



Who Moved My Future: Redesigning a New Workplace with Creativity

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There's a big disconnect between employees and employers. While some leaders are laser focused on returning to the old ways of work, employees are pushing back. Dave Stevens suggests leaders should be listening, asking the right questions, and adopting an innovative mindset to redesign a new workplace—one that makes sense for all.

Employees are done with the old ways of the workplace and now employers are confused—more so than ever. The events of the past few years have conspired to turn the world of work on its head. Even as restrictions from the pandemic have lifted, we are left with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity—a VUCA world on steroids.

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While this seems like a recipe for disaster, it's an opportunity for leaders to spur positive change in the workplace. It's also a chance for leaders and organizations to dictate their futures, [listen to their employees](#), and redesign a workplace that creates rewarding, collaborative, and productive work.

However, the current state of workplace structures is broken and mending it with some creative thinking could be the



key to securing your organization's future.

What's broken and how do we fix it?

Once upon a time, employers could rely on a tacit contract with their employees that governed where we worked, how we interacted with colleagues, the number of hours we put in and the time of day we did them. But this old contract is broken and recent efforts by employers to reinstate the structure of the past has been like trying to stuff the genie back in the bottle.

Attitudes and expectations of work have changed so significantly that we can't go back to the way things were. Employees' perception of work as *need* (compensation) versus work as *want* (purpose and meaning) have prompted the much talked about *great resignation*, and employers are looking desperately for answers.

Best practices? What practices?

Best practices and precedents should offer a fallback for employers trying to find their way. Unfortunately, most return-to-work strategies (and resultant experience) are too new to offer much guidance. Perhaps, more importantly, there has been a new focus on diversity in work, skill attributes, and worker preferences that can dictate very different structures in how work is done across these various work environments.

Asking the right questions

In days of old (remember 2019?), the CFO, the warehouse manager, the remote journalist, and the social worker all reported to the office on Monday morning. Today, the reactive employer is inclined to ask, "How do we get everyone back to the office?" However, the better question is "What is the *best structure for our service offering, in this environment, to maximize profit and productivity, and to engage our employees?*" What works for the warehouse manager may not work for the journalist. Indeed, the dislocation during the pandemic demonstrated that some firms thrived as traditional work structures broke down.

Thriving in uncertainty: The innovative mindset

Without certainty, [leaders are looking for answers](#). But if there's one thing we've learned, it's that there is *no* simple answer that works for everyone. For some companies, the nature of the business might easily determine the best approach. For others, landing on the right work structure will be a matter of trial and error and internal negotiation. Fortunately, we are all capable of thriving in uncertainty, and these are the perfect conditions for exploration, redesign, learning, and growth. In other words, uncertainty is a necessary requirement for thinking differently, forcing leaders and managers to play with new ideas to engage the workforce.

An innovative mindset requires empathy towards others. We need to be *other-centered*—in the world of the other person—but also in the world of the situation, which has changed. What is your company's situation? Take a step back and examine your employees, their expectations, the competition for talent, and the leverage your workers hold in the discussion. But also consider how those factors play into demands of your organization, including productivity, customer demand, performance, and return on capital. We need to imagine how the work should (and could) be done in a manner that satisfies all these objectives, as best as possible.



Think differently

Here are some techniques to help us think differently when tackling these challenges:

1. **Try opposite thinking.** Let's recognize that we all have biases and assumptions about how things should be done that are deeply ingrained in us. We need to challenge these! Write down any assumptions you have about the above key issues. Many of our assumptions are unconscious, but this reflective practice helps surface potential blind spots. Next, describe the opposite of this assumption. By turning your thinking upside down, you're destabilizing the conceptual energy of the assumption and creating a new lookout point. Lastly, describe a new opportunity you see out of the opposite.
2. **Ask uncertainty-based questions like "why" and "what if."** The idea behind these kinds of questions is to create doubt in your thinking and move away from what you know. Think of these questions as the adult version of *let's pretend*. By asking them, we initiate a process that makes us conscious of new perspectives and possibilities.
3. **Increase the parameters of your imagination by connecting more.** Thinking differently is a collaborative process. It's scary to question your biases and assumptions, but others may be better able to reveal them to you. Also, we increase our idea diversity by adding other people into the conversation. We get to test our thoughts and we receive feedback, which is essential for our brains to make new connections.

The burden of freedom to make choices

Our current situations differ by organization, employee, and environment—all impacting how our work needs to be carried out. Anticipating the future adds even greater uncertainty. For example, there's no denying that the pendulum has swung in favour of employees of late, making [talent acquisition tougher for employers](#). But how long will that last, and for which sectors?

What is clear is that dealing with uncertainty requires us to think creatively and embrace the freedom to make decisions about our future. It's liberating, for sure, but there's a natural anxiety that comes from the responsibility to make new choices where assumption sufficed in the past.

Leaders should be focusing on the process and asking the big questions. It's not about how we get back to the office, but how companies design its work to be rewarding, collaborative, *and* productive given the social, political, and economic environment we face.

Be comfortable with the uncertainty and get ready to think differently.



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