

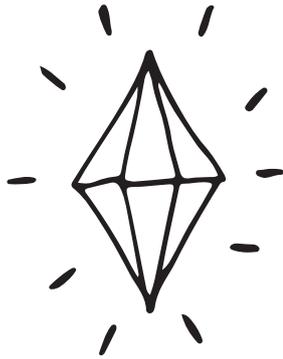


FROM PROPHECY TO STRATEGY:

THREE FUTURE WORKPLACE
PREDICTIONS AND
HOW TO PREPARE

BY MARIANNE DE PIERRES

If you cast your mind back to the start of this year and compare where we are today, it's clear how quickly everything can change. If only we'd had a crystal ball to see what lay ahead, what steps would we have taken to prepare? In the name of looking forward to act now, here is what a variety of analysts and futurists are seeing emerge – and what it means for leaders and learning professionals.



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Prophesy 1: Man vs. Machine?

It's no secret that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated our move to digital working environments. The digi-pulse of many organisations is literally racing right now. In fact, McKinsey suggests that we 'vaulted five years forward in consumer and business digital adoption in a matter of around eight weeks.' But many consider this to be just the beginning of a major change in how we work.

Prior to the pandemic, a lot was written about the impending impact of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation on the workforce. Forecasters project that up to 60% of jobs are vulnerable to automation in the next seven years. Yet, not all see this as a negative outcome. In fact, recent surveys by CNBC suggest that AI is having a positive effect on economic growth and wellbeing.

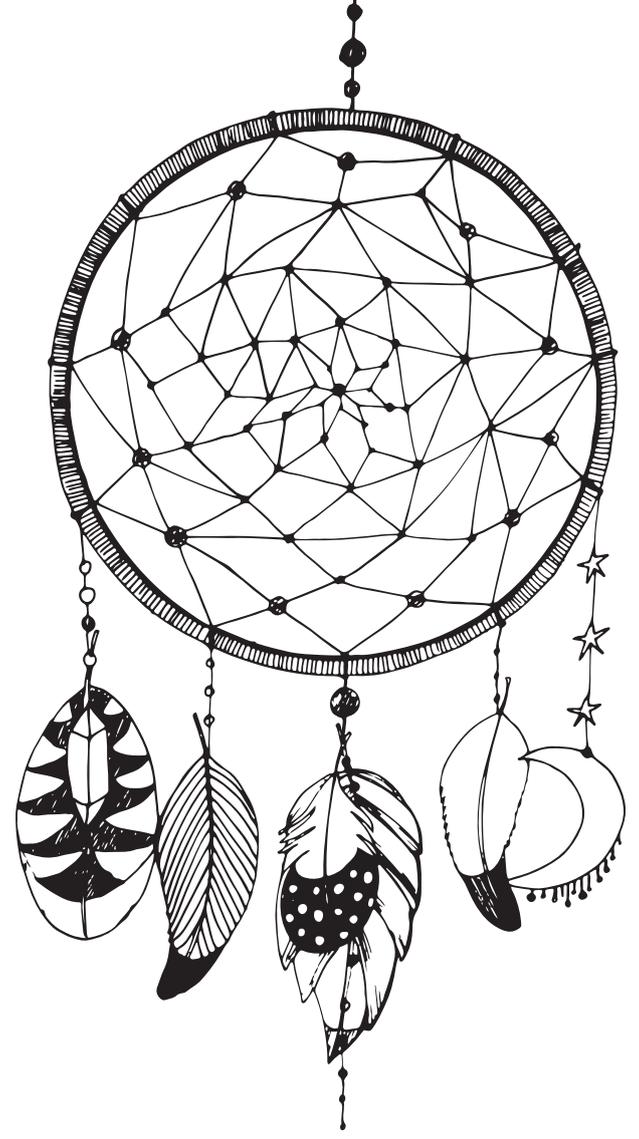
Consider, for example, a call centre where AI functions as an assistant to the human employee whose role is better suited to problem

solving issues. In this situation, the AI's role is complementary to the employee and is not aimed at completely replacing them. And it stands to reason that if AI enables faster, more accurate collection of big data, then the human skills of the future will most likely be centred around data-led decision making and problem solving.

With digital innovation still at the forefront of the current changes, leaders will need to consider the escalating need for retraining of the workforce.

Deloitte recommend that we:

- ensure a top-down commitment to digital innovation
- develop positions for 'business translators' who can match talent and technology
- focus on retraining and reskilling strategies
- embed more established flexible work-style models.



Prophecy 2: Work, On-Demand

Another important factor in determining the future of how we work is the growing composite workforce. Before the pandemic was a factor, the Society of Actuaries (SOA) estimated that, within five years, 50% of the UK's working population would be self-employed and established that in the US in 2019, 40% of employees (and rising quickly) were employed under non-traditional staffing arrangements. Now, in a COVID world, the emergence of a gig economy or 'off-balance-sheet' talent, has been further progressed by the need for remote working arrangements.

Companies who were digitally capable and had already embraced flexible working arrangements have proven to be much more resilient during COVID. It's a salutary lesson that productivity in a remote working world needs to be thought of differently and seen as an opportunity to change behaviour.

Our global workforce is shifting towards 'on-demand' availability as the average duration for learning business competency shrinks. Today, it sits at less than five years, compared to thirty years in the mid-80s. The SOA

believes there are many potential benefits to this evolution as it allows for more diversity of thought, improved employee satisfaction, a better product, greater autonomy and independent thinking.

From employees' side, this also heralds a change in attitudes. Studies from Cornell's Business School in 2019 conclude that, 'More so than being at work, they [on-demand or gig economy workers] become their work, or more precisely they become in their work. Such a porous membrane between work and self necessitates personal holding environments to weather and harness the emotional storms that accompany working without the cover of an organisational roof.' This new workforce needs portable skills and capabilities.



Prophesy 3: Beyond the Bottom Line

There is also a continued global shift towards organisations adopting a social enterprise approach. A social enterprise mission, ‘combines revenue growth and profit-making with the need to respect and support its environment and stakeholder network.’ At a more nuanced level, it invites a conversation about how to leverage the impact of technology on the work environment to keep a human focus. In many ways, humans are already fused with the digital. It’s in our DNA. But how do we make the most of that marriage?

One of the keys is staying focused on the relational or social aspects of business. In the era of Industry 4.0, C-suite executives not only need to abandon siloed thinking and embrace the idea of cross-fertilised ‘teams leading teams’, but they need to champion the notion of an ecosystem as a living organism that is part of a larger, social whole. ‘Who’ and ‘how’ we are should carry as much weight as ‘what’ and ‘where’ we are.



Strategies

Given the emerging trends, there are steps that leaders and learning professionals can take now to turn predictions into action.

- Consider the balance of working arrangements for your team – be open to blended and customised options. There is no longer a ‘right’ way.
- Proactively design a new human-capital model, factoring in employee health and wellbeing as core considerations.
- Consider your purpose-driven learning ecosystem: how do we bring teams across functions together to develop meaningful alignment of the whole, while offering targeted specialist learning?
- Re-skill for AI and automated futures now (i.e. creative problem-solving, data-led decision making, emotional intelligence, wellbeing, coaching autonomy).
- Prioritise conversations around ethics in a digital world. Ask ‘how should we...?’ rather than ‘how do we...?’.



MARIANNE DE PIERRES

Marianne is Performance Frontiers’ learning content specialist, with over 25 years’ experience as an award-winning author. Marianne translates the latest research in learning and development into powerful educational content. She has consulted as a futurist and future scenario writer with various businesses to influence social and cultural change. Through her work, she hopes to see the ripple effect of the written word take shape as positive change in communities.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

Ethical by design: Principles for good technology (Matt Beard & Simon Longstaff, 2018, The Ethics Centre)
<https://ethics.org.au/ethical-by-design/>

Future of Work: The New Realities of Work (Deloitte)
<https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/human-capital/topics/future-of-work.html>

How artificial intelligence is taking call centers to the next level (Mary Shacklett, 2017, TechRepublic)
<https://www.techrepublic.com/article/how-artificial-intelligence-is-taking-call-centers-to-the-next-level/>

The COVID-19 recovery will be digital: A plan for the first 90 days (Aamer Baig et al, 2020, McKinsey & Company)
<https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/the-covid-19-recovery-will-be-digital-a-plan-for-the-first-90-days>

The Growing World of “Off-Balance Sheet” Talent and Workforce Modelling (Megan Gauer et al, 2019, SOA)
<https://www.soa.org/globalassets/assets/library/newsletters/predictive-analytics-and-futurism/2019/may/2019-predictive-analytics-iss20-gauer-pohle-srivastava.pdf>

The symphonic C-suite: Teams leading teams (Dimple Argawal et al, 2018, Deloitte Insights)
<https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2018/senior-leadership-c-suite-collaboration.html>

This is the industry sector that has some of the happiest workers in America (Laura Wronski & Jon Cohen, 2019, CNBC)
<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/04/this-is-the-industry-that-has-some-of-the-happiest-workers-in-america.html>