

5 Trends

That Will Shape
Employee – Employer
Relationships in the

2020s

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Contemplating the end of one decade and the beginning of another, it feels like the 2010s passed in a flash. And while it feels like time flew by, so much occurred that has fundamentally changed our world today and its prospects for the future.

Brexit. The Arab Spring. Hong Kong. The Tea Party. Wikileaks. Bitcoin. The Panama Papers. The arrival of Zika. The cure for hepatitis C. The preponderance of the smart phone. The disappearance of the landline. #BlackLivesMatter. #MeToo.

Thinking back a decade, some of these changes – like the continued ascendance of social media and mobile devices – were widely anticipated. Others, like the rise of nationalism and global populist movements, have taken us more by surprise. Looking forward now, it begs the question... what's next?

While there are endless ways to analyze what's to come over the next decade (and I'm sure many analyses are coming), I want to offer five emerging trends that I believe will be critical for companies to address to execute their strategies and transform their businesses in the 2020s and beyond.

While this list is by no means exhaustive, I hope it serves as a useful thought starter as you consider the most important work you and your organizations will do over the coming decade.

1. Money Isn't Everything

What's the trend? *Employees are looking for meaning and fulfillment at work, and will sacrifice money to find it.*

What's the insight? *We need to take what we know about the neuroscience of meaning and fulfillment and intentionally apply those insights to our employee experience.*

The first trend that I expect will reshape the employee-employer relationship of the next decade is one that's already reshaping it today. That is employees' changing motivations as it relates to what they seek from their jobs and changing expectations of the companies they work for. More and more, we see that when it comes to attracting, retaining and developing talent, money isn't everything.

New data seems to come forward each passing month further substantiating this trend's traction and momentum. For instance, according to an [article](#) published in Harvard Business Review, nine out of 10 employees are willing to take less money to do work that possesses greater meaning.

So how does this change the way we lead large organizations going forward? In my view, over this next decade, we need to borrow insights and lessons from neuroscience to expand our thinking about meaning at work from corporate purpose to personal fulfillment.

When you look at what we know about the brain, fulfillment comes from many sources (which includes, but extends far beyond corporate purpose or social impact). For instance, over the course of his career, the neuroscientist Jaan Panksepp did pioneering work in identifying seven core emotions that are, "[built into the nervous system at a fundamental level.](#)" These are: seeking, anger, fear, panic-grief, maternal care, pleasure/lust and play. We inherit these systems at birth and they are guides to our survival. The first – seeking – has important implications for how we lead at work.

On a very fundamental level, humans are wired to search and discover. Whether we're conducting a basic Google search or researching a complex problem, when our "seeking system" is engaged, dopamine is continually released. Science shows we are actually as happy to be in the process of

discovery as we are to find what we're looking for. According to Panskepp's research, when we are in an emotional state of seeking, the feeling that presents itself is enthusiasm. It's safe to say, enthusiasm is something we'd all like to elicit more from our employees.

To not just attract and retain talent, but to get the best out of people, we have got to take advantage of these types of scientific insights. Creating space to intentionally and thoughtfully engage individuals' seeking systems within their employee experience will create meaning and fulfillment in ways that financial benefits alone can't. And this is just one of a litany of lessons from neuroscience that we can apply to align our culture, operations and leadership with our basic wiring. As the limitations of money as a motivator continue to come into focus, the organizations that make the most rapid progress at aligning their employee experience to the neurological science of meaning and fulfillment will have a remarkable competitive advantage.

2. The Loneliness Epidemic

What's the trend? *Loneliness has become a very real epidemic, and it is leaving employees feeling isolated, distrustful, and alone.*

What's the insight? *Humans are social animals and we crave a sense of belonging. Companies that use their platform to facilitate social connection and create community will unleash enormous untapped potential.*

Just as our brains naturally desire to seek and explore, an older but still critical insight from neuroscience is that humans are social creatures. As Aaron Hurst, a well-known thought leader on personal and organizational purpose (who I was fortunate to interview for my Let Go & Lead podcast) puts it, "We are a social species and our brains have

evolved to encourage us to connect. When we feel a sense of true connection to someone, our brain releases a neurochemical called oxytocin that makes us feel good and bonds us to them."

Unfortunately, society has evolved in ways where people are experiencing this necessary chemical release less frequently and with less volume. As Aaron cites in his piece, a study conducted by Cigna and UCLA together found that nearly half of all Americans feel lonely some or all of the time, and according to similar research at the University of California at Berkeley, only 53% of Americans experience a meaningful social interaction of any kind each day.

Despite an explosion of technologies that supposedly serve to bring us closer together, evidence suggests we feel more and more alone.

In many ways, this pervasive sense of loneliness shouldn't seem surprising. Because internet-connected devices allow us to simulate closeness, we have less and less actual social contact. We're less likely to know our neighbors, be active in a religious community, or participate in a team sport or communal activity than we were a generation ago. We're seeing – and feeling – the effects Robert Putnam forecasted nearly two decades ago in his book, *Bowling Alone*. As he predicted then, the less institutions there are that bond us, the fewer bridges there are that unite us. Our loneliness has bred tribalism and political polarization, both of which are fraying the seams of society.

Companies possess an amazing platform to step into this void and create community. In doing so, they can evolve their employee value propositions in an important way.

The core of what companies can provide employees is undergoing significant change. While for much of the 20th century companies offered the prospect

of lifetime employment and financial security, these don't agree with the nature of the modern economy. The days of joining a company after high school or college, climbing the ladder for 40 years and retiring with a pension and gold watch are, for better or worse, vestiges of a bygone era. We need to think more broadly about the value we can offer to employees' lives, including providing a forum for social connection.

I read an article in Harvard Business Review recently that struck me as critically important. It summarizes research done by A.T. Kearney and is titled, "[Making Joy a Priority at Work](#)". In their study, researchers find that 90 percent of employees expect to feel joy at work, but only 37 percent do. This is a gap we must attack! And one of the leading contributors to joy is feeling a strong sense of connection to a team.

[Loneliness is very literally killing us](#) and employers of all sizes can do something about it. Those who do will reap incredible advantages, but it will require dispelling the notion that corporate social life is frivolous or simply happens organically. Social connection at work can be cultivated, it just requires time, thought and intention.

3. Remote Teams On The Rise

What's the trend? *More organizations are relying on geographically dispersed teams and more employees expect or want to work from home, resulting in challenges for collaboration, innovation and strategy execution.*

What's the insight? *We need to create truly digital workplaces in which culture, leadership, strategy and technology work in harmony to create authentic connections in a remote environment.*

For many years, we've seen twin shifts that have important implications for how our companies

operate and our abilities to achieve our strategies. First, thanks to technological enablement, more teams than ever are comprised of employees operating from multiple locations. These employees often work in separate time zones, if not separate continents. Second, working from home part or all of the time is increasingly an expectation or demand of many employees, and a recruitment and cost saving tool for many companies. In fact, [40 percent more employers today offer work from home options](#) than they did five years ago, and telecommuting jobs are growing at [10 times the pace of the workforce](#). Already, nearly a quarter of employees [spend at least 80 percent of their time working from home](#). That number is almost certain to grow.

At the same time, when you ask corporate leaders today to name their top priorities, it's stunning how often they mention collaboration and agility. Given the pressure to innovate and the ceaseless pace of disruption, these cultural goals make sense.

However, this poses a challenge for many companies as two trends are pulling in opposing directions. On the one hand, we want to take advantage of diverse geographical footprints and honor employees' desire to work flexibly from home. On the other hand, with the scale and pace at which disruption is occurring, we need our teams to be more connected, collaborative and innovative than ever before. How you achieve both objectives is the question.

Today, many of these remote or virtual teams are underperforming. In a [study done by Siemens](#), researchers found that 79 percent of respondents frequently work in distributed teams, but only 44 percent found those teams to be as effective as ones who work together face-to-face. If these trends are not addressed effectively, many companies over the next decade will find the consequences of under-performing teams crippling.

In my perspective, the trouble today is that we're designing the remote employee experience – in some cases referred to as the “digital workplace” – in fragments and siloes. Culture goals are pursued, technologies are selected and leaders are developed in isolation. Things become myopic. Solutions are introduced to tackle narrow problems without respect to those problems' roots or origins. At best, they have loosely overlapping goals. At worst, they operate in outright conflict.

One of the major endeavors of the next decade will be for large corporations to harmonize all elements of the employee experience to enable remote work to operate more productively. I believe this resides in two prongs. First, elevating from our current myopia where virtual work problems are seen in functional siloes (the “HR part”, the “IT part”, the “communications part”, the “operations part”). Second, we have to resist the urge to solve every virtual work problem with technology alone. Many of the struggles of remote work today are cultural, structural or a result of unclear leadership. Yet every time these struggles are discussed, they seem to be solved with technology. When results fail to improve, we blame the technology when we ought to blame ourselves. The digital collaboration platforms most companies now utilize are tools, not silver bullets. They need to be considered in the context of the culture in which they'll exist and utilized in alignment with strategy and leadership.

4. The Automation Reckoning

What's the trend? *Emerging technologies will reshape how large segments of work are performed, resulting in significant job changes and many displacements.*

What's the insight? *Companies must take a proactive, human-centric approach to confront the realities of emerging technologies and handle*

difficult situations while respecting work's dignity.

One trend that is already moving with incredible momentum is the adoption of technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotics, block chain and quantum computing, all of which will automate large swaths of human work.

While speculation currently rules the day, it's inarguable that technologies enabling the automation of human work will be a defining topic of the decade to come. [According to McKinsey](#), 50 percent of human work activities today could currently be automated simply by adopting already-available technology. Additionally, 60 percent of occupations are comprised of activities that are at least 30 percent automatable. Needless to say, jobs are going to change. Some will experience a shift in activities. Some will result in evolved responsibilities. Others will disappear entirely. McKinsey [also predicts](#) 400 million global job displacements between 2016 and 2030.

Like with other past waves of innovation, experts believe that eventually automation will create more and better jobs than the ones they displace, there is likely to be a prolonged gap during which job losses will outpace gains. In a climate that is already increasingly populist and anti-establishment, how corporations handle this automation gap is likely to predict not only the success or failure of many corporate strategies, but also the larger tenor of our cultural and political environments.

This leaves companies with an enormous confluence of challenges to address as it relates to their relationship with their employees.

First, of course, they need to seamlessly and flawlessly introduce and implement these technologies. If the technologies are not properly introduced and adopted, their entire worth becomes diminished immediately. This will require executorial excellence.

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Second, companies will need to inspire people whose work is impacted by automation to think more broadly about the ways they can add new value. For instance, [McDonald's is on the forefront of automation](#). In their case, they will have fewer cashiers, but more staff who bring food to tables and cars and thus have an opportunity to build relationships and deliver the brand. Helping people think bigger about their role will require outstanding change leadership.

Third, companies need to invest in their employees' skillsets, developing new organizational capabilities now before the needs become desperate. We know that the nature of work is poised to experience a seismic shock. As the market for "soft skills" such as people management and technological skills such as programming grow in volume, companies [like Amazon](#) are already seeing – and acting on – the need to invest in re-skilling their employees.

Finally, and crucially important, there will be jobs lost due to automation. Many of those jobs will not be replaced in immediate fashion. The dignity, humanity and professionalism with which these displacements are handled is going to be one of the dominant business, economic and cultural stories of the coming decade. It will require courage, candor and soul-searching. There will be difficult conversations and heated emotions. The special executives who can look these issues in the face and address them head on will do enormous good for their organizations. The companies that handle job displacement with respect, honor and love will be reputational standouts and top performers of the years to come.

5. Maximizing the Gig Economy

What's the trend? *Due to platform technologies like Uber, and lean business models that rely greatly on freelancers, a growing percentage*

of large companies' workers will not actually be employees.

What's the insight? *In the absence of long-term commitments, companies must provide gig and freelance workers with opportunities to grow their capabilities, master new skills and feel a sense of larger purpose.*

Another technological advancement that has proven transformative and will have a heavy hand in shaping the next decade will be the continued growth of the "gig economy" and freelance workforce. In the last decade, we've seen an explosion of large companies who either offer a technology that connects gig workers with income opportunities (such as Uber), or who rely on a massive number of freelancers to perform core work ([like Google](#)). With the flexibility these operating and staffing models provide, this trend is almost assured to continue to grow.

In fact, while 75 million Americans are already gig or freelance workers, [40 percent of companies say they expect to make it an increasing part of their staffing plans](#).

While gig and freelancer staffing models come replete with benefits, they are prone to friction too. Organizations like Gig Workers Rising and Mobile Workers Alliance have already gained considerable strength as they represent complaints of Uber and Lyft drivers against those respective companies. The pattern of antagonism is spreading. Just recently, Instacart, which uses 130,000 gig shoppers to pick up and deliver users' groceries, received a letter signed by hundreds of deliverers seeking more equitable pay.

While gig workers and freelancers are not employees, their relationship to the companies to which they are affiliated is absolutely critical. In the mind of an Instacart customer or Uber passenger, their delivery person or driver isn't a "gig worker"... they're the face of the brand. When those gig

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workers are trapped in feelings of hostility, not only are they likely to cause brand and reputational damage, overall strategy execution becomes difficult too.

Over the next decade, we will need to think long and hard about what it means to work for a company, what defines a job and what any corporation owes to those in its network (regardless of the legal designation of their arrangement). Similarly, we must get clear on what those gig and freelance workers owe to those companies.

Just as how companies will need to learn from science to make work more fulfilling and meaningful for employees (see trend #1), they need to be thoughtful and intentional in providing greater value and a sense of fairness to gig and freelance workers. Two important ways they can do this is creating opportunities for freelance and gig workers to develop their capabilities, master new skills and continually connect them to a larger purpose.

Humans are hugely motivated by mastery, and we are wired to seek new opportunities. The quest of preparing for what's next is as important to our psyche as where we end up. We also want to feel a sense of social impact. Companies can provide all employees, including gig and freelance workers, with both of these. By building capability development and skill mastery into the freelance work experience, companies can significantly enhance the sense of partnership that exists in the absence of formal employment. Similarly, continually communicating an organization's purpose and drawing a line of sight from freelance and gig workers to larger impact, is simply an extension of work many companies already do today. Both can go a long way to ensuring positive relationships and protecting both brand and strategy.

While I hope these trends resonate with you and prove helpful in framing your thinking, they are not

a comprehensive list. I would love to hear from you what trends or imperatives you believe will shape the relationship between employees and employers over the decade to come.

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