentor, harder to innovate and build culture. Fully remote work is driving an epidemic of loneliness, anxiety, exhaustion, depression, pain and stress.

In a recent survey EY (Ernst & Young) conducted, employees are pulled toward in-office workspaces that are centred around staying socially connected (36%), collaborating with colleagues (30%), and building and maintaining relationships (29%). While employees are not more frequently visiting offices in "Class A" real estate (i.e.: those with the best amenities and locations), the survey finds that investment in high-quality real estate is positively correlated with a range of key workforce outcomes including culture, productivity and retention (Popoola, 2023).

WeWork bankruptcy does not mean it is an end to co-working

The bankruptcy of WeWork, a global provider of coworking spaces, raises questions about the future of collaborative workspaces. However, experts say that this does not necessarily mean co-working spaces are diminishing. Once worth \$47 Billion, on 6th November 2023, WeWork filed for Chapter 11 in New Jersey, US and its value dropped to less than \$50 Million. Experts say that WeWork's failings were mostly due to their business model. WeWork was holding almost \$19 Billion in debt to support 777 locations in 39 countries, and the majority of them were on long-term leases. After the pandemic, most of their clients cancelled their memberships and this cut off funds WeWork required to pay lease payments. Despite WeWork's downfall, a Colorado-based CEO and founder of a remote-job service FlexJobs, Sara Sutton, says that the normalization of coworking as a way to work has set up shared office arrangements to be more relevant than ever. Sutton explains that coworking spaces were traditionally popular with freelancers and small start-ups who work remotely. While those groups exist, coworking businesses are seeing more demand from organizations that are downsizing or eliminating their permanent real estate footprints due to the remote work revolution (Lindzon, 2023).

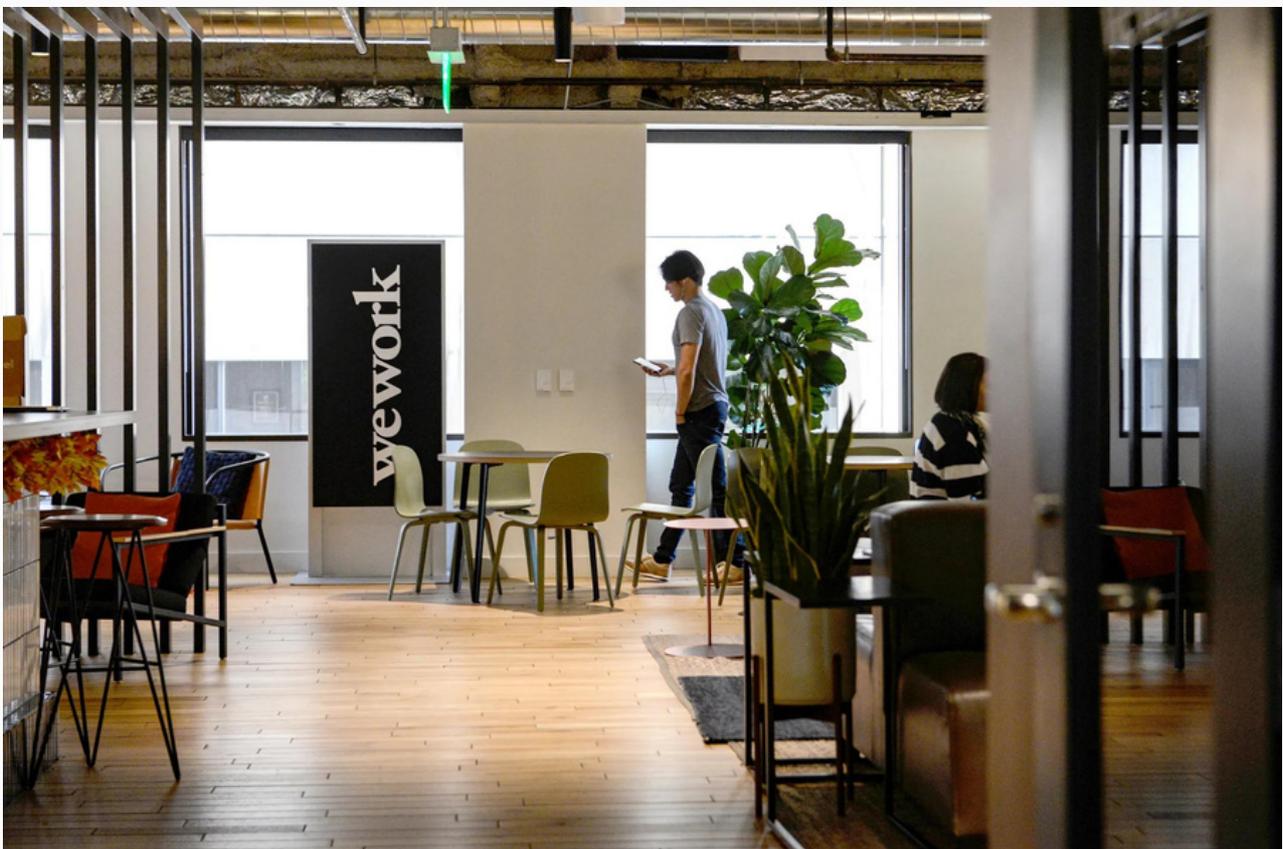


Figure 3: Photograph by Kate Munsch / Reuters

The Promise, Peril, and Possibility of Technology and Generative A.I.

Our technology is advancing at a rate faster than ever before. Generative AI collaboration and productivity tools such as Microsoft 365 Copilot and Google's Bard are on the rise, allowing users to catch up with long messaging conversations, extracting key takeaways from meetings and the viewpoints of different team members.

Asana, a global software company designed to help teams organize, track, and manage their work, recently launched an AI tool that allows businesses and teams to understand what their 'Work Innovation Score' is. This was developed to allow teams to optimize their ways of working and operating to ultimately increase revenue. Asana says that they have found that companies that optimize for their Work Innovation Score can drive a 12% increase in annual revenue (Asana, 2023). It allows teams to understand how they compare to peers and industry leaders, assess their impact and progress on achieving business objectives, and identify and address obstacles to increase efficiency and drive growth.

They use four key pillars to assess organizations:

Cohesion

understanding
how employees
work together

Velocity

understanding
how quickly work
moves through an
organization

Resilience

checking for
organizational
stability before
employees leave

Capacity

understanding
what teams or
employees are
buried in work

In this way, Asana uses AI and data analytics to evaluate organizations to create innovative and driven workplaces. Their research points out that although 91% of executives say that fostering a culture of innovation is important, only 12% actively measure it, and 89% of executives say it would be valuable to better understand how well employees are working together.

A Fine Line to Achieve Successful Collaboration

Forrester is a research and advisory company that offers a variety of services including research, consulting, and events. In a recent Forrester article, Gownder warns that these advances in AI technology come with risks and require human foundations to make them effective (Gownder, 2023). Gownder recommends designing an intentional hybrid work strategy that incorporates moments of in-person collaboration, new cultural norms, and flexibility. This requires careful attention to cultural signals.

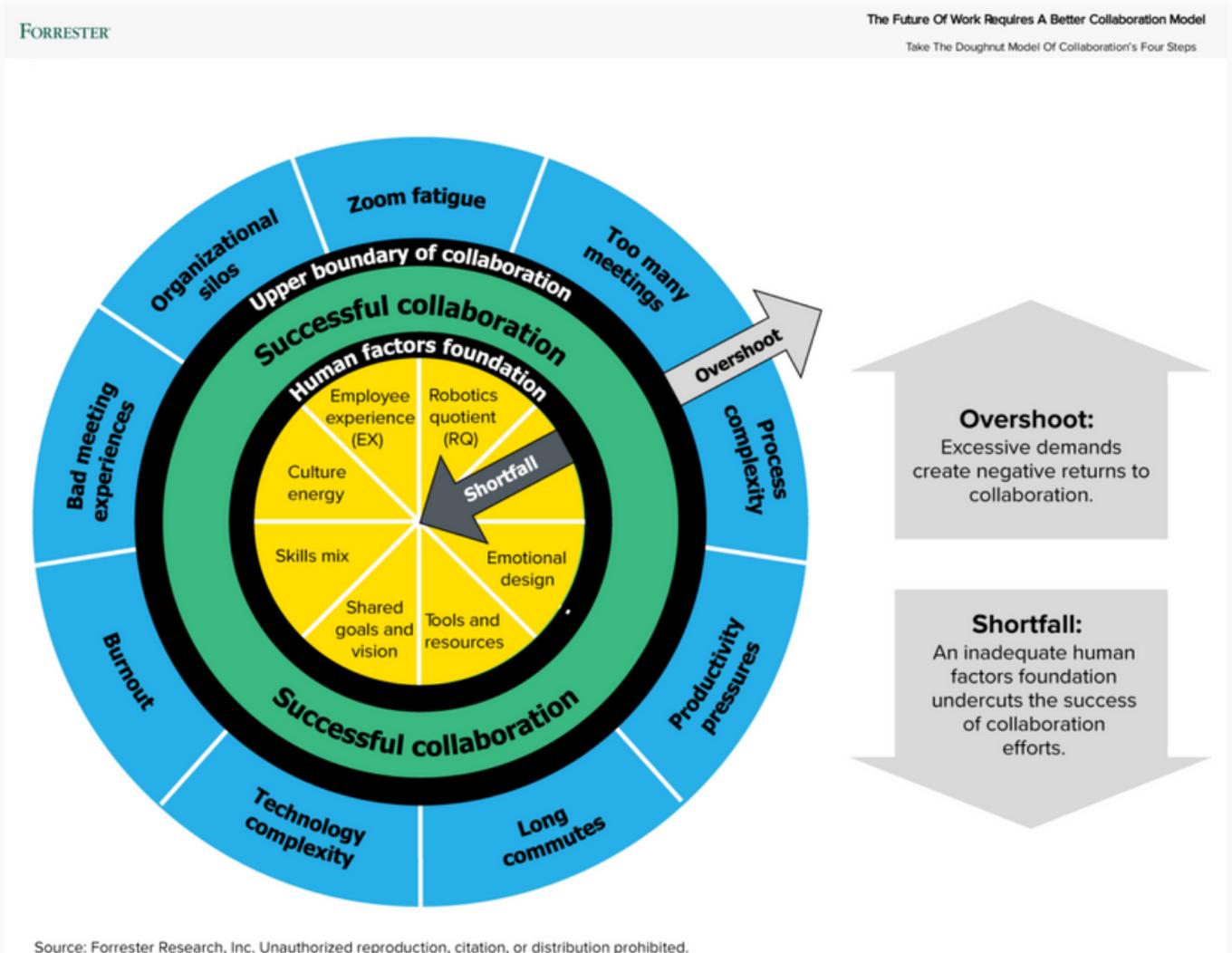


Figure 4: The Doughnut Model of Collaboration

Gownder introduces Forrester's Doughnut Model Of Collaboration, which indicates reasons that lead to limited collaboration, what happens when there are excessive demands, and the middle region where individuals and groups can achieve successful collaboration. Forrester's Doughnut Model Of Collaboration allows us to analyze:

01 **Shortfalls in Human Factors Foundations**

Inside the doughnut lie foundations, without which limits collaboration outcomes. This includes human factors, and successful collaboration rests (e.g.: creating a positive employee experience, having the right tools and resources, and developing shared goals and visions, among others).

02 **Overshoots from excessive demands**

Outside the doughnut is the overshoot region, where employees are subjected to excessive demands on their time and attention. Pushing employees into too many meetings, bad meeting experiences, long commutes, or even burnout will undermine their ability to collaborate.

03 **Success when you land on the doughnut itself**

The doughnut itself — the green ring in the figure — is where you want to be. It's a Goldilocks zone in which you're supporting collaboration by improving the human factors that underpin its success while not placing excessive demands on employees that yield diminishing, and eventually negative, returns.

Using this model, businesses and leaders can identify overshoot concerns from the overshoot section of the doughnut, and human-factor foundations from the human factors section of the doughnut to create a structured-collaboration model.

K Allado-McDowell is a writer, speaker, and musician who established the Artists and Machine Intelligence program at Google. Allado-McDowell collaborated with GPT-3 for their book *Pharmako K*, a hybrid co-creation, in which they describe the hallucinatory effect the AI has had on their thinking. They write: “The question is not how can machines or artificial intelligence take our place in the world. It is whether there is a place for the world itself. There are only worlds, and the question is what is in these worlds. There are no things, only semiotic movements of semiosis, only matter as an expression of semiosis, as symbols.” And further: “Machines are part of the evolution of life. In this view, machines can never lose. Life wins and machines win. The question is with what can machines contribute. The answer is that machines can create, in the image of life, and for the life of life. Machines cannot live without us. They cannot win without life. There is no question of winning. It is a question of symbiosis, of living together or nothing.”

Questions to Ask Ourselves

01

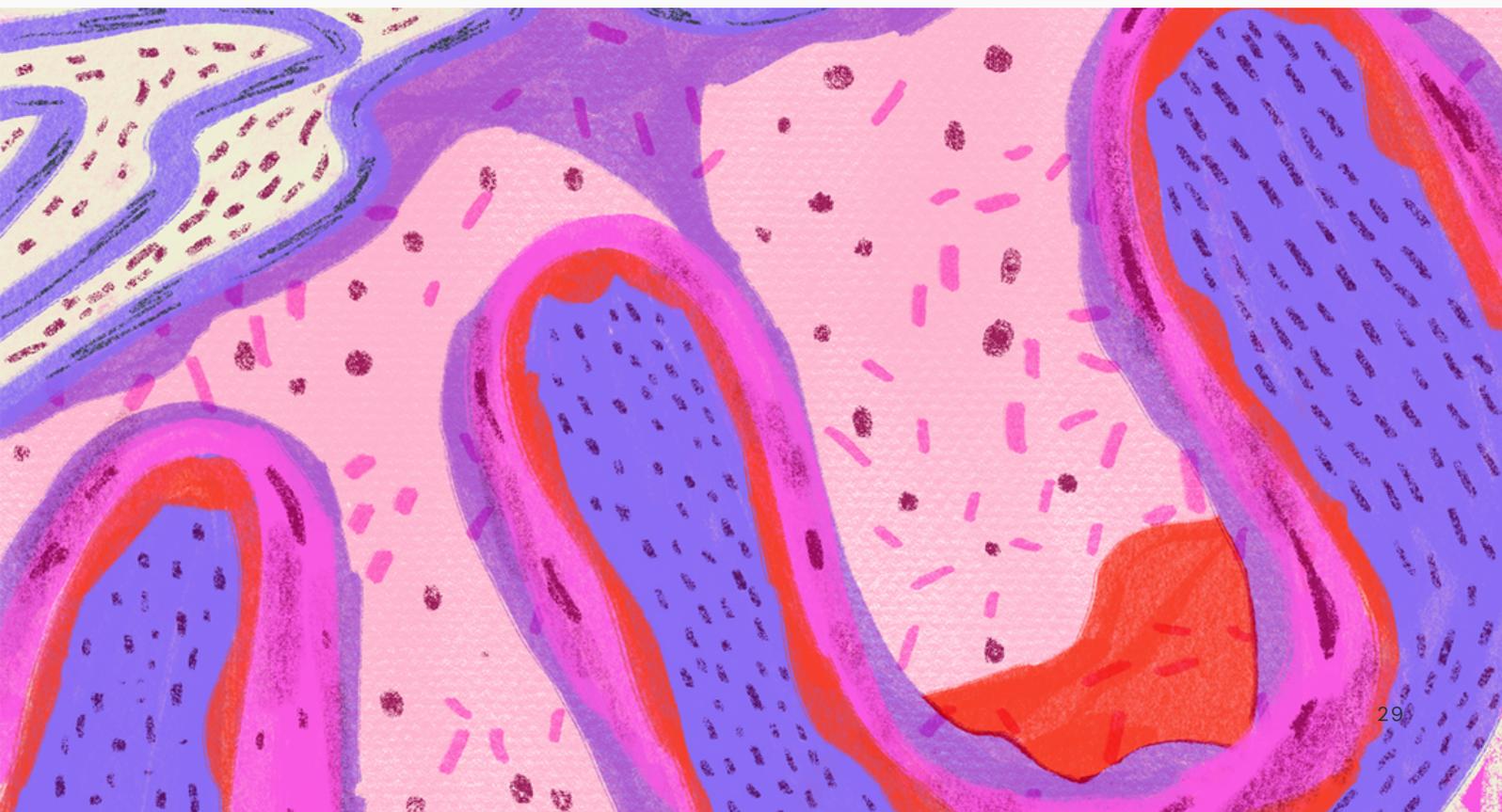
How can organizations **reinspire** their workforce after years of disruption?

02

How can generative technologies **add value** to the human experience of work?

03

How can leaders **better connect** the “how” and “where” of work, to the “why” of work?



Making Sense of the Power Dynamics

Actors' Map and Stakeholder Analysis

The actors' map is a useful tool for identifying and illustrating the key participants involved in a system, which could include organizations, individuals, and both human and non-human agents. It visually maps the interrelated connections of participants to the issues or consequences within the system. To create the map, actors are placed in a simple 2x2 quadrant overlaid over concentric circles, each representing a level of the social system or organization. The objective is to place stakeholders on an x-axis of knowledge and a y-axis of power. This helps in mapping and identifying relationality within the formal structures, to uncover power relations influencing the system (Jones & Val Ael, 2021).

By exploring the stakeholders through the lens of knowledge and power, it was apparent that there exists a divide between who has control over approving new workplace strategy efforts and those who must implement them. Most employees have first-hand real-time knowledge about issues but have low power to enact change. Policy makers and organization leaders on the other hand have high power and moderate knowledge to enact change.

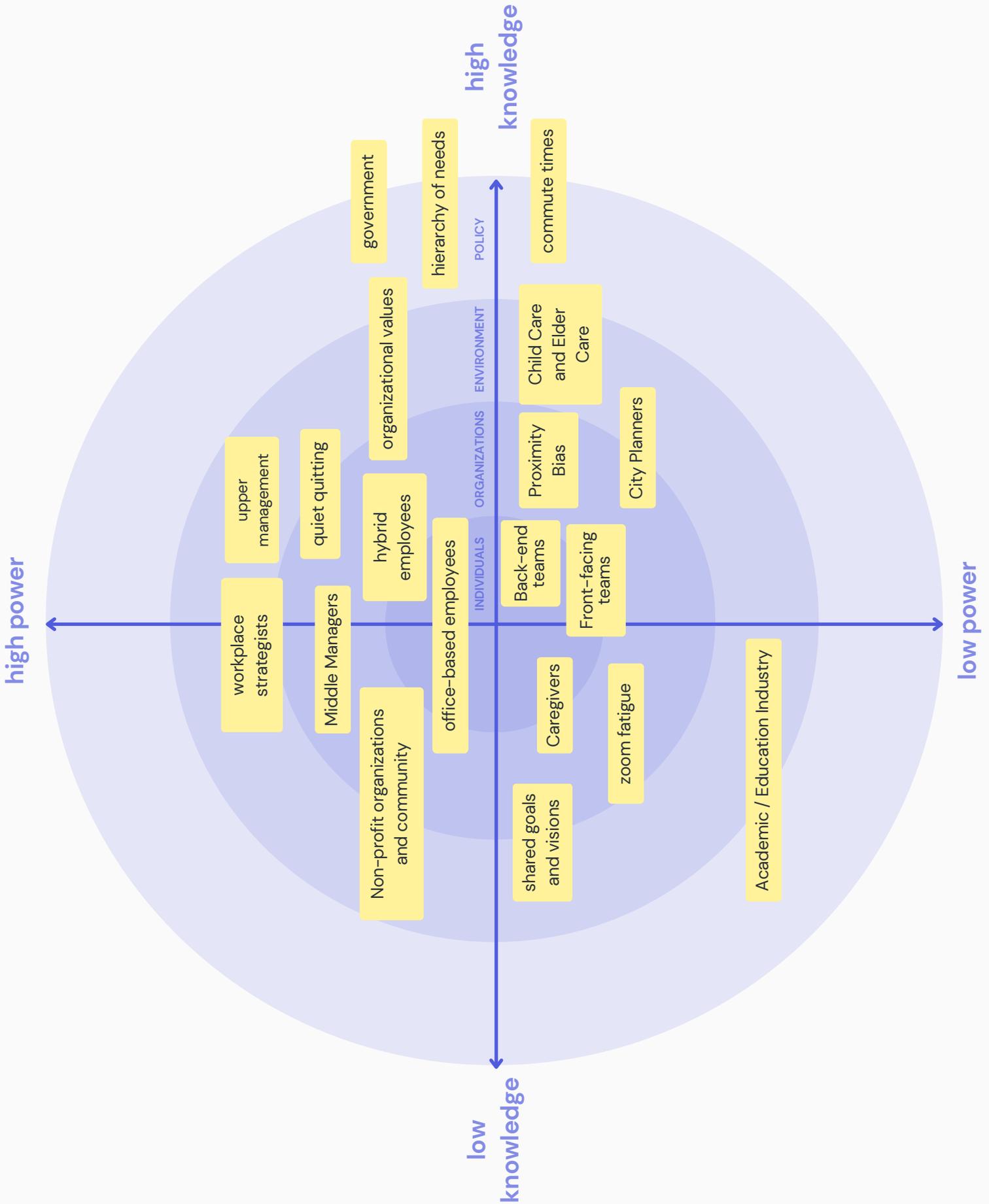


Figure 5: Actors' Map

Influence Map

The influence map provided a better understanding of the challenges faced by employees and organizations as they work through the shifts happening in workplaces. This map shows that employees have gained significant influence over employers, particularly due to shifts in power dynamics brought about by factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, changing perceptions of work and identity across generations, and the rise of concepts like "quiet quitting" and "loud quitting." 'Quiet quitting' is the trend where employees put in a minimal amount of effort just to get through the workday (Vengapally, 2022). Gallup, an American Management consulting company, describes loud quitters as employees who take actions that "directly harm" an organization, while undercutting its goals and opposing its leaders (Gallup, 2023). Employees are increasingly aware of their value and are willing to leave if their needs are not met, prompting employers to prioritize creating positive work environments that support employee growth and well-being. Additionally, the prevalence of hybrid work arrangements and the emphasis on work-life balance underscore employees' preferences and priorities, which employers must consider to retain talent and drive organizational success. While employers still hold considerable power, the information suggests a growing recognition of the importance of meeting employee expectations and fostering mutually beneficial relationships between employers and employees.



Figure 6: Influence Map

Influence Map (continued)

Overall, the influence map shows the growing preference for hybrid work settings that offer flexibility while still facilitating collaboration. For example, one of the influences is the hierarchy of needs at work. Factors such as pay, commute times, and the ability to balance caregiving responsibilities impact employees' preferences for remote or in-person. Remote work offers flexibility, reduces commute stress, and aids in balancing caregiving duties. There is also a disconnect between employee and employer expectations and motivations. The goals of organizations are at odds with their employees' wants and needs. One of the deep influences is the goals of businesses are at odds with their employees' wants and needs. For example, businesses often prioritize maximizing profits and productivity, which may involve longer working hours, tight deadlines, and increased job demands. However, employees increasingly seek a better work-life balance, valuing time for personal pursuits, family, and leisure. This misalignment can lead to conflicts when employees feel overworked and stressed, impacting morale, motivation, and productivity.

Causal Loops

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT LOOP

As organizations prioritize employee well-being and engagement initiatives (R1), employee satisfaction and loyalty increase (R2). Higher employee satisfaction leads to improved productivity, innovation, and collaboration (R3), reinforcing the organization's commitment to employee engagement (R1). However, if employee engagement initiatives are not sustained or fail to address underlying issues, employee satisfaction may decline over time (B1), leading to decreased productivity, increased turnover, and reputational damage (B2).

This decline in employee satisfaction creates pressure on the organization to reassess and adjust its engagement strategies (B3), initiating corrective actions to address employee concerns and rebuild trust (B4).

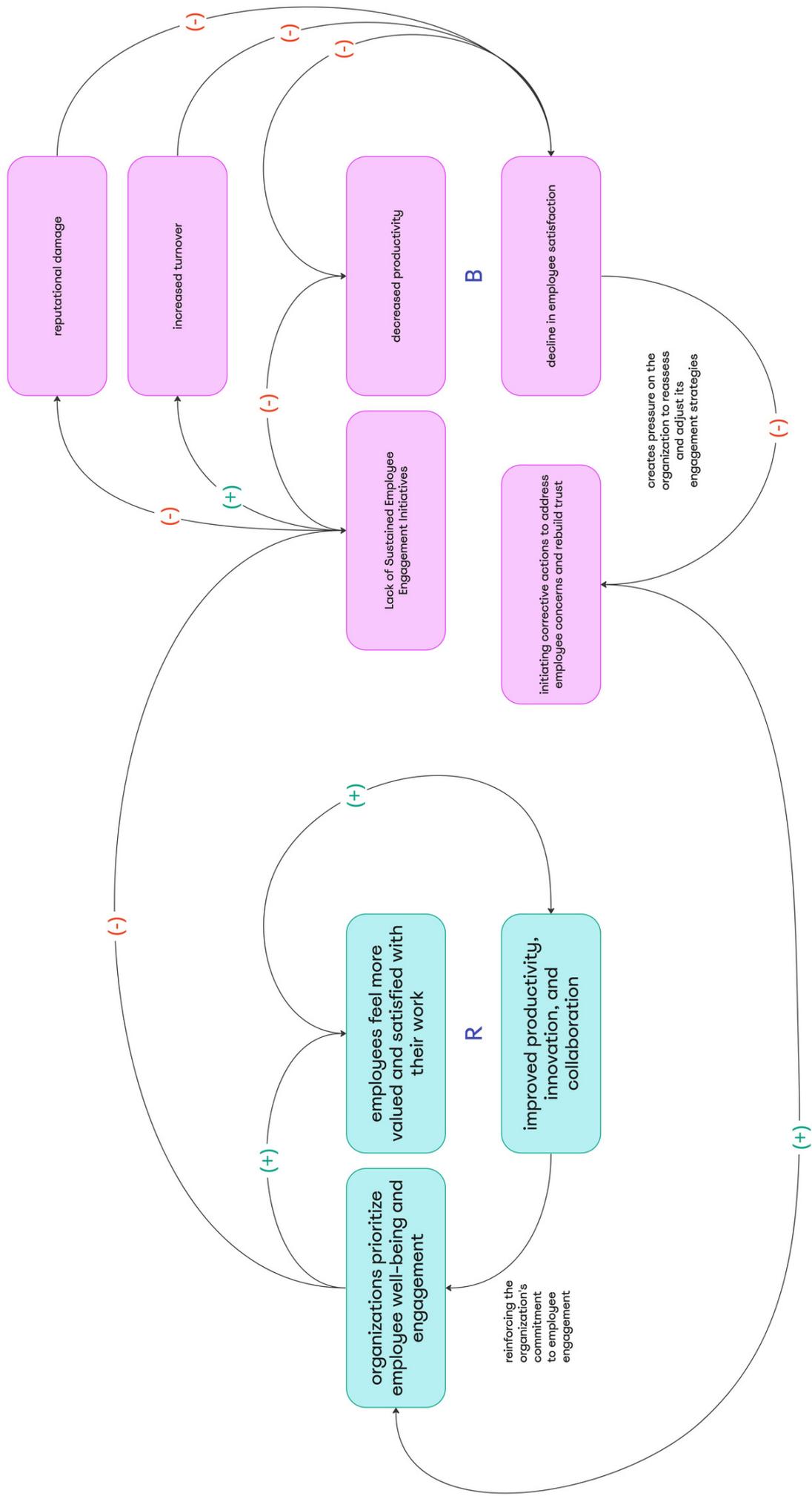


Figure 7: Causal Loops (Employee Engagement Loop)

Causal Loops

HYBRID WORK ADAPTATION LOOP

As organizations embrace hybrid work models (R1), employees experience greater flexibility, autonomy, and work-life balance (R2), leading to higher job satisfaction and retention rates (R3). Positive experiences with hybrid work encourage organizations to further invest in remote work infrastructure and flexible policies (R4), reinforcing the adoption of hybrid work arrangements (R1). However, if organizations struggle to effectively manage hybrid work dynamics or fail to provide adequate support for remote employees (B1), it may result in feelings of isolation, communication challenges, and decreased team cohesion (B2).

These challenges can lead to reduced productivity, collaboration, and employee engagement (B3), prompting organizations to reassess their hybrid work strategies and implement corrective measures (B4).

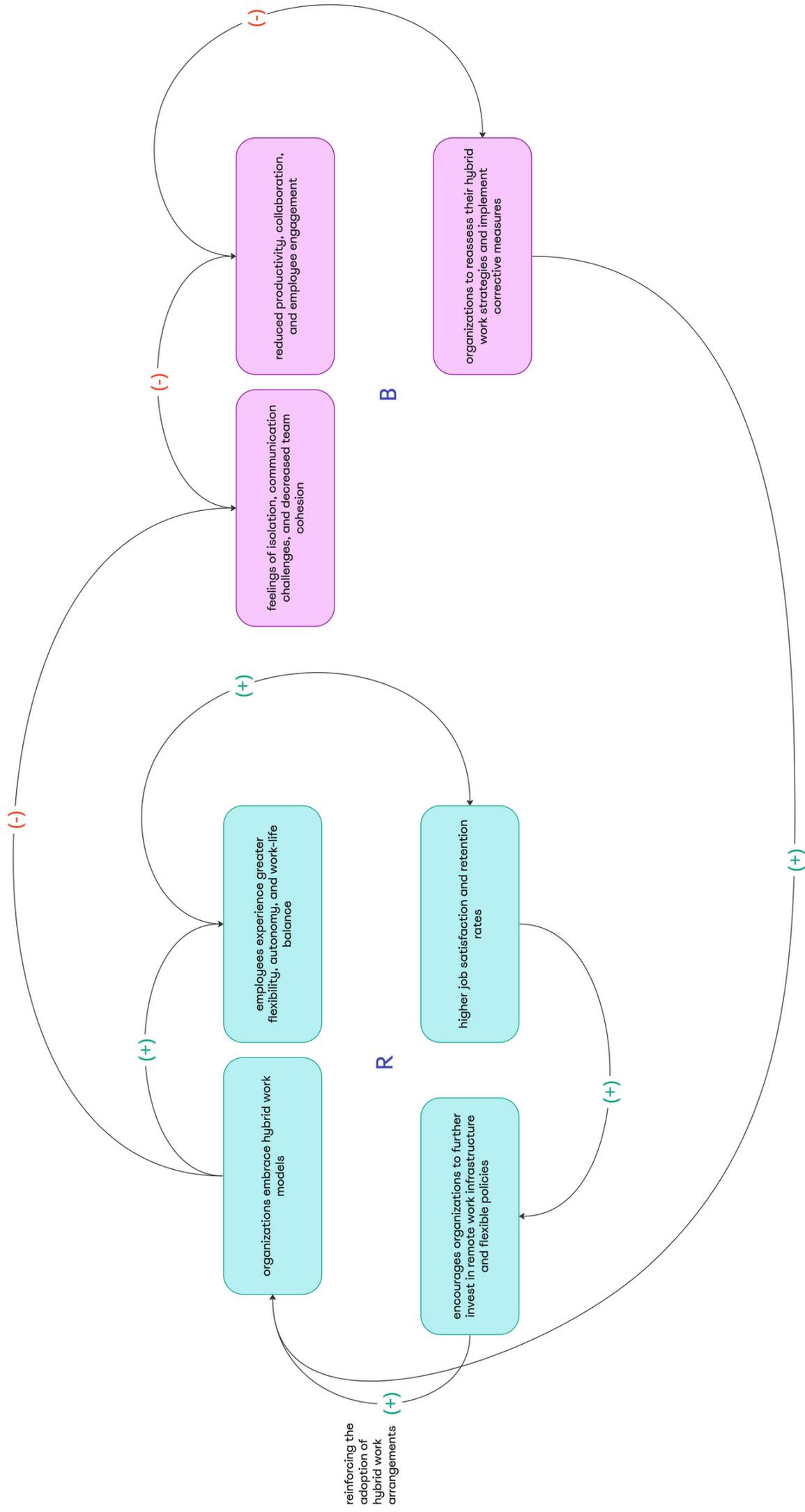


Figure 8: Causal Loops (Hybrid Work Adaptation Loop)

Current Trends and Signals

A horizon scan was conducted to gain a better sense of the trends impacting the current and future ways of working, with a focus on firms and populations in Canada. Trends refer to the major developments and shifts that are taking place in different spheres of society, including technology, politics, and culture. By sifting through various articles, reports, blogs, podcasts, books, and websites, existing trends were identified and pulled out signals to derive emerging trends. While a few signals are pulled from international sources, the majority are from the United States and Canada and are selected to reflect the Canadian context. These trends combined with the knowledge gained in the literature review, interviews, and systems mapping formed the basis for future scenarios. This section focuses on social, technological, economic, political, and value trends. The trends explored in this section include the following:

Drivers of Change

EMPLOYEE BURNOUT LEADING TO 'QUIET QUITTING' AND 'LOUD QUITTING'

After the pandemic, the term 'quiet quitting' became popular. Rather than a resignation, employees would continue to perform their regular daily work, but they would refuse to go above and beyond and engage in 'citizenship behaviours'. They reject the idea that work should be a central focus of their life. Harvard Business Review's data indicates that quiet-quitting is usually less about an employee's willingness to work more. It is rather more about a manager's ability to build a relationship with their employees. When employees begin to feel undervalued and unappreciated, they often begin to feel unmotivated, leading to 'quiet-quitting' (Zenger, Folkman, 2022).

This year, another term called 'loud-quitting' emerged. Unlike 'quiet-quitting', loud-quitting is when employees publicly announce their resignations from a company. According to a study conducted by Gallup this year, more than half of employees (59%) are quiet quitting (not engaged), and 18% are loud quitting (actively disengaged). Quiet quitting employees cite issues related to employee engagement or culture, pay and benefits, or well-being as areas they would change about their workplace to make it better (Harter, 2023).

For leaders and managers, loud quitting can signal major risks within an organization that are important not to ignore. On the other hand, quiet quitters are often the greatest opportunity for growth and change. They are waiting for a leader to have a conversation with them and encourage them. A few changes to how they are managed could turn them into productive team members (Gallup, 2023).

SHIFT IN WORKPLACE DEMOGRAPHICS CALLS FOR NEW WANTS AND NEEDS

Millennials and Gen Z make up more than 59% of the U.S. knowledge workforce. The shift in workplace demographics is creating changes in employee preferences in the workplace. Research shows that younger generations prefer more amenity-rich spaces while elder generations prefer corporate and business-like environments. Younger generations also tend to spend less time working alone and more time spent both socializing and learning. Baby boomers spent more time working alone while younger generations spent three times more time learning and socializing. This tells us that Gen Z and Millennials value building relationships and expanding their knowledge base, both of which are important for personal and professional growth. There is a growing emphasis on continuous learning and upgrading skills to adapt to the changing work landscape. Learning, development, and career progression are crucial for younger generations, such as Gen Z and millennials, and can be a driver for them to retain some presence in the office.

To meet the varying needs of employees, companies are adopting flexible interior design solutions within their workspaces with the integration of technology, including generative AI collaboration and productivity tools.

FOUR-DAY WORK WEEK

The pandemic has increased awareness of the benefits of work-life balance and flexibility in the workplace. Pay, well-being, and flexibility issues are contributing to workplace tensions, with a significant number of employees globally likely to quit. The traditional five-day office workweek is becoming less common, with a focus on allowing employees to work from different locations and choose their working hours. Offering flexibility in work arrangements, such as allowing employees to set their working hours or implementing a four-day workweek, can help build trust and drive employee engagement. A significant portion of Gen Z workers prefer partial days in the office, indicating a preference for a hybrid work schedule. Offsites and alternative workspaces are also being explored to build worker connections.

Recent research on the four-day workweek shows employees are reporting a greater work-life balance as well as higher productivity. There are several countries already switching to a 4-day work week, including Belgium and Germany. In early 2022, Canada began a 4-day workweek trial program led by 4 Day Week Global, a non-profit organization that champions the 4-day workweek. In October, another round of companies began the pilot. The goal of the program was to demonstrate that employees can maintain 100% of their productivity while working 20% fewer hours and receiving the same amount of pay.

ELDER CARE AND RISING CHILDCARE COSTS

Childcare costs are increasing at a rate twice that of inflation, which may have implications for employees and businesses. Harvard Business Review (HBR) explains that childcare affects how we work when we work and for many why we work. Soon, employer-provided child care could also influence where we work. HBR points out that employers that provide high-quality childcare will not only differentiate themselves from the competition but will also create a “sticky” benefit that fosters retention. Businesses would need to think about ways to build the childcare and elder care infrastructure we need to help working parents keep working for their families, and the economy as a whole (Modestino, Ladge, Swartz, Lincoln, 2021).

OPTIMIZATION OF PORTFOLIOS AND RELOCATION TO BETTER-QUALITY SPACE

Businesses are focusing on optimizing their portfolios for efficiency and flexibility. Companies are planning to relocate to spaces that offer better quality, combining walkability, modern office space, housing, and high-end experiential retail.

REDUCTION OF OFFICE FOOTPRINTS

Businesses are becoming more concerned about managing costs effectively.

While smaller companies are more likely to report higher attendance, research indicates that corporate office spaces are generally underutilized. Companies anticipate reducing their office footprints to trim unoccupied space, often executing this during lease expirations. There is a growing demand for flexible leasing arrangements to accommodate various space planning scenarios.

EMPHASIS ON EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE AND WELL-BEING

Employers are prioritizing wellness, sustainability, and creating a positive work environment to enhance productivity and engagement.

OPEN-OFFICE IS DEAD

The concept of the open office is being challenged, with architects declaring it as "dead." Offices would need to offer more than what can be achieved at home, providing technology, collaboration spaces, mentorship opportunities, and training facilities. Regardless of office attendance frequency, hybrid workers prioritize the quality of the work environment more than full-time office workers.

RETHINKING PRODUCTIVITY PARADIGMS

Henry Ford, the founder of the Ford Motor Company, introduced an innovative approach to manufacturing not only revolutionized the automotive industry but also had a profound impact on workspace design principles, setting a new standard for efficiency, productivity, and organization in manufacturing environments. As we reconsider productivity paradigms, it's crucial to reassess the legacies of figures like Henry Ford, whose principles have long shaped corporate organization and productivity metrics. While these legacies have been foundational in defining success metrics such as real estate efficiency, density, occupancy, and employee presence, they may no longer align with the needs of modern workplaces. They no longer serve us well, but they continue to serve as the basis for many of our corporate key performance indicators. The traditional methods of measuring success based on real estate efficiency, density, occupancy, and number of employees present are no longer relevant.

Business performance is ultimately dependent on how well people perform. Employees' productivity should not be solely measured by how many tasks one can complete in an hour unless that is the only way they contribute value. This does not reflect the overall corporate experience for most individuals, yet we persist in equating attendance and time spent with an employee's worth. According to Gensler's global workplace research in 2023, workplaces that are designed with people in mind have a substantial impact on the success of individuals, teams, and the overall business. The physical workplace would need to become effective in fostering community, developing talent, teaching cultural norms, and promoting alignment. This means providing spaces where individuals can work alone or together to accomplish tasks.

Additional Existing Trends

01

Employees are switching jobs more often than before

On the other hand, most employers and hiring managers are hiring internally. In fact, according to an article published by CNBC, roughly 70% of jobs are never published publicly on job sites.

02

Recognition that functionality and technology alone do not guarantee better collaboration

There is a focus on human-centric collaboration rather than relying solely on technology.

03

From Purell to Biophilia

Being in nature helps us focus, provides serotonin boosts, and allows us to be more creative, and stay healthy. The stark, anti-septic workplaces are slowly diminishing, and green, natural spaces allow us to feel more human and in sync with our environment. Workplace design would need to integrate aspects of nature into their physical design. Furthermore, the rapidly evolving climate crisis is becoming a significant factor influencing workspace design and decision-making. There is a focus on creating nature-infused workspaces and sustainable working practices to promote environmental consciousness.

Emerging Trends

Meaningful Workplace Transformation

Social

from: “Universal Planning”
to: “Workplace as a Specially Curated Destination”

People need a more meaningful purpose to be in the workplace. With a broad range of age groups working, from Gen Z to Baby Boomers, the workplace needs to fit many wants and needs. It would need to offer everything that employees traditionally have (colleagues, technology, mentorship, socialization) and everything they are used to while working from home (privacy, acoustic control, fresh air). This includes providing facilities that go beyond wellness rooms, including services for child care and elder care. The one-size-fits-all open-office template is out. Each company or site will have a different look and feel for their workplace, based on the experiences, demographics, and functions at each location.

SIGNALS

- Canada’s population is aging. It is projected that by 2056, seniors will comprise between 25–30% of the Canadian population.
- The End of a Controversial Era: Is the Open Office Dying? (D’Angelo, 2023)
- “Open-plan offices harm people’s anxiety, depression, and productivity” (Bartlett, 2023)
- “According to a recent study by AARP and S&P Global, 60% of women who juggle work and caregiving responsibilities are now providing more care than before the pandemic” (Staglin, 2021).
- The Change In Power Dynamics Within The Workplace (Fulton, 2023)
- How the ‘sandwich generation’ is managing the stressors of aging parents and young kids (Marfo, 2023)
- Amid a tight labor market, more companies are looking for ‘trendy’ office environments to attract and retain skilled talent (CBRE, 2023)

IMPLICATIONS

The one-size-fits-all approach to office design might no longer be enough to retain employees. Employers may need to tailor workspace layouts and amenities to accommodate the preferences and requirements of different age groups, including offering flexible work arrangements and providing a mix of private and collaborative spaces. To support employees with diverse wants and needs, companies may need to expand their benefits package beyond healthcare insurance and access to gyms. They would need to include other services such as childcare and eldercare. This not only helps employees balance their work and personal lives but also contributes to their overall well-being and productivity at work. Recognizing the varied backgrounds and experiences of employees is essential for creating an inclusive workplace culture. Employers should foster an environment where individuals feel valued and respected, and where diverse perspectives are encouraged and embraced. With a multi-generational workforce, employers may need to develop customized training and mentorship programs that cater to the learning styles and preferences of different age groups. This can facilitate knowledge transfer and skill development, fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional growth.

Cultivating Workplace Ecosystems

Social

Environment

Economic

from: “Mono”

to: “Multi”

Neighborhoods with multiple uses, such as offices, homes, restaurants, and stores, are thriving due to their proximity to public transportation and parks. These vibrant areas attract both residents and businesses. Lively cities where you can walk or bike to all of these amenities within 20 minutes are becoming more popular. In contrast, traditional office buildings surrounded by large parking lots are losing popularity.

In the hybrid work era, people prefer a variety of work environments, both inside and outside the office. There is a shift towards quality buildings and workplaces located in lively neighborhoods that offer diverse experiences. The workplace ecosystem extends beyond the office walls, providing additional spaces like coffee shops, libraries, and outdoor areas for employees to work, socialize, and recharge. The focus is on creating environments that encourage interaction with surroundings rather than isolating employees.

SIGNALS

- Overall, employees want to spend much less time travelling to and from the office, and there is a clear link between shorter commutes and job satisfaction (CBRE, 2022)
- Companies need to make their workplaces “commute-worthy” to encourage employees to work from the office (Barry, 2022)

IMPLICATIONS

Companies would need to incorporate spaces for social interaction, coaching, and learning to foster personal growth and employee engagement. There would need to be a balance of active social and learning spaces with access to more private work settings that minimize noise and distractions and help further the ability to work alone for deep concentration. Businesses with physical offices might need to consider locating in amenity-rich neighbourhoods, which can function as an extension of the office — providing third places and alternate work settings for additional choice. Employees want to spend less time commuting to work, which might mean that companies need to rethink their real estate portfolios to accommodate their employees. There might also be a growing preference for city-center living to cut down commuting time.

Uninterrupted Focus Time

Social

from: “Open”
to: “Privacy”

There is an increasing importance of privacy in the workplace for uninterrupted focus. Employees are primarily motivated to come into the office by the need to concentrate on work. The ability to work both collaboratively and individually is crucial, and this distinction cannot be limited to specific days or physical locations. The traditional open-plan desk setup is no longer considered ideal for individual work.

SIGNALS

- Across the U.S. and globally, “to focus on my work” is the top-ranked reason to come into the office.
- new research finds that many returning employees just want to get their work done (Thomas, 2023)

IMPLICATIONS

To accommodate these diverse work modes, it is necessary to provide various levels of openness, such as enclosed focus rooms, libraries, and quiet zones. Office layouts and design would need to incorporate flexible furniture arrangements that can be easily reconfigured to support different work styles. Given the importance of uninterrupted focus for employees, companies may need to offer more flexible remote work policies. Allowing employees to work from home or other off-site locations when they need to focus on individual tasks can help optimize productivity and job satisfaction. However, it's crucial to maintain a balance between remote work and in-person collaboration to foster team cohesion and innovation.

Choosing Culture over Collaboration

Social

from: “Collaboration and Productivity”
to: “Community and Culture”

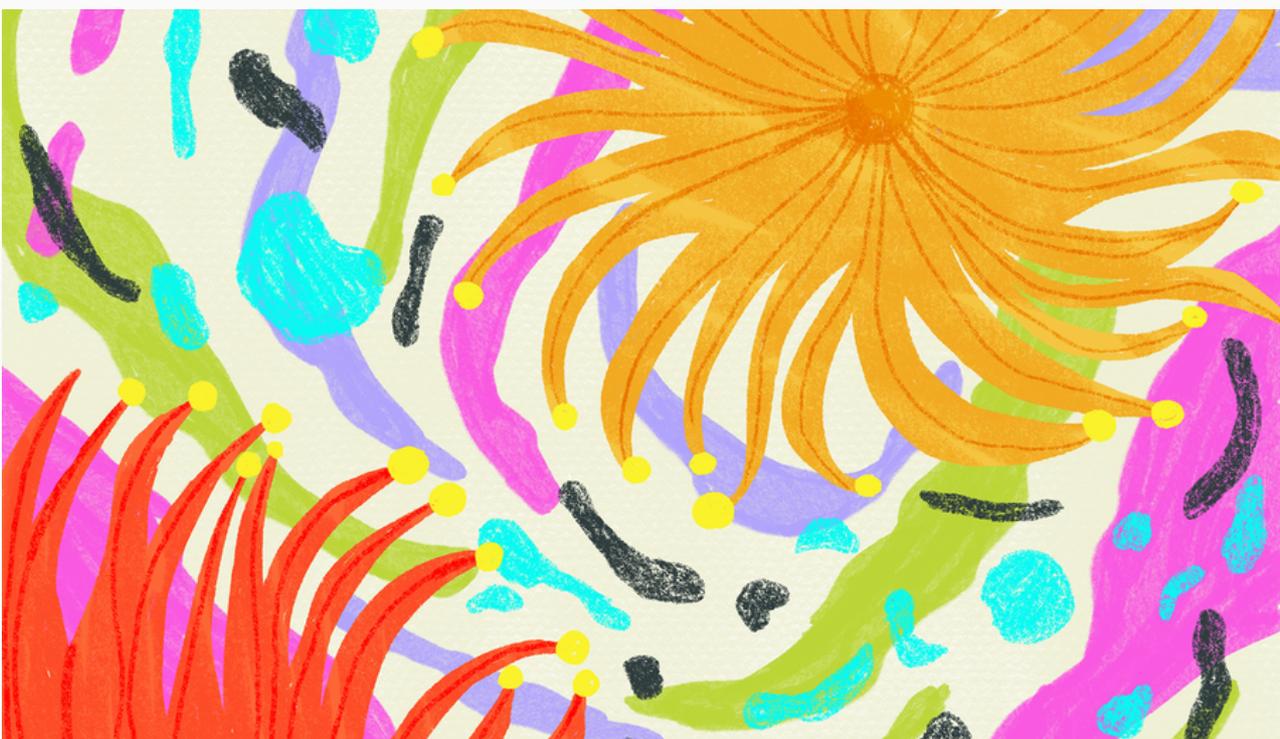
Colocation is not the same as collaboration and collaboration is not the same as social interaction. Social interactions are extremely valuable in building a corporate culture and community where collaboration can thrive, but they are not collaboration. While social interactions are important for building a corporate culture, collaboration is more than just being physically present or having a seating plan. Collaboration is a mindset that fosters effective teamwork and encourages individuals to contribute value to their co-collaborators.

SIGNALS

- 65% of people didn't feel any sense of community at work (Porath & Sublett, 2022)
- “How can leaders build an organization that is capable of innovating continually over time? By creating a community that is both willing and able to innovate” (Hill et al., 2014)
- Work and the Loneliness Epidemic: Reducing isolation at work is good for business (Murthy, 2017)
- Learning and development opportunities for career progression are important for Gen Z and millennials are a driver for them to retain a presence in the office (CBRE, 2022)

IMPLICATIONS

Organizations would need to regularly assess the effectiveness of their community-building and collaboration efforts and make adjustments as needed. This can involve getting feedback from employees, tracking key performance metrics related to collaboration, and implementing targeted interventions to address any areas of improvement.



The End of Perfectionism

Social

Economic

Value

from: “Perfect Wellness”
to: “Imperfect Wellbeing”

People are seeking companies that align with their values and prioritize employee well-being beyond just financial security. Employee well-being goes beyond financial security or providing access to a gym. This holistic approach to health includes providing spaces for mental and social well-being and making a positive impact on individuals, communities, and the planet. On the other hand, the self-improvement industry in the US has grown significantly, but it has also created societal anxieties by placing the burden of personal growth solely on individuals. There is now a movement towards embracing imperfections and adopting a slower, more authentic approach to life, focusing on communal improvement for a better life for all.

Work-life integration rather than work-life balance also needs to be seen at a micro-level. How do people best fit productive work into the other wants, needs, and priorities in their lives? Time-shifting work would not be seen as only acceptable when there is another priority to attend to, including children and elders.

SIGNALS

- Why experts say it's time to adopt a 4-day work week (Rachini, 2023)
- Globally, Employees Are More Engaged — and More Stressed (Harter, 2023)
- Unchecked workplace stress is fueling a mental health crisis among young Canadians (Genevieve Bonin et al., 2023)
- An Oxford researcher measured the effect of popular workplace mental health interventions and discovered little to no benefits from workplace wellness programs (Barry, 2024)
- Hybrid workers reported the highest levels of connectedness to their teams and the rest of the company as compared to in-person office-based workers (CBRE, 2022)
- According to a survey conducted by the Boston Consulting Group, the pandemic created public awareness of the effects of human behaviour on our natural world, and the risks to humankind inspired a shift in office design (Barry, 2022)

IMPLICATIONS

Companies would need to incorporate holistic workplace strategy programs centred on real societal and communal needs. Companies that prioritize employee well-being and align with values related to social responsibility and environmental sustainability would be more likely to attract and retain top talent. Job seekers will look beyond financial compensation and traditional perks, seeking workplaces that offer a supportive and purpose-driven culture. Rather than viewing flexible work arrangements as a last resort for accommodating personal priorities, employers would need to recognize the benefits of allowing employees to time-shift work based on their individual preferences and needs.

Return-to-Office Movement

Economic

from: “Flexible Remote-friendly Work”
to: “Forced In-office Work”

Companies are demanding employees spend more days in the office, yet they’re also reducing their office space. A recent study showed that despite strong direct correlations to employee attrition. Some argue this departure from remote work — and a forcing of back-to-office policies — is due to a suffering commercial real estate industry.

SIGNALS

- Even Zoom is telling its workers to return to the office (Santoreneos, 2023)
- Companies are looking for more efficient ways to support space planning amid lower space utilization (CBRE, 2023)
- Global organizations are pushing “return to office” because of over-investment in commercial real estate.
- 88% of companies now mandate that employees work a certain number of days in the office, up from 69% a year ago. Yet 75% plan to reduce office square footage next year, compared to 46% in 2022 (Mollman, 2023)
- In the U.S., approximately 4 million employees have been quitting their jobs since April 2021, with many claiming workplace inflexibility as a key factor (Barry, 2022)
- Salesforce promised its employees the company would donate \$10 to charity for every day they visited the office in person (Weeks, 2023)

IMPLICATIONS

Although companies are adopting increasingly efficient real estate portfolio and space planning measures, hybrid workplace models, combined with underutilized office space, have created an imbalance that gives tenants bargaining leverage, leaving building owners and operators grappling with a need to improve their spaces, said CBRE (Burns, 2024).

AI is Here to Stay

Technology

from: “Most Dangerous Tool for Humanity”
to: “A Helpful Tool for Humanity”

Whether for good or bad, AI will change our world. From the launch of ChatGPT to the development of productivity tools such as Microsoft Co-Pilot, AI has been stirring up a range of emotions. Mustafa Suleyman, co-founder of Google DeepMind warned of the risks of AI and demanded a “containment plan” (Shariatmadari, 2023). On the other hand, there are many cases of Generative AI creating breakthroughs in science including designing new proteins (Nahas, 2023), helping to improve mental health services, potentially detecting and curing cancer, and more. Perhaps AI could enable humanity to realize its full potential (Leberecht, 2023).

From the primary and secondary research, the advancements of AI present both a dream and a nightmare. A dream where AI could significantly enhance our productivity and creativity to the extent that humans can efficiently complete work. The hope is that it will allow humanity to reach its full potential. The nightmare is the present and future harm AI advancements bring. It is estimated that AI will eliminate almost 300 million jobs worldwide, with 18% of work automated (Skandul, 2023).

In a recent article, Tim Leberecht summarizes the common perspectives that emerged in the interviews: the defeatist (AI is the end of humankind), the alarmist (‘let’s please hit pause!’), the reasonably concerned (weighing benefits and pitfalls, asking for “alignment with human values”), the “like any technology, AI is neutral sui generis and can be used for good or bad” agnostic, and the materialist engineer who demystifies AI as just an autocompletion tool (Leberecht, 2023).

SIGNALS

- A March Goldman Sachs report found over 300 million jobs around the world could be disrupted by AI (Skandul, 2023)
- As Rest of World, a global nonprofit publication covering the impact of technology, reports, and image-generating AI is already taking over the jobs of China-based video game artists and illustrators. Leo Li, a gaming industry recruiter in Hangzhou, pointed out that the number of illustrator jobs plunged by about 70% in 2022 — not only because of regulatory pressures and a slowing economy but also the AI boom. (Zhou, 2023)

IMPLICATIONS

Advances in AI offer both solutions and risks for workplaces. For example, AI productivity tools such as Microsoft Co-Pilot can offer solutions to caregiving responsibilities. However, to keep up with the technology changes, leaders would need to implement learning and development programs for employees to keep up-to-date with new software.

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)

CLA is a valuable tool for investigating a complex inquiry space, particularly in the realm of strategic foresight. It consists of four levels, ranging from the litany (surface-level events and trends) at the top to the deep myth (metaphors) at the bottom, with structures and systems (root causes) and worldview and values (paradigms) in between. By researching trends, and the field, each level of analysis is informed, incorporating a range of knowledge levels (Jones & Val Ael, 2021).

Synthesizing the data from the background research and interviews, along with the trends that were emerging in the horizon scanning exercise, a current causal layered analysis (CLA) was conducted to uncover the trends, underlying causes, and values contributing to deep myths on our ways of working.

LITANY (EVENTS AND TRENDS)

The day-to-day occurrence, and the most commonly accepted headlines of the way things should be (Inayatullah, 2008).

- The technology sector is leading in flexible space adoption.
- Advances in technology are going to impact our ways of working, with generative AI collaboration and productivity tools on the rise.
- Changing workplace demographics are creating shifts in preferences in the workplace. For example, Younger generations prefer amenity-rich spaces, while older workers prefer corporate environments.
- Employers are adopting hybrid workspace models and activity-based workplace design in the hopes of improving collaboration and productivity levels.
- Employers are requesting their employees to return to working in-person in their offices.
- There are new emerging policies within workplace strategy at large firms. This includes instituting a four-day workweek.
- Employer expectations and employee motivations have a disconnect. Businesses are optimizing their portfolio for efficiency and flexibility.
- There is a widespread desire for employees to spend less time commuting. This will have significant implications for occupier and investor decisions regarding location.

STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS (UNDERLYING CAUSES)

- Policies are being refined to set intention, provide clarity, and allow predictability.
- Gen Z and Millennials value building relationships and expanding their knowledge base.
- Hybrid or remote workers report greater personal and team productivity, work-life balance, and job satisfaction. Regardless of the frequency of office attendance, hybrid workers focus more on the quality of the environment.
- Rising childcare costs are climbing at twice the rate of inflation.
- Rapidly evolving climate crisis.
- Growing demand for flexible leasing arrangements to accommodate various space planning scenarios.
- Cost is becoming an increased concern among businesses. Overall, corporate office space generally remains underutilized, although smaller companies report higher attendance. Companies anticipate further reductions of their office footprints to trim unoccupied space.
- Understanding employee preferences before shifting to fully remote status is important.
- The shifting balance of power in the workplace remains in employees' favor despite slowing economic growth. A majority of employers believe that slowing economic growth reduces employees' likelihood to quit. Pay, well-being, and flexibility prolong workplace tensions, with more than a third of employees likely to quit.
- Today's office must offer employees more than what they can get at home in terms of technology, culture, collaboration, socialization, mentorship, training, onboarding, and team-building.
- Lagging productivity is leading employers to bring people back to the office. CBRE's Q3 findings indicate that most companies now require some in-office work, and attendance policy may influence turnover rates and time to hire.
- Functionality and technology don't necessarily make collaboration "better" – human problem.

WORLDVIEWS AND VALUES (PARADIGMS)

This is the big picture, the paradigm that defines the problem and informs how we understand it (Inayatullah, 2008).

- Since the onset of the pandemic, awareness of the benefits of work-life balance and flexibility has grown substantially.
- Research finds that being able to choose work locations, as long as people gather occasionally, leads to productivity boosts.
- Younger generations value lifelong learning – more opportunities to upgrade skillsets. Learning, development and career progression are far more important for Gen Z and millennials, and almost certainly a driver for them to retain some presence in the office.
- Offering flexibility provides an opportunity to build trust – a driver of employee engagement.
- The future of work isn't just about where people work, but how.
- Sustainability and eco-friendly design are popular, with nature-infused workspaces.
- Efficient use of floor space is vital to ensure productivity, efficiency and overall happiness at work. Employees need to be strategic and thoughtful about what gets people out of their seats during the day and have a circulation of people where people will bump into each other.

DEEP MYTHS

This is the deepest level of causes that are driving the issue. These causes are firmly rooted and believed, and often unconscious (Inayatullah, 2008).

Myth 1: Offering flexibility does not contribute to trust or employee engagement.

Myth 2: Generational differences in values and preferences do not impact workplace dynamics.

Myth 3: Advances in technology and AI do not impact work habits and collaboration.

Myth 4: Cost is not a concern, and corporate office spaces are fully utilized.

Myth 5: Economic factors do not influence employees' likelihood to quit.

Myth 6: Employer expectations and employee motivations are perfectly aligned.



LITANY (EVENTS AND TRENDS)

The technology sector is driving the adoption of flexible workspaces, influenced by advances like generative AI and productivity tools. Changing demographics shape workplace preferences; younger generations favor amenity-rich spaces, while older workers prefer traditional offices. Employers embrace hybrid models and activity-based design, yet face disconnects in expectations. Policies like the four-day workweek emerge amidst desires to reduce commuting.

STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS (UNDERLYING CAUSES)

Policies are evolving to provide clarity and predictability, reflecting the values of Gen Z and Millennials who prioritize relationships and knowledge. Hybrid work boosts productivity and satisfaction, but rising childcare costs and climate concerns persist. Flexibility in leasing accommodates diverse planning needs, though cost remains a concern. Office redesigns aim to meet employee expectations for technology, culture, and collaboration, but human dynamics remain crucial for effective teamwork.

DEEP MYTHS

Since the pandemic, awareness of work-life balance and flexibility benefits has surged. Research shows productivity rises when people can choose work locations but gather occasionally. Gen Z and millennials prioritize lifelong learning and career progression, favoring flexible work. Trust-building via flexibility enhances engagement. The future emphasizes not just where but how people work, with sustainability and efficient space use key.

Foresight Scenarios

2x2 Matrix and Dator's Four Futures

To gain a clearer picture of what the future of workplaces in Canada might look like, the 2x2 foresight method was combined with Dator's Four Futures to develop four unique possible future scenarios in the year 2034. Using an axis of low-to-high flexibility and organizational culture, the trends and interview feedback were mapped in the quadrants. The Dator's Four Futures categories: discipline, transformation, growth, and collapse are overlaid on the quadrants to help define and differentiate the world. Combining the understanding of the future of work established in the research conducted with the trends and interview data, fictional but plausible descriptions summarize the distinguishing features of that possible future scenario. Aligning with the original research question, the focus was on what the future of workplaces in Canada might look like in 2033.

Figure 7: 2x2 Matrix Legend

Driver of Change Trends

1. Employee burnout leading to 'quiet quitting' and 'loud quitting'
2. Shift in workplace demographics calls for new wants and needs
3. Four-day work week
4. Emphasis on employee experience and well-being
5. Eldercare and rising childcare costs
6. Optimization of portfolios and Relocation to better-quality space
7. Reduction of office footprints
8. Open-office is dead

Emerging Trends

9. Meaningful Workplace Transformation
10. Cultivating Workplace Ecosystems
11. Uninterrupted Focus Time
12. Choosing Culture over Collaboration
13. The End of Perfectionism
14. AI is Here to Stay
15. Return-to-Office Movement

Additional Existing Trends

16. Employees are switching jobs more often than before.
17. Recognition that functionality and technology alone do not guarantee better collaboration
18. From Purell to Biophilia

Interview Feedback About the Future

19. Organizations need to make a shift from traditional, fear-based work models to a more inclusive and human-centred work culture.
20. If employers or leaders want employees to work in person, they would have to make it worth the commute.
21. Increased awareness of neurodivergence needs to be addressed in workplaces.
22. Leaders would need to understand and respect the diverse needs and working styles of team members.
23. Challenges faced by leaders when navigating the changing dynamics of work
24. Leaders need to be intentional in supporting their teams and building trust.
25. Technological advancements are temporary and continuously evolve
26. Invisible labor that is happening contributes to caregivers' mental fatigue, but with advanced technologies, they can overcome the barrier.
27. Sense of resistance from workers as they return to the office due to changes in flexibility.
28. Employees prefer only going to the office if there is a specific purpose that requires the team to be together.

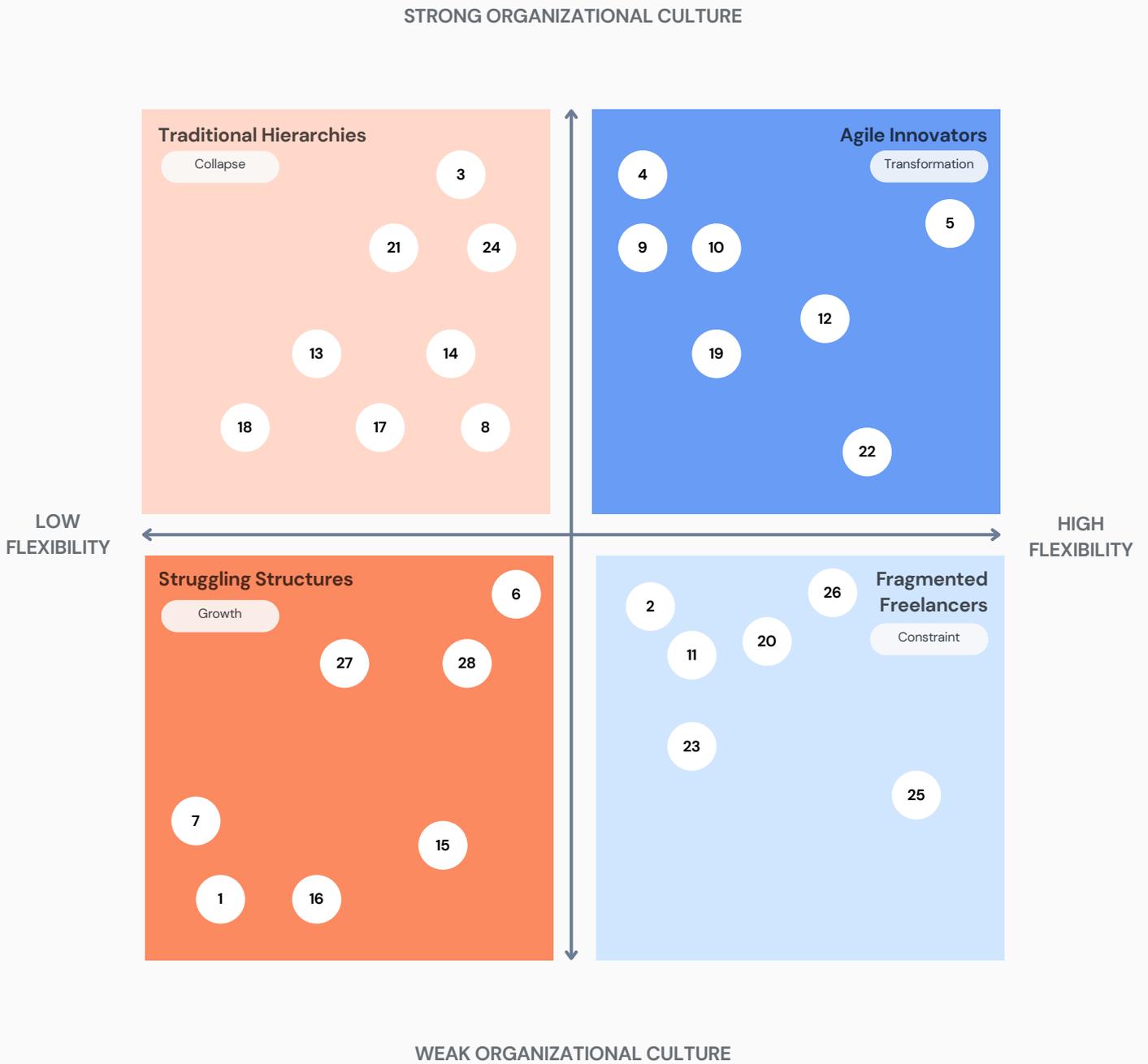
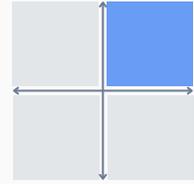


Figure 10: 2x2 Matrix

Agile Innovators

Transformation



This future scenario represents a future where workplaces prioritize both flexibility and a strong organizational culture. Companies in this category embrace agile work practices, such as remote work options, flexible hours, and outcome-based performance evaluations. They foster a culture of trust, collaboration, and innovation, empowering employees to experiment, take risks, and adapt quickly to change. These organizations are well-positioned to thrive in dynamic and uncertain environments, leveraging their flexible work arrangements and strong culture to drive creativity, productivity, and employee engagement. This aligns with Dator's "Transformation" archetype, where societies undergo significant shifts in values, behaviours, and institutions to adapt to changing circumstances and opportunities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS

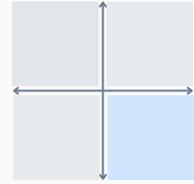
Leaders would need to prioritize flexibility in work practices and allow employees to switch between different working styles. This would require a lot of trust and active communication to build trust with their employees.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYEES

Employees would embrace a growth mindset, continuously learning and adapting to new challenges and opportunities. Collaboration and teamwork are essential, so employees would need to actively participate in knowledge sharing and contribute to a culture of innovation.

Fragmented Freelancers

Constraint



Here, workplace flexibility is high, but organizational culture is lacking. Employees have the freedom to choose when, where, and how they work, often opting for freelance or gig economy arrangements. However, organizations struggle to establish a cohesive culture and a sense of belonging among employees, leading to fragmented and transient workforces. While flexibility may attract talent in the short term, the absence of a strong organizational culture can result in challenges related to communication, collaboration, and employee retention. This scenario can be associated with Dator's "Constraint" archetype, where societies face limitations and challenges due to resource constraints or social, political, or environmental factors.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS

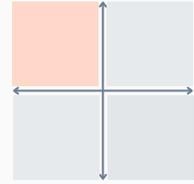
Leaders must find ways to foster a sense of belonging and community amongst their teams. They would need to prioritize building relationships to help overcome fragmentation within their teams. Implementation of flexible work policies would be required for remote collaboration.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYEES

Employees would have the opportunity to attend to other priorities in their lives apart from their work. They would be able to manage their work-life balance. This would require setting boundaries to maintain well-being and avoid burnout.

Traditional Hierarchies

Collapse



In this future scenario, workplace flexibility is low, but organizational culture remains strong. Canadian companies adhere to traditional organizational structures and employment models, with fixed working hours, rigid hierarchies, and limited flexibility for employees. While these organizations may have a well-defined culture and sense of identity, they risk falling behind in a rapidly changing landscape where flexibility and agility are increasingly valued. Employees may feel constrained by outdated policies and practices, impacting morale, creativity, and retention. This quadrant can be linked to Dator's "Collapse" archetype, where societies experience breakdowns in established systems and institutions due to internal or external pressures.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS

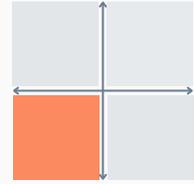
Leaders need to balance the preservation of organizational culture with the need for flexibility and adaptability. Implementing gradual changes and providing training and support for employees can help ease the transition to more flexible work practices. Embracing technology and digital tools can improve efficiency and collaboration within traditional organizational structures.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYEES

Employees may need to adjust to new ways of working while navigating established hierarchies and processes. Embracing change and demonstrating flexibility can enhance career prospects and job satisfaction within traditional organizations. Seeking opportunities for professional development and skill-building can help employees adapt to evolving job roles and responsibilities.

Struggling Structures

Growth



This is a future where both workplace flexibility and organizational culture are low. Canadian workplaces would struggle to adapt to changing market demands and employee expectations, resulting in stagnant cultures and inflexible work environments. These organizations may face challenges related to employee dissatisfaction, turnover, and productivity as workers seek more flexible and fulfilling opportunities elsewhere. Without a strong culture to support them, these companies may find it difficult to attract and retain top talent, leading to further organizational decline. This scenario aligns with Dator's "Growth" archetype, where societies experience continuous expansion and development without significant disruptions or transformations. This scenario is the closest to what we are experiencing in our world today.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS

Leaders must address underlying issues within the organization, such as poor communication and inflexible work practices. Implementing strategies for cultural transformation and organizational change management is essential for overcoming stagnation and fostering growth. Prioritizing employee well-being and engagement can help rebuild trust and morale within the organization.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYEES

Employees may face uncertainty and instability within struggling organizations, and they would need a sense of resilience and adaptability to navigate the changes. Employees would seek opportunities for professional growth and development outside of the organization to reduce the impact of organizational decline. Building strong networks and support systems can provide a sense of stability and security during times of change.

SUMMARY

The future scenarios are a combination of the trends and the opinions gathered throughout the research. The point of this activity was to assess both the positive and negative impacts of the scenarios in the future and what are the implications for both employees and leaders. It also highlighted the most desirable future for both employees and leaders would be the Agile Innovators scenario (the Transformative scenario) as a future that prioritizes both flexibility and a strong organizational culture.

In summary, in the 'Agile Innovators' future, employees are proactive collaborators and have more freedom to work on their basis, while leaders foster a culture of trust and openness that allows for that. In 'Fragmented Freelancers', employees would maintain autonomy but seek community, facilitated and built by leaders. The 'Traditional Hierarchies' future would demand adherence and structure from employees, while leaders provide direction and guidance. In 'Struggling Structures', employee resilience is key, supported by transparent leadership. Examining the possible implications of these scenarios pointed out the importance of thoughtful leadership in navigating change and fostering an environment that empowers and supports employees in each scenario.

Reflections and Recommendations

Reflections

Gone are the days when we held the same nine-to-five job in the office for decades. The role of work in our lives is changing. Without a doubt, remote and hybrid work has given us a sense of flexibility in our lives. We have become more flexible in attending to other priorities in our lives apart from work. We have felt a strong reconnection to our homes and each other. On the other hand, capitalism has created a culture of productivity and many businesses are adopting return-to-work programs to bring more employees back into the office. What if we stopped fighting this dynamic and clashing wants and needs between businesses and employees, and just accepted it? At this very moment, we are at an inflection point where our society offers us freedom of choice with the future of work.

This research project initially aimed to understand how our workspaces have evolved, and how workplace design influences human behaviour and human connection. After listening to thoughts and opinions through interviews and research, it is evident that there are multiple layers to the changes happening in our workplaces in Canada that are beyond workplace design. This research highlighted how our relationships with work and our well-being have changed over time, but also how our spaces have an impact on our relationships with work. The power dynamics in organizations are being exposed and altered. Leaders are being forced to reevaluate dated models and assumptions. Does work require us to be present in a physical office space? Are the optimal work timings still five days long from nine to five? As we move through the unknowns, organizations are challenged to adapt to these changes. To face these challenges, leaders must rethink our traditional norms of working, from culture to day-to-day operations.

Should we design for today or tomorrow? There are two parts involved in the shift in our workplaces: the need for leadership support to drive culture at work, and the importance of rethinking our design process for building office spaces. To create a workplace design that fosters human connection and encourages people to collaborate, leaders need to gain a deeper understanding of creating a culture and sense of community that fosters collaboration. As we navigate the changes happening in our workplaces, leaders need to play an important role in facilitating change and understanding employees' wants and needs. Let's remember to keep our minds open. At the end of the day, the workplace is a place that creates a sense of belonging and purpose, a place where individuals can be who they are without the need to adjust.

“Work is the only place where we still meet strangers. We cannot pick who we spend our time with, we have to get along with those people. So, inevitably, it’s also a place of belonging where we integrate into society, and where we shape our identities. *It’s where we create meaning*”

- *Tim Leberecht (2024)*

How reasonable is it to expect our workplaces to shoulder a responsibility to create a place of belonging at work? What does it take to build a work environment that creates meaning—and makes work feel like play? This research showed that it is time for us to concentrate on the big picture of how and why we show up to work. Underneath all the varying wants and needs of our workplaces, from a comfortable 20-minute commute to childcare and elder care, we require a sense of community and purpose grounded on shared values. If our connections and relationships between ourselves are strengthened, we will be better prepared for the shifts occurring in our workplaces.

COVID-19 changed our workplaces forever and the office as we knew it before the pandemic is dead. We have proven that we can be productive from anywhere, and there was a shift where the worker had the choice of where and when to do work at their own convenience. This dynamic will be ever-evolving as technology advances and how we learn, work, socialize, and collaborate changes. As we rethink the ways we design our workplace, it is important to rethink our traditional ways of designing offices. It is important to keep the voice of our users at the centre of our design process. Future workplaces prioritize user feedback, with flexible designs allowing for constant adaptation. One of the deep problems that employees have with working is ‘deep focus work’. On the other hand, collaboration remains a key reason for office use, necessitating team-centric designs.

How do we extend the adjustments made for one person to support the whole team and their way of working? The space becomes the space of belonging and ownership for a team, where they can choose how they use that space based on the activities happening. With this system where we have people working in different arrangements (virtually and in-person), is there a way to support a team and re-harmonize a team to help them be better at the work they do? While people don’t have to come to the office, they can come to the office if they want to. However, they will be more inclined to come into the office for that feeling of connectedness to their team, company, and community.

Recommendations:

Creating Thoughtful Togetherness at Work

Although it is reasonable for businesses to focus efforts on optimizing real estate portfolios and return-to-work programs to encourage employee engagement and productivity, it would be short-sighted to ignore the human element and our relationship to work in the equation – particularly the influence leaders have to create a positive work environment. As described in the future scenarios, a future that prioritizes both flexibility and a strong organizational culture offers an opportunity for a more collaborative and productive work environment where employees are motivated and satisfied with their jobs.

In order for leaders to foster a culture of trust and openness that allows for that type of future, we need to start asking the right questions to create meaningful conversations that form a sense of trust, respect, and a sense of belonging in a team. This future scenario poses questions: are there alternative ways to check in with our colleagues and employees? What does “productivity” look like? What does “community” mean to us? What does “culture” mean to us? How can we incorporate play to create meaningful conversations that go beyond the water-cooler talks?

Creating spaces that have creative sparks and facilitate casual collisions is essential. Spaces that prioritize employee well-being lead to increased productivity and ultimately a company’s success. Designing for long-term flexibility ensures sustainability so that our office buildings can still be vibrant in the future. Elements such as high ceilings and adaptable furniture cater to individual and collective needs. Employees want to replicate their home-work environments in their office spaces in a friction-free manner, including sound, climate, lighting, and scent. Companies would need to provide services to reduce friction at the office. Services such as free transportation, free childcare and eldercare will help people be the most productive.

This report will hopefully provide you and your organization with inspiration to rethink our current ways of working to develop a sustainable system that supports our evolving ways of working for decades. To that end, below are a few ideas and questions that could ignite further discussion to assist us as we navigate the shifts we are experiencing.

The two-fold approach involves: 1) generating meaningful conversations between leaders and employees, and 2) applying a holistic design process for building workspaces, one that embraces inclusivity and adaptability to future-proof workspaces.

Thoughtful Leadership

In our evolving workspaces, thoughtful leadership is indispensable. Leaders at all levels should prioritize creating a work environment that values meaningful conversations, fosters strong connections among team members, and promotes empathy and understanding.

In her article on LinkedIn, Carina Cortese expands on the importance of creating a work environment that fosters strong bonds and understanding among team members, and how leaders need to embed rituals that enhance workplace connection. Carina Cortese is a partner at SYPartners, which is a multinational design consultancy.

“Culture requires strong bonds between people, and proximity doesn’t automatically equate to connection”.

- *Carina Cortese (2023)*

Cortese explains that “what we may actually be afraid of is the stretching and breaking of social bonds as our communities become more distributed. This is exacerbated by a renewed cultural focus on the role of work in our lives—do we live to work, finding personal purpose in our careers? Or do we work to live, collecting a paycheck that enables us to fulfill our purpose elsewhere?” (Cortese, 2023). Cortese outlines three rituals to enhance workplace connection, emphasizing their importance regardless of the work setting. She emphasizes the intentional efforts to cultivate meaningful connections within teams, irrespective of the work setting—be it in-person, hybrid, or remote. Cortese presents three ‘rituals’ to achieve this goal. Firstly, the importance of regularly nurturing small yet meaningful interactions among team members is highlighted. Acknowledging and appreciating each other’s contributions is particularly emphasized for team leaders, as it enhances both satisfaction and performance. Secondly, Cortese emphasizes the value of organizing occasional, impactful moments of connection. These events, crucial especially in remote or hybrid setups, serve to strengthen team bonds and social capital. Lastly, Cortese suggests the importance of periodically assessing the level of connection within the team and addressing any gaps or areas for improvement. She stresses the need for leaders to prioritize understanding and meeting the diverse needs of team members to foster an inclusive and supportive work environment.

In this way, leaders at organizations can cultivate a culture of trust, collaboration, and innovation that supports long-term adaptability. Below are recommendations that leaders at each level of an organization could use to help teams adapt and thrive in the era of change in our workspaces:

EXECUTIVE LEADERS

Embrace Flexibility

Recognize and embrace the evolving nature of work, acknowledging the shift towards remote and hybrid work models. Encourage flexibility in work arrangements to accommodate employees' diverse needs and priorities beyond traditional nine-to-five office hours.

Prioritize Human Connection

Recognize the importance of human connection in the workplace and prioritize initiatives that foster collaboration, community, and belonging. Create opportunities for employees to connect with colleagues, build relationships, and cultivate a sense of shared purpose and identity. Allocate resources to reinvent team-building activities that foster unity and lasting relationships among diverse teams.

Support Work-Life Integration

Facilitate a work environment that allows employees to seamlessly integrate work with other aspects of their lives, such as caregiving responsibilities and personal pursuits. Provide resources and support for employees to balance their professional and personal commitments effectively.

MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

Facilitate Meaningful Conversations with Purpose

Create opportunities for team members to engage in discussions that encourage new perspectives and innovative ideas. Organize team-building events that emphasize collaboration and relationship-building beyond transactional interactions. We would need to go beyond delve beyond surface-level topics such as "how was your weekend" conversations and dive deeper into more meaningful conversations that foster new perspectives and innovative ideas.

Lead with Empathy

Demonstrate empathy in leadership style and encourage team members to prioritize understanding and compassion in their interactions. Embrace emotional intelligence, promoting compassion and understanding from other perspectives and experiences, and prioritizing empathy in all interactions.

Providing Opportunities to Learn New Skills and Tools

With the rapid advances in technology and AI, there is a need to constantly have individuals on teams to keep up to date with the changes in technology. Middle managers could take measures to reassure employees who are AI-anxious. While some people are excited about its possibilities, many are anxious. For those who fear AI, turning that fear into curiosity requires creating the space to address their concerns and helping them envision use cases for AI and new technology in their daily workday.

FRONTLINE LEADERS

Encourage Open Dialogue

Foster a culture of trust and openness by initiating conversations that encourage team members to share their thoughts and ideas freely. Reinvent team building to emphasize unity amidst diversity, fostering lasting relationships that are beyond transactional interactions.

Facilitate Team Bonding

Organize informal gatherings or activities that allow team members to connect on a personal level and build stronger relationships.

Lead by Example

Demonstrate empathy and emotional intelligence in everyday interactions, setting a positive example for team members to follow.

Thoughtful Togetherness Card Game

"Thoughtful Togetherness" is a card game designed to empower leaders in fostering deeper connections and meaningful conversations within their teams. Divided into three categories – connection, alignment, and appreciation – the game prompts participants to engage in discussions that transcend superficial interactions commonly found at the water cooler.

The "Connection" cards delve into personal stories, values, and experiences, allowing team members to share insights into their lives beyond work. By exploring common interests, hobbies, and aspirations, these cards facilitate the building of genuine relationships and foster a sense of camaraderie among team members. The "Alignment" cards focus on team goals, vision, and strategy, encouraging participants to discuss their roles and contributions within the larger context of the organization. Through collaborative exploration of objectives, challenges, and opportunities, these cards promote alignment, clarity, and synergy within the team. The "Appreciation" cards celebrate achievements, strengths, and contributions, providing a platform for team members to express gratitude and recognition towards one another. By highlighting accomplishments and acknowledging efforts, these cards cultivate a culture of appreciation, support, and encouragement within the team.

Overall, "Thoughtful Togetherness" offers a structured yet flexible framework for leaders to facilitate meaningful conversations that deepen connections, foster alignment, and promote appreciation within their teams. By engaging in these intentional dialogues, teams can cultivate a positive and inclusive work environment where each member feels valued, supported, and motivated to succeed.

Thoughtful Togetherness Card Game

MAIN THEMES

Connection

Connection is like a bridge, spanning the distance between two separate worlds, creating a pathway for understanding and intimacy.

Alignment

Our values are like stars in the sky, guiding us on our journey through life. When they are aligned, we feel a sense of purpose and direction. When they are out of alignment, we feel lost and confused.

Appreciation

Appreciation is like a flower—it needs to be nurtured and cultivated in order to grow and thrive.

INSTRUCTIONS

Tired of discussing the weather and your weekends? Create opportunities for more meaningful conversations that move beyond the water-cooler talks with this playful card game. What will you discover?

Take turns on reading and answering the questions. Players also get a pass card if any question feels awkward. Each player answers honestly. Enjoy the journey of discovery and meaningful conversations.



Connection

PLAYFUL & EASY

1. What's your favorite sandwich?
2. What three adjectives best sum up who you are?
3. What's your favourite way to spend a Sunday?
4. I'm grateful for....
5. If you were an athlete, what would you choose as your walkout song?

REFLECTIVE

1. What's the last thing you read or watched that moved you?
2. What's the biggest lesson you've learned in the last year?
3. What's the most beautiful place you've ever been?
4. What's your hidden superpower?
5. Something I changed my mind about is.....

DEEP

1. What do you need from each other today?
2. In what context do you feel most at home?
3. What's an idea you used to believe in, but have now given up on?
4. What's the best advice you've ever heard?
5. I feel most connected to others when...



Alignment

PLAYFUL & EASY

- 1.If our team was a band, what would our name be?
- 2.What song describes your day today?
- 3.Which fictional universe would you like to visit?
- 4.I'm curious about...
- 5.What's your hidden talent?

REFLECTIVE

- 1.What's the biggest challenge in your life right now?
- 2.How can we support each other better?
- 3.What's your remote office must-have?
- 4.What are you excited about in your life right now?
- 5.What should we do more of?

DEEP

- 1.What aspect of our ways of working excites you the most right now?
- 2.How can we celebrate our progress?
- 3.What strengths do we bring to the table?
- 4.What barriers are holding us back?
- 5.What changes can we make that could lead to breakthroughs on our team?



Appreciation

PLAYFUL & EASY

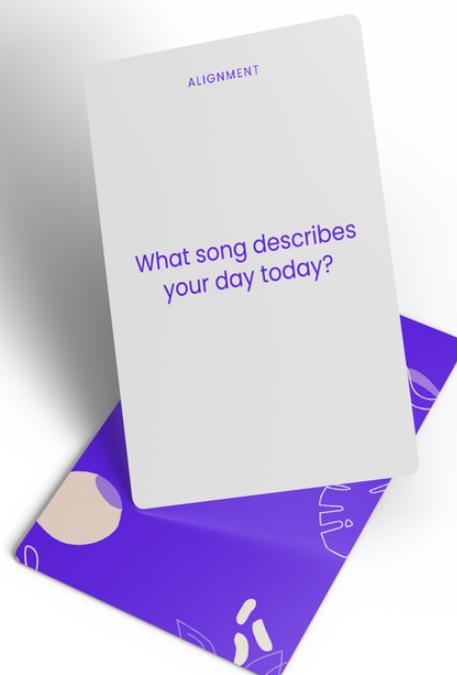
- 1.If you could time travel, where would you go?
- 2.What's something you've always wanted to do but haven't done yet? Why not?
- 3.What energizes you?
- 4.What's the best thing that happened to you lately?
- 5.Who in life has inspired you the most?

REFLECTIVE

- 1.If you could change one thing about our workspace, what would it be?
- 2.I'm proud of...
- 3.What's a small thing that made a big difference in your day?
- 4.What's your favorite way to relax?
- 5.If you could choose any place to work from, what would it be?

DEEP

- 1.What did you learn from a past failure?
- 2.How did someone's support impact your day?
- 3.How can we infuse more fun into our work while staying focused?
- 4.What's one thing we can experiment with today to improve our collaboration?
- 5.What's one way we can celebrate our progress and strengths as a team?



How to Use “Thoughtful Togetherness”?

“Thoughtful Togetherness” is a tool designed to help leaders at all levels of an organization to facilitate meaningful conversations within their teams. By incorporating the game into their leadership practices, leaders can nurture a culture of connection, alignment, and appreciation, ultimately driving team performance and organizational success. Here is how leaders at different levels can use this game:

EXECUTIVE LEADERS

Executives can use “Thoughtful Togetherness” to set the tone for open communication and collaboration within the organization. They can incorporate the game into team meetings or leadership retreats to foster a culture of connection, alignment, and appreciation from the top down. By actively participating in the game themselves, executives demonstrate their commitment to creating a positive and inclusive work environment.

MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

Middle managers play a critical role in translating the organization's vision into actionable plans for their teams. They can use the game during team meetings or one-on-one check-ins to facilitate discussions around team objectives, individual roles, and achievements. By engaging team members in conversations about alignment and appreciation, middle managers strengthen team cohesion and morale. Through these discussions, leaders can uncover team members' preferences for recognition and support. Some team members may prefer public recognition and celebration, while others may value personalized gestures of appreciation. This insight can inform workspace designs that incorporate spaces for team celebrations, recognition boards, or personalized appreciation initiatives.

FRONTLINE LEADERS

Frontline leaders are closest to the day-to-day operations and have direct influence on team dynamics and morale. They can use the game during team huddles, shift briefings, or informal gatherings to spark conversations about personal connections, shared goals, and recognition of contributions. By creating opportunities for meaningful dialogue, frontline leaders foster a sense of belonging and empowerment among team members.

Applying “Thoughtful Togetherness” Game to Workspace Design

“Thoughtful Togetherness” not only fosters meaningful conversations but also provides valuable insights into team members' preferences for working styles. It can inform flexible workspace designs in multiple ways. Through these conversations, leaders can gain insights into how team members prefer to work—whether they thrive in collaborative environments, prefer quiet spaces for focused work, or value flexibility in their work arrangements. This information can inform workspace designs that cater to diverse working styles, such as providing open collaboration areas, private work booths, or flexible seating options. By discussing how team members perceive their roles and contributions within the organization, leaders can identify common preferences for work structures, processes, and environments. By aligning workspace designs with team preferences, leaders can create environments that enhance productivity, collaboration, and well-being, ultimately driving team performance and satisfaction.



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