

The Future of Work

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At the 2015 World Leaders Forum in Sydney, I had the pleasure of listening to and meeting Professor Lynda Gratton of the London Business School. Gratton was in Australia to talk about the key trends shaping the future of work, many of which are to be found in her insightful 2011 book *The Shift*.

The future of work is something I have written about many times over the past five years, particularly how people can best position themselves for the future. At the heart of getting ready for the future, I have stressed that we all ask ourselves, *'Could my job could be automated or is it possible that it could be done by someone, somewhere else at a cheaper cost, that is, can it be outsourced?'*

To best prepare yourself, I wrote, *'focus on what you are really good at, do something that you really love and ensure that you are world class at it; that it can't be replicated to your level of quality by anyone else.'* In May 2012, I also posited that in future we will all need greater creative thinking, a tolerance for ambiguity and a more adaptive and responsive style. What I, and many others have said, is that we fundamentally require a collective and collaborative intelligence to leverage diversity and become more innovative. The scientist, Dr Brian Cox, has said that the imagination to think and create something that does not currently exist (innovate) requires more than one brain – it requires a collective intelligence. And for this we need great conversation – a process of communicating ideas and describing and exploring something that doesn't yet exist.

So what is the future of work? Well, as one of my favourite thinkers, Dan Pink, says, *'The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different mind – designers, story tellers, carers, empathisers, big-picture thinkers and meaning makers'*.

In *The Shift*, Gratton spells out the 5 forces that will shape the future of work. The 5 forces she describes are as follows:

1. The force of technology - specifically that technological capability will increase exponentially; that soon 5 billion people will be connected; that even though technological capability will increase, productivity gains will come more from organisational assets like cooperation, culture, collaboration and collective intelligence; that social participation in technology will surge and lead to open innovation applications and user generated content; that technology will spur on the creation of micro-entrepreneurs and; that more and more jobs will be replaced by technology.
2. The force of globalisation – this will see work become 24/7 and different nations play new and significant roles in the global economy. Further, that low-cost, frugal innovation will become more prevalent; that India and China will be the place to find well educated engineers and scientists; that the world will become more urban and; that we will continue to experience economic crashes and a



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growing underclass of people who will be more and more marginalised and unable to participate in the global economy.

3. The force of demography and longevity – with this will come millions more who wish to work well past 60; many people will grow old poor and join the growing underclass; global migration will increase and; Gen-Y will ascend in its power and influence.
4. The force of society – with this force, families become rearranged; there is a rise in what Gratton calls ‘reflexivity’, that is, people begin to make decisions based on the lives they wish to construct; powerful women become more prevalent and men become more balanced in terms of their roles and work lives and; there is growing distrust in institutions, a decline in happiness and a commensurate rise in passive leisure.
5. The force of energy resources – this will see energy prices increase; environmental catastrophes displace people and; a growing culture of sustainability emerge.

In her book, Gratton sets up two divergent futures – one bright and benign and one dark and foreboding. In the dark future, she talks of increasing fragmentation and isolation, where no activity lasts more than a few minutes, where there are constant interruptions and where we are so virtually-connected, plugged-in and hooked-up that we are constantly distracted and disrupted. In this future, there are no boundaries and working 24/7 is normal as is the expectation that you are available and ready to work all the time. This is not a world of reflection or a world where people are deliberate and purposeful but rather one where you are constantly reactive and led by drivers external to you.

In this dark future, Gratton paints a picture of a world where we are frenzied, overwhelmed and time is compressed; where our concentration is compromised and our ability to learn and achieve mastery is lost. Time and concentration, which are critical for mastery, are both thwarted in this dark future.

This is of particular interest, as it accords with what I have written in the past about reflection and in fact, about the role of boredom to fire one’s imagination. Boredom and reflection have very real roles in our evolution and our ability to innovate and foster new ideas. Boredom is not only normal but intrinsic to living a fully human life - it is a gateway to creativity. Quite simply, moments of ‘not-doing’ are not wasted.

This dark future of work is also characterised by a general malaise or unhappiness, what I call a lack of satisfaction and meaning. Gratton points out that so much of our leisure time is passive – watching TV for example – and that most of the 5 forces (enumerated above) could easily bring a life of isolation and loneliness. What’s more, Gratton shines a light on the rise in status anxiety that is commonplace today, the feeling that we are not successful when compared to others, that we evaluate ourselves negatively based on what we have and what we consume. Further, Gratton argues that there an incumbent shame that manifests and a rise in narcissism – a continuous focus and obsession on self along with a disturbing trend of describing and presenting oneself by what one consumes – as if this is our identity.



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The Power of Talk in a Digital Age

On the other hand, the divergent future is one where we purposefully and deliberately craft our lives to have meaning and satisfaction. To achieve this, Gratton speaks of 3 shifts we need to embark upon.

1. From shallow generalist to a working life that is built on serial mastery and its antecedents of time, concentration, learning and practice – this is a working future where you are dedicated to developing depth and skills in areas which bring you meaning and where you will need to increasingly differentiate your value from that of the crowd.
2. The development of meaningful and co-operative relationships and three distinct networks that help us connect and create, that support and validate us – relationships that are an antidote to the increasing virtual, impersonal and deeply isolated world of work. The shift here is from isolated competitor to innovative connector that can tap into the mastery of others.
3. A shift from voracious consumer to impassioned producer – away from being defined by what you buy and wear and consume and towards productive meaningful experiences. This is where the quality of experiences matters more than the quantity of consumption. In this shift, you will need to understand yourself and have the emotional resilience to make choices which deliver, for yourself, a values congruent and satisfying life. Such a shift requires us to understand that the money and material goods that lie at the heart of the traditional work deal represent declining marginal utility – the more we have the less we appreciate it. In this shift, it is us, rather than organisations, who will need to make courageous choices about the role of work in our lives and to take action to live a more purposeful working life. This is a future where what you produce is infinitely more satisfying than what you buy and consume.

(This reminds me of the work of Jason Drew and his optimistic view of the future where we have moved beyond the 19th Century with its focus on production and the 20th Century with its focus on consumption, to a 21st Century that is about sharing, repairing, durability and upgrading. In his view of the future the ‘extract-manufacture-throw-away’ cycle is replaced with a different paradigm based on durability and repurposing.)

Gratton’s 3 shifts hone in on the need to develop your intellectual, social and emotional capital in very targeted and focused ways.

What I really like about Gratton’s picture of a bright future is the role of co-operation, collaboration and co-creation, where innovation is a mass activity harnessing the global cognitive surplus of billions of hours per day devoted to participation and contribution. This is a world that leverages diverse thinking and tackles problems in new and different ways. This is a world of micro-entrepreneurs partnering in creative clusters and ecosystems and networked around common endeavours. In this world, success will come from the paradox of being a unique specialist and yet deeply integrated with creative clusters of people.



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