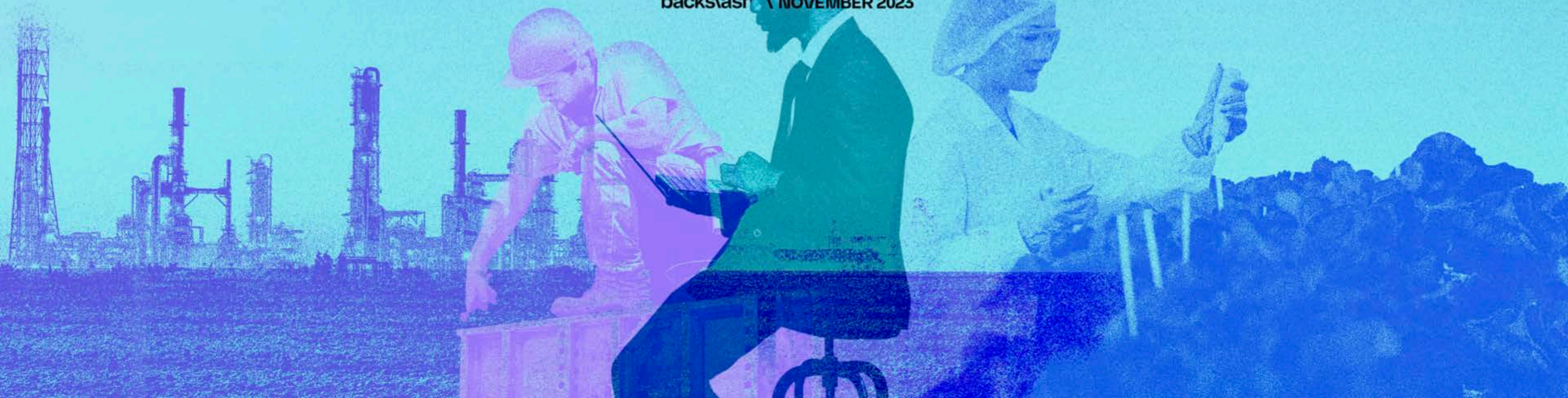


FUTURE OF EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

backslash \ NOVEMBER 2023



WELCOME TO THE *FUTURE*



Welcome to 'Future of', a report series that explores what will—and more importantly what *should*—come next in must-watch categories.

At Backslash, we believe that culture is the biggest opportunity and threat to businesses today. With support from over 300 Culture Spotters, we closely observe and analyze worldwide developments so that TBWA—and our clients—can better understand and anticipate change.

The following report leverages cultural intelligence to identify opportunities to improve the employee experience. Opportunities that don't just impact how an employer communicates, but points to specific ways to attract and retain top talent—encompassing everything from IT tools to climate change protections.

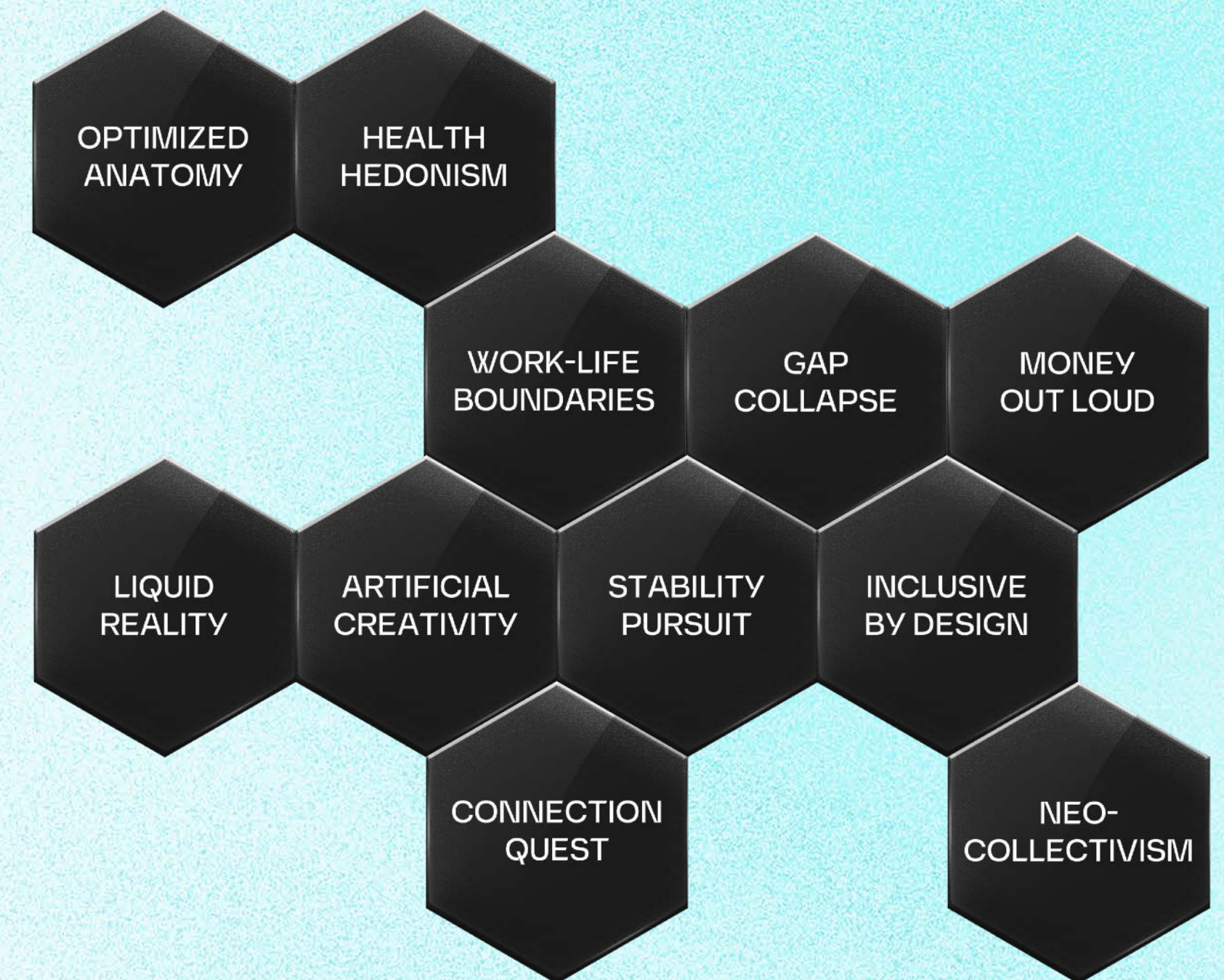
METHODOLOGY

This report was born from months of in-depth qualitative and quantitative research, strategic ideation, and collaboration among 42 Culture Spotters from 23 global TBWA offices. Our Spotters bring expertise from their work on some of the world's biggest employers—from McDonald's to Hilton to Apple.

This is an independent research report by TBWA. None of the entities or individuals referenced herein has endorsed or otherwise participated in this report.

EDGES
SHAPING
THE

FUTURE OF EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE



What is an Edge?

Edge / 'ej / noun

A meaningful cultural shift that has the scale and longevity to propel a brand toward a greater share of the future.

See Appendix for complete Edge definitions.

FOREWORD

End to end, from outreach to exit, from attraction to engagement and retention, employees' experiences have evolved dramatically over recent years. Well before the jarring dislocation of the pandemic, workers were reacting to the increased pace and decreased predictability of marketplace developments with customers' new demands and changing behaviors, and shorter feedback loops and update cycles.

These highly digitalized, interconnected ecosystems require greater responsiveness from businesses, putting pressure and new emphasis on employees. After all, it is talent who is figuring out, learning, and utilizing the sophisticated new apps and tools. Workers are the ones now crafting effective prompts to benefit from chatty AI helpers. Employees are in front of clients and screens, behind the content and the curtains.

Employees have much to contend with. During this extended period of flux and transformation, they are trying to recognize and respond to unfamiliar circumstances to adjust today and prepare for tomorrow. There is urgency and opportunity to enhance talent experiences in four core areas as they continuously chase new skills; integrate cultural support and benefit from updated tools; advocate for pervasive operational and workplace flexibility; and adapt for societal, economic, and environmental upheaval.

Talent is central and essential to any organization's ability to achieve an updated trajectory with sustained growth and success. As technology competencies are rapidly learned, so are power (previously "soft") skills elevated. Managers' and employees' enhanced empathy practices nurture the environments, relationships, and interactions they need to work together at the new tempo, with its accelerating beat.

Employees need elasticity and optionality as they advance in unfamiliar operating conditions—especially as they experiment with emerging technologies. As new applications are adopted, talent's daily tasks and outcomes are altered while also updating the products they are required to develop and deliver.

Within the new work environments, each employee's context is different: their appreciation of work, concerns about income insecurity, work preferences, and mental health sensibilities. To foster strong individual and team performance, managers need to notice each individual as a creator to recognize and enhance their unique value and team contributions.

The vision of future employee experiences is compelling—where we have more autonomy and flexibility over our work, whether that work happens at home, in the office, or in a warehouse. We are becoming more self-aware and empathetic toward others. Our powerful technology tools are becoming more intuitive and personally supportive.

We need to develop intentional community to support employees in all their local working situations. We need training and upskilling. We need resilience as we keep adjusting to new conditions. We need to be proactive to meet the higher bar that keeps rising.

For those companies that co-create employee experiences that are innovative, integrated, and inclusive, the future is yours—whatever it looks like—tomorrow and beyond.



A. Sophie Wade

Workforce Innovation Specialist, Speaker, Instructor, Host of the [Transforming Work Podcast](#) and Author of [Empathy Works: The Key to Competitive Advantage in the New Era of Work](#).

WORK X CULTURE

▶ MEDIA & ENTERTAINMENT

Roblox Tycoon Games

Kids today are showing up on Roblox ready to work. One of the platform's most popular genres is tycoon games, where users build their own business from the ground up. Whether you want to run an airport or become a famous YouTuber, there's a tycoon game to fit every ambition.

TikTok Recruitment

TikTok influencers aren't just teaching dances; they're now helping recruit new talent. These carefully selected TikTokers are paid to post videos hyping up a particular company and explaining why someone would want to work there.

Working: What We Do All Day

In this recently launched Netflix docuseries, host Barack Obama explores the meaning of work in a time of rapid change. From gig workers juggling multiple jobs to CEOs reckoning with the impact of automation, the show humanizes the struggles of the modern worker.

The Gamer Advantage

Add "gamer" to your résumé. In a 2023 study, staffing company Randstad found that popular gaming platforms improved essential soft skills like leadership and teamwork, traits highly sought after by employers.¹

🗨 LANGUAGE

Resignation Parties

People in China aren't quitting quietly; they're going all out. #ResignationParty has 170k views on Xiaohongshu, with users shamelessly celebrating the end of a toxic or unfulfilling job.

Body Doubling

Miss working in the presence of others? Try body doubling. Participants say the trend—which involves joining a video call with other strangers as you work in silence—helps keep them motivated during WFH days. It's especially popular among people with ADHD.

Lazy Girl Job

Where we once used to take pride in prestigious, hyper-ambitious roles, we're now glorifying stress-free jobs that allow us to put life first. But don't be fooled by the name. The #LazyGirlJob isn't actually about slacking off; it's about accepting that your productivity doesn't define your worth.

Coffee Badging

The latest resistance strategy involves coming into the office just long enough to grab a coffee and chat, then returning home to finish work from there. But as employers boost their surveillance tactics, you might not be able to get away with coffee badging for much longer.

⚡ DISRUPTORS

Michelle Lee

As the leader of IDEO's Play Lab, Lee is helping employees rethink day-to-day work by emphasizing curiosity and exploration over tasks. In her words: "play opens up the possibilities."

Mia Perdomo & Andrea de la

Piedra García

Mia Perdomo and Andrea de la Piedra García are changing workplaces across Latin America with Aequales—a consultancy that provides businesses with the tools to close gender gaps.

AI

Meet your new coworker. As generative AI moves further into every industry and every type of role, learning how to work with it will become essential training. Think less "man vs. machine," and more "man and machine."

Mauro Repacci

Mauro Repacci is out to prove that the digital nomad life isn't just for young singles. With his company, Boundless Life, Repacci connects families with a global network of communities where they can live and work, all while their children continue their studies in a flexible education program.

👕 STYLE

Gender-Neutral Uniforms

From airlines to banks, more employers are relaxing dress code policies and implementing gender-neutral uniforms in an effort to promote inclusivity.

#Officewear

Office fits are all the rage on TikTok, where #officewear has racked up over 250M views. Whether you're into corporate goth or a more "power casual" look, social media has inspo for everyone.

Cooling Accessories

As temperatures soar, smart cooling fabrics, safety helmets with built-in fans, and wearables that detect heat stress are becoming essential accessories for outdoor laborers.

Workwear for All

Carhartt and Dickies—originally intended as blue-collar workwear—have long held their cultural cachet as a cool off-duty look. Both brands are regularly donned by rappers and models, proving that classic, durable clothes are loved by people of all professions.

FOUR GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES AT A GLANCE

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1. ALWAYS-ON UPSKILLING

The path from education to employment is no longer straightforward. As the pace of innovation accelerates and traditional learning institutions struggle to keep up, employers will increasingly be called on to prepare people for the jobs of tomorrow. Upskilling is more essential than ever before, and it will require an ever-evolving, always-in-beta approach.

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2. NEW-AGE NECESSITIES

The days of wooing talent solely with flashy perks and well-crafted mission statements are coming to a close. Now, as people take off their rose-colored glasses and get real about work's role in their life, employers will be forced to reinvest in what really matters. From IT tools to built-in breaks, workplace necessities are due for a radical overhaul.

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3. FLEX-FUTURES

Flexibility is shifting from a perk to an expectation. As employees decenter work from their lives, companies will be forced to take a more nuanced approach to flexibility—reconsidering not just where we work, but also how schedules are set, how benefits are structured, and how we get paid. And contrary to old assumptions, these personalized offerings won't be limited to the white-collar crowd.

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4. MANAGING TURBULENCE

From climate change to AI to aging populations, major forces are set to disrupt work as we know it. But while some employers avoid confronting these challenges, others are viewing them as an opportunity to change work for the better. The most resilient organizations will be those that proactively protect their workforce in the face of turbulence.

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ALWAYS-ON UPSKILLING

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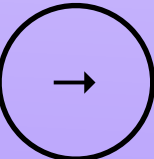
“What was a war for talent is increasingly becoming a war for skills. Companies are pivoting much more to looking at **‘What are the skills that we need?’** Instead of identifying the specific opportunities, they're addressing specific skills gaps.”

Mark Elliott,
CFO of Mercer

Rapid innovation is requiring employers to take a more hands-on role as educators.

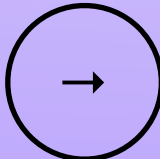


DRIVING THE SHIFT



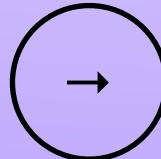
AI is widening the global skills gap

The World Economic Forum predicts that 44% of workers’ skills will be disrupted between 2023 and 2028—up nine percentage points from its last five-year projection.²



Fears of becoming obsolete are intensifying

Eight in 10 employees around the world are concerned they lack the skills needed to advance their careers, while 70% fear they lack the necessary education.³



Stability is moving up worker wishlists

Globally, 48% of adults say “having a stable, future-proof job” is increasing in importance compared to a year ago—ranking the highest among 39 cultural shifts.⁴

WAY IN 1



EMPLOYER ED

Employers are becoming the new educators. As AI threatens entry-level positions and universities lose their allure, incoming workers will be looking to employers to train them for the roles of the future.

There's no question that it's a tough time to be entering the workforce. Standard entry-level positions are being dissolved at the hands of AI, and even the jobs we once thought to be immune to tech's influence, like those in the creative field, are now proving to be under threat. "The more I study the innovative and disruptive power of AI and other technology, the more I realize that there is no 'certain' or 'stable' career path for my generation," says Jackie Berardo, a researcher at Meta who belongs to Gen Z.

"With AI, it's conceivable that students might now find themselves learning skills in college that are obsolete by the time they graduate."

Chris Hyams,
CEO of Indeed

Throughout the last several decades, a four-year degree was typically seen as the answer to such concerns. But that's no longer the case. According to a recent [Gallup poll](#), the percentage of college-educated workers who have FOBO ("Fear of Becoming Obsolete") has jumped from 8% in 2017 to 20% this year,⁵ which brings them to a near-equal level with those who are not college educated. The takeaway? A degree isn't quite the foolproof safety net it was once thought to be. At the same time, salaries aren't keeping up with the price of tuition—making college a harder sell in some parts of the world. In the US, [four million fewer](#) teenagers enrolled in college in 2022 than in 2012,⁶ and Americans across every generation [agree](#) that going to college today is "not worth the financial cost."⁷ A similar sentiment is shaking out in the UK, where British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has unveiled [plans](#) to crack down on "rip-off" university degrees that don't lead to decent job prospects.

On-the-job education

It’s not just workers who are questioning the need for four-year degrees. With 77% of companies globally reporting talent shortages⁸—the highest in 17 years—more of them are dropping college requirements and switching to skills-based hiring. For this model to actually be effective, though, employers must commit to closing the skills gaps with in-house education. This includes apprenticeships, alternative credential programs, and on-the-job training that sets incoming workers up for success.

One positive example of this comes from software development company Tectonic, which launched the first coding apprenticeship program to be approved by the US Department of Labor. Participants apply to join the program, and once selected, the company trains them while also paying them from day one. After the training period, participants are paired with a senior staff member to work on a client project, then are ultimately hired by Tectonic or one of their clients.

Similar offerings are becoming more common in white-collar industries—with major employers like McDonald’s, Amazon, Accenture, JPMorgan Chase, IBM and Delta all expanding their in-house training programs. The benefits of these systems go both ways. Workers get a more reliable and direct line to the professional world, and employers can train people for the skills they need, when they need them. It also breaks down barriers to high-earning careers for people who can’t afford to go to college.

College-company collabs

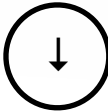
Even with more companies filling gaps in education, the fact is that universities aren’t going anywhere anytime soon. So how can businesses ensure that these schools are keeping up with the speed of innovation and training students for the careers of the future? One way is to forge closer collaborations. Just look to how Roblox partnered with Parsons School of Design to launch a course focused on digital fashion—an industry expected to be worth \$2.5 billion by 2028.⁹ This could very well become the new model going forward, where employers work hand in hand with universities to design curriculum as trends unfold. With some universities already starting to offer degrees in influencing—Gen Z’s main career aspiration—nothing is off the table.

Ultimately, the future isn’t about directly trading college degrees for company-driven education. It’s about challenging the status quo and recognizing that there’s no single best path to employment. Gen Z has already come to this conclusion on their own. It’s now up to employers to follow suit.

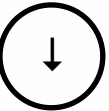
WHAT IF...



Employer-driven education brought back long-term careers at a single company? Offering ongoing growth opportunities for a workforce seeking stability.



Companies worked with universities to train students on new technologies as they emerge? Reducing the lag between innovation and higher education.



Competitors pooled their resources to launch broadly relevant training programs? Ensuring that trainees were set up for success not just at one company, but within the wider industry.



WAY IN 2

SOFT UPSKILLING



Soft skills—once thought to be a basic requirement—are becoming a worker’s greatest asset. As AI’s technical prowess reaches new heights, it’s things like leadership, social intelligence, and effective communication that will help humans come out on top.

An old assumption tells us that workers in STEM don’t need to be good with people. As long as they can solve the equation or develop the code, the thinking went, who cares if they can captivate an audience or motivate their colleagues? But when AI can do the technical parts of their job better, faster, and cheaper than they can—as is becoming more and more evident—those human skills may eventually be all that’s left.

Data shows that things are already heading in that direction. While STEM skills were considered the most important requirement in the workforce back in 2016, a new global IBM study found that today’s executives now rank it as the least important skill in 2023.¹⁰ Time management and ability to prioritize have become the most important critical skills, followed by the ability to work in team environments and communicate effectively.

Employees in STEM will of course still be vital (we’ll need people to train and manage these AI systems, after all), but what’s changing is that we’re throwing out the “STEM vs. Humanities” narrative. The reality is that future employees will need both technical knowledge and cognitive social skills to thrive, something Deloitte calls the shift toward a “STEMpathetic” workforce.

“The machines will become very good at being machines in the years ahead, so we need to be extremely good at being humans again.”

Liselotte Lyngsø, founding partner of Future Navigator

Gen Z’s professional guidebook

While a certain level of soft skills were once assumed to be learned before you entered the workforce, more employers are noting that today’s incoming employees need a little extra help in this area. And it’s not a problem that’s unique to STEM, nor is it entirely Gen Z’s fault. With the pandemic forcing schooling and internships online, many Gen Zers are entering the workforce having little to no experience working in-person or in an office. College group projects that were meant to teach collaboration took place solely in digital documents, and dress codes only went so far as what was visible on Zoom.

To address these deficiencies, more employers are offering soft-skill training for new recruits. Big Four accounting firms Deloitte, PwC, Ernst & Young, and KPMG have all added extra classes on how to give face-to-face presentations and participate in in-person meetings; and global consulting firm Protiviti recently expanded its onboarding process to include workshops on improv-based public speaking and how to make conversation. “Most of the gaps have to do with what I refer to as power skills, oftentimes seen as soft skills—the ability to have conversations, make eye contact, shake hands, or eat at a table with multiple people; the types of things that are indicative of a society that is social,” says Kaye Monk-Morgan, president and CEO of the Kansas Leadership Center. In Japan, some companies are even offering smile-training sessions to help their employees perfect their grin after three years of pandemic masking.

Soft skills software

Looking forward, we may (ironically) see technology step in to offer guidance as well. Zoom just announced a new AI Companion that will give users real-time feedback on their conversational and presentation skills in meetings. And in Saudi Arabia, youth are using soft skills learned from gaming to land their first job. Even doctors are now using ChatGPT to communicate with patients in a more compassionate way, proving that it’s not just junior-level employees who could stand to improve their interpersonal skills.

Back to being human

For all the talk of technology rendering workers obsolete, there’s also something to be said for AI forcing a renewed appreciation of the traits that are uniquely human. Traits like curiosity, trust, leadership, self-awareness, and emotional intelligence. “You can ask ChatGPT to translate things into every language imaginable,” says Alex Schwartz, co-founder of The Disrupted Workforce, “but it can’t read the room.” Not yet, anyway.

With research suggesting that more than 30% of high-paying new jobs will be social and “essentially human” in nature,¹¹ experiences and tools that build core soft skills will become invaluable.

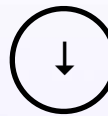
WHAT IF...



University students were able to mix and match majors of their own design? Allowing for a customized combination of STEM-related skills and humanities.



High schools and universities offered courses on soft skills training and professional development? Helping young people enter their first job with more confidence.



Customer-facing roles like waiter, retail associate, and receptionist were recognized as essential training for the professional world?



WAY IN 3 VIRTUAL WORK COACH

It's true that generative AI is rapidly driving demand for new skills. But what if GenAI could also help workers learn those new skills faster and more effectively? Here, we explore how virtual work coaches will revolutionize the way companies upskill their workforce.

Since its arrival, ChatGPT has sparked a wave of panic in the world of education. Some schools were quick to ban the technology, citing fears of cheating, while others took a bolder—and, we believe, wiser—approach by teaching students how to work *with* it. Now it's time for employers to take note. Rather than ignoring our new reality, companies should be exploring how GenAI can help their employees get smarter, faster. Imagine, for example, if everyone had their own personal AI work coach that teaches them the latest skills, develops individualized learning plans, and gives constructive feedback along the way. When programmed according to a company's specific processes and intellectual property, these chatbot mentors could allow for tailored upskilling on demand.

Upskilling as an essential

This new AI use case comes as demand for upskilling and reskilling programs soars. Up until recently, upskilling was primarily synonymous with success in the technology sector. But with every company now a tech company, continuous learning opportunities are becoming a deal breaker for workers across the board. In fact, 65% of employees globally say they are likely to leave their employer because there aren't enough opportunities for skills development or career advancement. That number jumps to 74% for Gen Z and millennials.³

“76% of employees globally would be more likely to stay with a company that offers continuous training.”

TalentLMS
and SHRM,
“The State of
L&D in 2022”

This kind of education is equally important for low-wage workers. In Singapore, for example, more than 60% of food service employees are considering leaving the industry “in the foreseeable future,” driven primarily by a lack of skills development and training.¹²

Personalized learning with ChatGPT

As with most things, the biggest barriers to offering upskilling programs are time and money. But that’s where generative AI can change the game. With a ChatGPT-like learning tool, expensive software and dedicated training programs can be replaced with a single, scalable solution that’s available to assist every employee at every minute of the day. And resource savings are just one of several advantages. In addition to making learning more fun and interactive, a virtual work coach would also allow for much greater personalization—adapting to different learning styles and delivering customized lesson plans based on each employee’s unique goals. So while one person may prefer to learn through memes (yes, that’s a thing), another could opt for audio courses with regular quizzes built in.

For those seeking more general career guidance, ChatGPT-powered coaches could also help people figure out what they’re good at and what they need to improve on. Think of it like a personal career counselor. In the case of Singapore’s food service workers, this might mean explaining the various career pathways within the industry (something one-third say they’re unaware of)¹² and outlining clear next steps to help someone move up the wage ladder. AI could also evaluate their strengths to determine if they’d be better suited for a future role as a restaurant manager versus an inventory analyst.

AI-facilitated, human-backed

It’s important to note that these AI coaches can’t—and shouldn’t—ever fully replace human mentorship. At the end of the day, recognition and guidance from actual leaders will always be more motivating than a virtual pat on the back from a machine. And, more than that, regular check-ins will be essential to sparking healthy, nuanced debate about the subjects being taught—something AI doesn’t always allow for. The best models will combine AI-powered curriculum with ongoing human support.

Education revolution

With e-learning giants like Khan Academy and DuoLingo rolling out GPT-4 powered tutors, education is already moving in this direction. Employers who join the revolution will be able to train workers on new skills as quickly as they’re needed, giving much greater confidence to the seven in 10 people who say they don’t feel prepared for the future of work.³

WHAT IF...

→ **AI coaches took the guesswork out of career planning? Helping people identify their strengths and outlining clear next steps for landing their dream job.**

→ **AI-powered upskilling programs allowed for a less subjective and more accurate approach to employee reviews? Providing managers with a quantified summary of someone’s progress.**



NEW-AGE NECESSITIES


The days of wooing talent solely with flashy perks and well-crafted mission statements are coming to a close. Now, as people take off their rose-colored glasses and get real about work's role in their life, employers will be forced to reinvest in what really matters. From IT tools to built-in breaks, workplace necessities are due for a radical overhaul.



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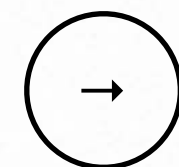


"The most successful companies of the future will be those that invest in their internal tools and resources as carefully as their customer-facing interfaces."

Kalle Ryan, Executive Lead, INSIDE by TBWA

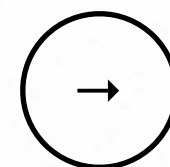
Once-overlooked essentials are moving to the top of employee wishlists.

DRIVING THE SHIFT



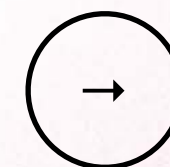
Talent is becoming increasingly weary of empty promises

38% of workers globally do not trust their organization to put employee interests ahead of profits.¹³



Demands for work-life boundaries are intensifying

72% of all adults say it's important for them to establish clear boundaries between work and their personal life, and 42% say it's increasing in importance compared to last year.⁴



Productivity tools are the new workplace necessity

87% of global employees believe pursuing digital transformation is more important now than ever before. More specifically, they want solutions that automate tasks so they can focus on work that matters.¹⁴



WAY IN 1

ELIMINATING THE DAILY DRAG



IT is getting decentralized. Armed with low-code software and generative AI tools, employees are taking digital transformation into their own hands and automating the most tedious parts of their job. The next best productivity solutions will be highly personalized and employee-made.

When it comes to attracting talent, white-collar employers tend to brag about flashy perks like beer taps and ping pong tables. But what you don't often hear about in interviews or see in recruitment campaigns is the kind of digital tools they use on a day-to-day basis. And it turns out that's what today's workers really care about. Among Gen Zers, 70% say they would switch jobs to access better tools to support productivity, as would 52% of Gen Xers and 37% of boomers.¹⁵

Gen Z's emphasis on software is reflective of how relationships with work are evolving. Back when work was a marker of identity, employees wanted "cool" lifestyle perks that said something about them. Now, as younger employees take a more transactional approach to work, it makes sense that they're prioritizing practical tools that help them get the job done faster so they can get back to their real lives. Better company tech is becoming synonymous with better work-life balance.

Decentralized IT

So, exactly what kinds of tech tools do desk workers want? You'll have to ask them. While precise needs vary widely by industry, organization, and job title, one consistent complaint is that the people actually doing the work don't typically have a say in digital solutions. Global Microsoft research confirms this. While 84% of business decision makers note digital transformation projects as a top priority, 61% of employees say they're not an integral part of that process.¹⁴

Employers can bridge the gap by taking a more decentralized approach to IT. Instead of leaving all the digital decisions to senior managers and IT leads, they should be creating a continuous feedback loop that involves people across all departments. Only then can businesses truly get a sense of what's wasting their employees' time and what's causing them the biggest headache on a day-to-day basis.

Citizen development

Hearing employees out is just step one. Step two is actually giving them the ability to build their own productivity solutions, something that’s becoming increasingly common, thanks to the rise of low- and no-code software offerings. As the name suggests, these are tools that allow teams to automate repetitive tasks or create their own apps with little or no coding. This might include things like immediately alerting the next person who needs to review a document, automating an invoicing process, or churning out weekly Excel reports. The key here is ensuring that the baseline software is usable across departments, and won’t break down every time it’s updated—considerations that may require some oversight from IT professionals.

77% of workers wish they had more access to low-code tools or platforms to build digital solutions that help them achieve their goals.¹⁴

Microsoft

This kind of citizen development will soon become even easier and even more common, thanks to generative AI. Not only can ChatGPT detect time-wasting habits and recommend tools and tactics to boost productivity, it can also help you write the computer code needed to build those IT tools and automate tasks yourself. Think of it as your own personal IT concierge.

“Typically, workers are on the receiving end of digital transformation,” says Emily He, corporate VP of business applications at Microsoft. “But we’ve entered a new phase, where they are taking matters into their own hands.” This DIY approach will significantly speed up IT processes—essentially eliminating the need to wait for approvals from the top or join a long queue of requests.

Moving beyond the mundane

The obvious—and understandable—concern here is that automation will take white-collar jobs. But if approached correctly and paired with the appropriate trainings, it has the ability to do something much more powerful: to eliminate the aspects of people’s jobs that they dread the most. More citizen development means IT professionals will be freed up to focus on complex projects that require true technical expertise. And in the case of everyone else, fewer tedious tasks will lead to higher morale and more fulfilling work. Just look to how Walmart is rolling out an AI assistant to summarize documents and speed up projects for its 50,000 corporate employees.

Perhaps best of all, the companies that lean into this kind of IT democratization will naturally attract ambitious employees who are eager to solve real problems. Tech doesn’t have to be a threat to all work. It can just be a threat to the boring parts.

WHAT IF...



Recruitment campaigns highlighted company software? Positioning time-saving tech tools as a hot new benefit.



Incoming employees were taught how to code their own IT solutions? Ensuring that everyone had the tools and know-how to simplify their workflows.



WAY IN 2

BUILT-IN BOUNDARIES

For too long, employers have been treating rest as a Band-Aid for burnout. At your absolute breaking point? Take a day off. Feeling overwhelmed? Try some yoga. But as workers unsubscribe from hustle-and-grind culture, boundaries can no longer be a last resort. Rather, they'll need to be proactively built into daily schedules, time-off policies, and career paths at large.

No other cohort has demanded boundaries quite like Gen Z. After witnessing generations before them give work everything they have only to receive little in return, incoming employees are refusing to treat burnout like a badge of honor. In fact, in a [2023 survey](#), soon-to-be-grads noted work-life balance as their number one concern about the work landscape.¹⁶ This sentiment is especially evident in China, where college students are taking [zombie-style graduation photos](#) that reflect their desire to “[lie flat](#)” and leave toxic 996 work culture behind.

With workers making it clear that their mental health comes first, superficial wellness solutions will no longer suffice. Instead of nap pods in the office, for instance, what if employers restructured work in a way that actually allowed people to get enough rest at home? This is the kind of mindset shift that will set the standard for healthy work-life boundaries going forward.

Rest assured

On a day-to-day level, building for boundaries means creating a culture where logging off early is not only allowed, but encouraged—a tactic that's becoming increasingly common as employers aim to lure in young talent. As of March 2023, more than [1,400](#) UK job postings mentioned “early-finish Fridays” as a benefit.¹⁷ Other companies, like Chinese video-streaming provider Leshi, are implementing [half-day Wednesdays](#) in order to help staff recharge midweek.

Perhaps the most extreme example comes from Indian tech startup SoftGrid. Every day, SoftGrid employees get a notification to log off 10 minutes before their workday ends. Then, at 7 p.m., their computers automatically shut down. While probably not feasible for every kind of business, SoftGrid’s move does signal an opportunity to reinforce boundaries through company tech. Instead of tracking when employees are offline, for example, what if systems alerted managers when their team members were working too much overtime? Or, for non-office workers, what if scheduling software allowed employees to set their own break times? Something remote knowledge workers may take for granted.

Making time off count

Beyond work itself, employers are also rethinking something equally important: time off from work. And contrary to what one might assume, it’s as good for employers as it is employees. One Ernst & Young study showed that for every additional 10 hours of vacation time that employees took, their year-end performance improved 8%.¹⁸ Companies that encourage time off also retain talent for longer, which keeps turnover costs down.

“Rest is not the absence of performance. It’s part of performance. How do we think about rest not to recharge after we burn out, but to ensure our employees stay charged over time?”

Brent Cassell,
VP, Advisory at
Gartner

Despite the clear two-way benefits, though, the reality is that modern workplace stressors often prevent vacations from being as rejuvenating as they should be. One major factor? The pressure to keep up with all the emails and messages that don’t stop just because you’re away. According to a recent poll from Fishbowl by Glassdoor, 54% of professionals say they can’t fully unplug from work when they take paid time off.¹⁹ Recognizing the struggle, employers like PwC and Spotify have started implementing weeklong company-wide shutdowns in hopes that everyone will be able to enjoy a collective reset. An even more novel experiment is being run by Indian tech company Dream11, which forces employees to pay a fee of 1 lakh (\$1,200) if they contact their coworkers who are on leave.

Fractured career paths

Beyond vacation time, companies should also be restructuring career paths to allow for built-in breaks—debunking the idea that rest has to wait until retirement. This might include encouraging sabbaticals for personal and professional development (an increasingly popular benefit), advocating for travel gaps, and even offering grandparent leave for older employees who don’t want to miss out on quality family time.

Most important is that companies position these breaks as a smart career move rather than a risky one, especially considering 60% of people still think there’s a negative stigma associated with a work gap.²⁰ LinkedIn’s recent addition of a “Career Breaks” feature is a great first step toward normalizing time away from the grind.

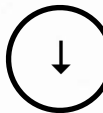
Employer-led boundaries

All of these changes mark a major shift in how we approach work-life boundaries. They’re going from employee-led to employer-led; from reactive to proactive; and from something that’s earned over time to something that’s given automatically. Because ultimately, employees deserve much more than a one-off wellness day. They deserve jobs that don’t strain their mental health in the first place.

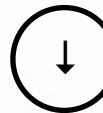
WHAT IF...



Sabbaticals became a standard offering across industries and positions? Allowing people to regularly reset rather than waiting until retirement.



For salaried employees, every hour worked overtime could later be cashed in for two hours of time off?



Breaks were automatically built into project timelines? Ensuring that aggressive deadlines weren’t an excuse for overwork.

WAY IN 3

WORK- PLACE BELONGING

Inclusion and Impact (I&I) isn't a box to check, and it certainly isn't a PR play. Rather, it's an ongoing commitment to designing a work environment that makes everyone feel valued and respected. As we move beyond tokenism, I&I will become a shared responsibility that's built into core business processes.

In 2020, companies worldwide spent about \$7.5 billion on inclusion & impact-related efforts, and that figure has grown every year since, with expectations that it will double to \$15.4 billion by 2026.²¹ But despite this uptick in spending, several companies are still struggling to deliver real results.

In many cases, the problem is that I&I initiatives are being treated as a separate, nice-to-have project that sits on the sideline. Mandatory one-and-done inclusion trainings, programs that begin and end at the hiring stage, and ambitious long-term goals devoid of any near-term plans are all common ways that employers simply check the box and move on. Unfortunately, it's much easier to find examples of empty promises than it is to find successful case studies.

To move past this performative approach and create true progress, businesses will need to design for I&I across the board. That means integrating I&I goals into core business activities, and distributing responsibilities among all employees vs. pinning them on a single group. In other words, I&I efforts should be treated like any other company product—complete with regular check-ins, clear success metrics, and shared accountability.

Inclusion and belonging

This more integrated approach will require I&I to extend beyond the hiring process. While the emphasis on bringing in candidates with different perspectives is of course crucial, it can't stop there. The next—and perhaps even more important—step is ensuring that the people you hired actually feel like they belong. Otherwise, they'll be out as quickly as they came in. Just look at how women leaders are leaving their companies at the highest rate in years.²² Or, how only 24% of women and ethnic minorities in tech roles feel a sense of belonging at work, despite 75% of executives believing the opposite.²³

Telling people they can bring their whole self to work is one thing. But if the culture, physical environment, and company policies don't reflect that, it quickly feels superficial. One way employers can live up to their promise is by initiating a more open dialogue during the onboarding process—taking care to listen to and understand each person's unique needs. And while it may not be possible to meet every single need of every single employee, it can at least help employers identify the biggest gaps to close first.

“At first we looked at inclusion through the lens of gender and race. Now, companies are starting to understand the value of different perspectives, experiences, skill sets, etc., as critical drivers of innovation and problem solving.”

Rema Spelman,
Manager of Inclusion &
Impact at TBWA\Worldwide

In terms of workplace design, this might mean providing desk fans for menopausal women or quiet spaces for neurodivergent employees. In terms of workwear, it might mean loosening dress codes and offering gender-inclusive uniforms—a growing trend among airlines. And in terms of company policies, it might mean reconsidering how return-to-office mandates will disproportionately impact parents, caregivers, and people with disabilities. Religious differences—a topic employers have historically shied away from—are also becoming a bigger consideration. A global leader in this realm is Accenture, which offers inclusive holiday policies and religious literacy training.

Sharing the load

Designing for inclusivity also means expanding impact efforts beyond employee resource groups and closed-door conversations, and making them part of company culture at large. All too often, marginalized communities are relied on to shoulder the majority of I&I work—whether by educating everyone else or bearing the unspoken responsibility of representing their entire demographic. But by giving all employees a role, companies can reframe I&I as a shared priority with shared benefits. Cross-cultural mentorship programs are a great way to achieve this, as is greater transparency around the issues that can be tackled together. For example, imagine if companies sent out I&I progress reports as often as they sent out sales and revenue reports? Openly acknowledging areas for improvement and giving each team a list of clear next steps.

Ultimately, a company can spend their entire PR budget promoting I&I communications and crafting a perfectly worded mission statement. But the real marker of success will lie in their ability to not just hire inclusive talent, but foster an environment that makes them want to stick around. And that kind of employee advocacy can't be faked.

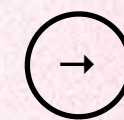
WHAT IF...



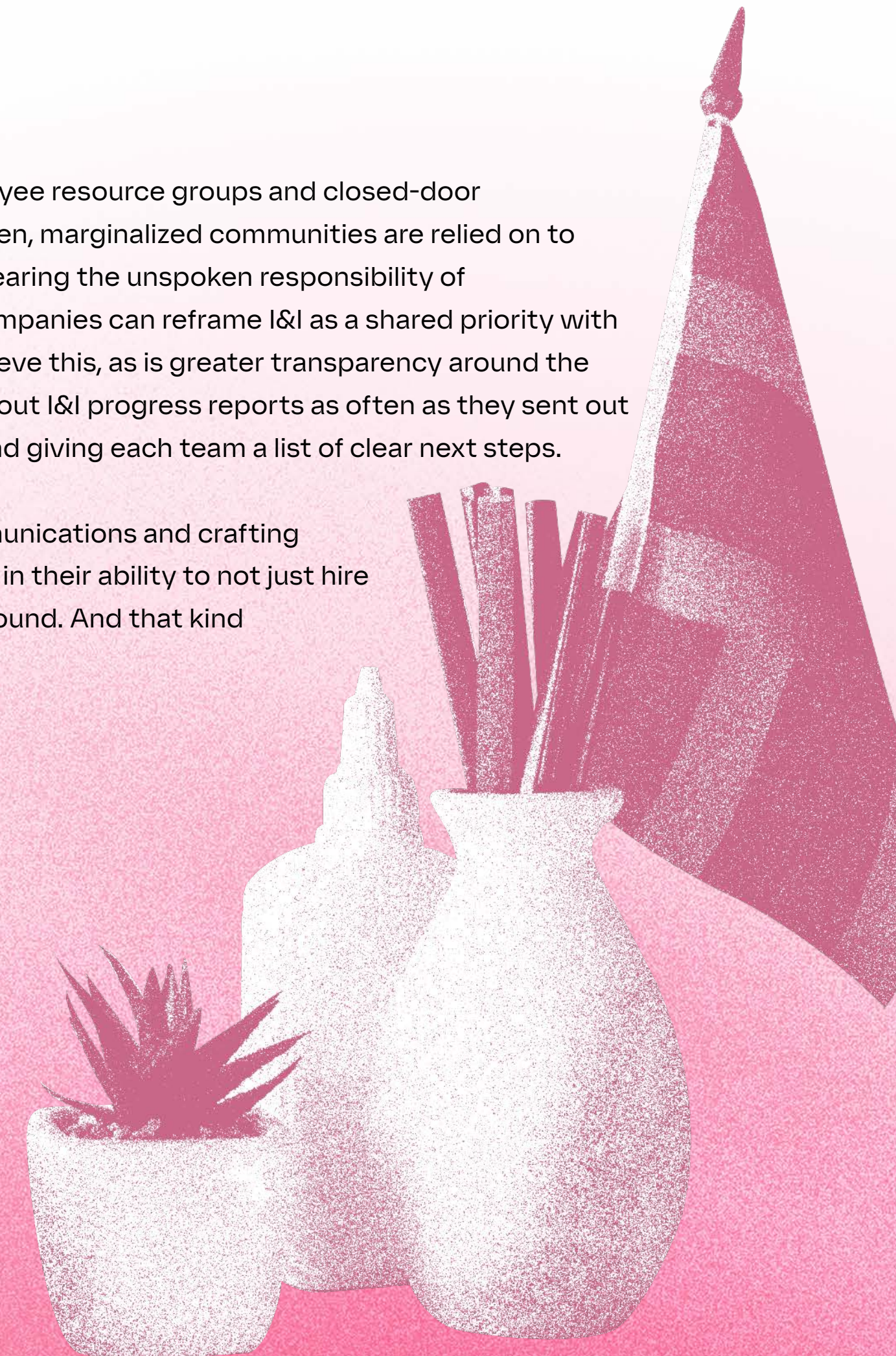
Every project—both internal and external-facing—had measurable I&I goals baked in? From employee onboarding, to product design, to customer service.



I&I efforts were incentivized through bonuses and merit increases?



Managers were consistently trained on how to effectively build and lead inclusive teams? Creating a culture of belonging from the top down.



FLEX FLEX FLEX FUTURES

Flexibility is shifting from a perk to an expectation. As employees decenter work from their lives, companies will be forced to take a more nuanced approach to flexibility—reconsidering not just where we work, but also how schedules are set, how benefits are structured, and how we get paid. And contrary to old assumptions, these personalized offerings won't be limited to the white-collar crowd.



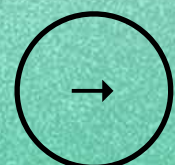


"Balance is a tired old concept that needs to be put to pasture. Younger generations are forcing the conversation to move where it needs to be, which is how all employees can fit work and life together."

Cali Williams Yost,
work transformation strategist

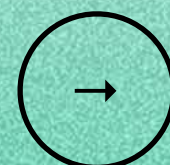
After decades of structuring our lives around work, we're finally making work work for our lives.

DRIVING THE SHIFT



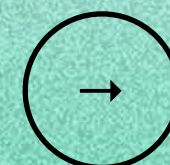
Incoming employees are putting flexibility first

75% of Gen Zers say they would prioritize a job with flexibility over one with a higher salary.²⁴



Personalized offerings are becoming a core aspect of workplace inclusion

Customizable benefits and compensation plans are on the rise as employers look to boost employee retention.



Governments are giving people more say in their working patterns

The UK's newly passed Flexible Working Bill will grant employees the right to request flexible working from day one of a new job, with employers required to provide a reason before rejection. As the competition for talent heats up globally, we could soon see more countries follow suit.

FLUID SCHEDULING

WAY IN 1

The idea of a standard nationwide work week could soon feel archaic as culture calls for a more fluid approach. From compressed workdays to employee-controlled schedules, the future will be about fitting work into our lives.

While much of the fight for flexibility is focused on *where* people work—a topic that’s still causing serious tension between workers and employers—when and for how long people work is also being reassessed in a major way, with a growing number of companies giving their employees more agency over their schedule.

One notable example comes from Australian software agency Code Heroes. After a successful trial, the company recently made the switch from a rigid eight-hour workday to a more fluid six-hour one. Their core hours are from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., when everyone works, then employees are free to complete the other two hours of work whenever they’d like. Best of all, their salaries are the same as when they worked eight hours—a perk that has helped the small company steal talent from top tech giants.

The shift toward shorter, looser schedules is being driven by a larger realization that more time doesn’t always equal more productivity. Employees at Code Heroes, for example, report doing 15% more work in six hours than they did in eight.²⁵ Outside research confirms this too. According to studies done by the Future of Work Research Center at the Teesside University International Business School, people who work eight hours are productive at most two-thirds of the day.²⁵

Blue-collar flex

Perhaps the most noteworthy change is that flexibility—long considered a white-collar privilege—is making its way to non-office work as well. And for good reason. Recent data confirms that 46% of deskless workers consider flexibility to be equally or more important than pay (similar to 54% of their white-collar counterparts).²⁶ But while white-collar talent prioritizes flexibility in terms of location, studies show that blue- and gray-collar workers prioritize flexibility in terms of work schedules and number of hours worked.²⁶ Thankfully, employers are starting to take note. In Germany, DIY retailer Hornbach recently granted its 11,000 employees full autonomy over when they work. Through an online portal, everyone from office managers to warehouse workers can regularly adjust their hours based on if they want to be full-time or part-time, or if they want to work longer shifts to create a four-day week.

Similarly, UK building company Sir Robert McAlpine is running two different flexible working trials. On one site, workers have the option to work longer hours Monday to Thursday so that they can leave at lunchtime on Friday. And on another site, workers get one “flex” day that they can take off every three weeks. To make sure this doesn’t interfere with workflows, every employee is paired with a “flex buddy” who oversees their core responsibilities when they’re out.

Though there’s still a ways to go—only 24% of non-office workers have seen increased flexibility since the start of the pandemic, compared to 52% of knowledge workers—flexibility could very well be the next frontier for blue-collar jobs.²⁶

Two in five non-office workers globally believe their jobs can be flexible, but their employers aren’t trying hard enough to accommodate their needs.²⁷

Randstad 2023
Workmonitor
Pulse Survey

Experimentation awaits

It’s evident that we’re moving further away from the idea that work is at the center of our lives. Rather than setting a firm schedule and assuming employees will figure it out, companies will increasingly be expected to loosen the rules around when and how much people work—giving them the freedom to get the job done on their own terms.

The reality, though, is that work hours can’t be a complete free-for-all. There are plenty of instances where mismatched schedules disrupt processes and hurt the bottom line, meaning companies will have to experiment with different formats to figure out what works for them.

At the same time, we’ll need to establish new systems that give employers the confidence to start measuring work by results instead of by hours. Think new technologies that measure productivity both qualitatively and quantitatively, new outcome-based performance metrics, and new ways of holding workers accountable. For greater flexibility and fewer work hours to become standard, employers will need solid proof that it benefits them far beyond the recruitment stage.

WHAT IF...

- Companies with blue-collar workers became leaders in flexible work experiments? Disproving the assumption that flexibility is only for desk jobs.
- Knowledge workers were online at the same time for half the day, then were free to complete the rest of their work whenever they pleased? Giving workers autonomy while also creating consistency for the sake of collaboration.
- Productivity was measured by qualitative and quantitative results instead of by hours? Debunking the idea that more time equals more productivity.



WAY IN 2

BUILD- YOUR-OWN BENEFITS

Employee benefits are broken. Not only do 85% of employees find them confusing, but over two-thirds don't use their benefits because they're not tailored to their needs. As we confront the fact that a single package can't possibly work for everyone, employers will shift from cookie-cutter benefits to a fully customizable menu of offerings.

Think about the differences between you and a coworker. Any coworker. You probably have different hobbies, different family situations, different definitions of self-care. Why, then, would companies assume that one benefits package could ever satisfy all their employees?

When we say benefits here, we're not talking about statutory benefits that are required by law. We're talking about the non-mandatory "extras" like discounted gym memberships, catered lunches, pet adoption subsidies, and so on. While these types of perks have become an increasingly common way to pull in talent, they've also led many employers down a bottomless pit of weekly pizza parties and in-office massage chairs—all lovely things in their own right, but probably not the most efficient or worthwhile use of company funds.

"If the purpose of employee benefits is to keep staff happy and healthy, only the individual can know what they really want and need."

Ally Fekaiki,
founder of Juno

From endless perks to tailored offerings

Instead of spending money on blanket offerings that are good enough for everyone but great for no one individually, more employers are starting to let workers decide what constitutes a meaningful benefit for them. “Benefits should be utilitarian. People may not want to get their drinks trollied around on a Friday, but they still need to get their kids to school, sleep well, and take care of their mental health,” notes Ally Fekaiki, founder of flexible benefits company Juno.

It may sound complicated and expensive to give employees free rein of their benefits, but there are a growing number of platforms making it feasible. Among the leaders are Forma, Level, and Juno. All three have slight differences, but the basic idea is that employees receive funds via a debit card to spend on products and services as they wish. This includes things you might expect like therapy sessions, nutrition counseling, and transit passes, as well as less common offerings like elder care assistance, death planning support, and fertility treatments. New options can also be added based on employee requests, making it a fully customizable, ever-expanding menu.

While the upside for employees is pretty clear, companies using these platforms also benefit from the ease of a centralized platform, reduced admin, global scalability, and less money down the drain. As Juno’s content lead puts it, “Their well-being and mental health budget can be allocated all in one place and never go to waste by unused yoga classes or generic veggie boxes.” This is especially key in tough economic times, when employers are often forced to pull back certain perks.

The global growth of these platforms proves that employers are catching on. Forma raised \$40 million in Series B funding last year, while London-based Juno pulled in \$4 million after seeing users swell tenfold since 2021.

65% of employees value choosing their own benefits, yet only 36% feel they have a say in their benefits.²⁹

PeopleKeep

Designing for inclusivity

Inherent in this push for employee-first benefits is greater inclusivity. Building benefits for the majority will inevitably leave some people out, but building for individual choice acknowledges the fact that health needs and lifestyle habits vary greatly based on race, gender, age, and location. And as the workforce becomes increasingly unique, one-size-fits all plans will no longer cut it.

WHAT IF...

→ There was a regular feedback loop that allowed benefit options to continually evolve and expand according to employee needs?

→ Companies worked with marginalized and underrepresented groups to address gaps in benefits?



WAY IN 3

A woman wearing a helmet and a backpack, looking down at a smartphone while riding a bicycle. The image is in black and white with a high-contrast, grainy texture.

ADAPTIVE PAY

Flexibility isn't just about when and where you work. It also extends to how you're paid, with more employers now embracing a personalized approach to worker compensation. Because if financial needs and ambitions vary from worker to worker, so too should pay practices.

The rise of flexible pay practices is being driven by a much larger cultural shift toward transparent money talk. In short, the more comfortable we become discussing our financial struggles, the closer we'll get to unearthing practical solutions. And the reality is that these solutions will look different for everyone. This means that employers will be forced to take a much more nuanced approach to pay innovation—looking beyond a single number and rethinking details like how fast workers are actually paid, and how compensation packages can be customized to fit their personal goals.

Gig worker guarantees

In recent years, the salary transparency movement has led to big leaps in pay for hourly and salaried employees. For gig workers, though, pay typically fluctuates based on demand, making it hard to anticipate how much you'll make on any given day. That's where the Solo app comes in. Through partnerships with nearly 20 major gig platforms, the app's new Smart Schedule feature pulls historical data to predict how much workers will make at different times. They can then use that information to plan their schedule in a way that maximizes earnings across their various jobs. The best part? If you end up making less than the app predicted, Solo will pay you the difference.

Faced with ongoing accusations of worker exploitation, individual gig platforms are moving in a similar direction. Lyft recently followed Uber's lead with the rollout of a feature that allows drivers to see pay details before accepting a request. And in June, DoorDash announced that it would begin giving its delivery drivers the option to be paid a flat hourly rate rather than making money for each order—ultimately giving them greater control over when and how they earn.

Instant pay

For the millions of workers living paycheck to paycheck, another issue is that fixed pay cycles don't line up with the real-time nature of personal expenses. But what if you could get paid on demand? That's the idea behind earned wage access (EWA), an increasingly popular model whereby employees are paid at the end of every shift rather than monthly or biweekly. For workers, it's a way to gain financial security and be able to pay bills on time. For a growing number of businesses—including Target, Walmart, and McDonald's—it's a way to incentivize employees to stick around. According to a study by Mercator Advisory Group, the average tenure of retail employees increased by 24% when using EWA.³⁰

87% of Gen Z and 84% of Millennials say they'd be more interested in applying for a job that pays them the same day they work.³¹

Instant

While instant pay is currently geared toward hourly workers and freelancers, EWA platform Instant Financial says the perk is beginning to see greater interest from companies with salaried workers too. And for good reason. 87% of Gen Z and 84% of Millennials say they'd be more interested in applying for a job that pays them the same day they work,³¹ which makes sense considering the expectations set by today's on-demand culture. If you can send money to your friends instantly via Venmo, why shouldn't employers be able to do the same?

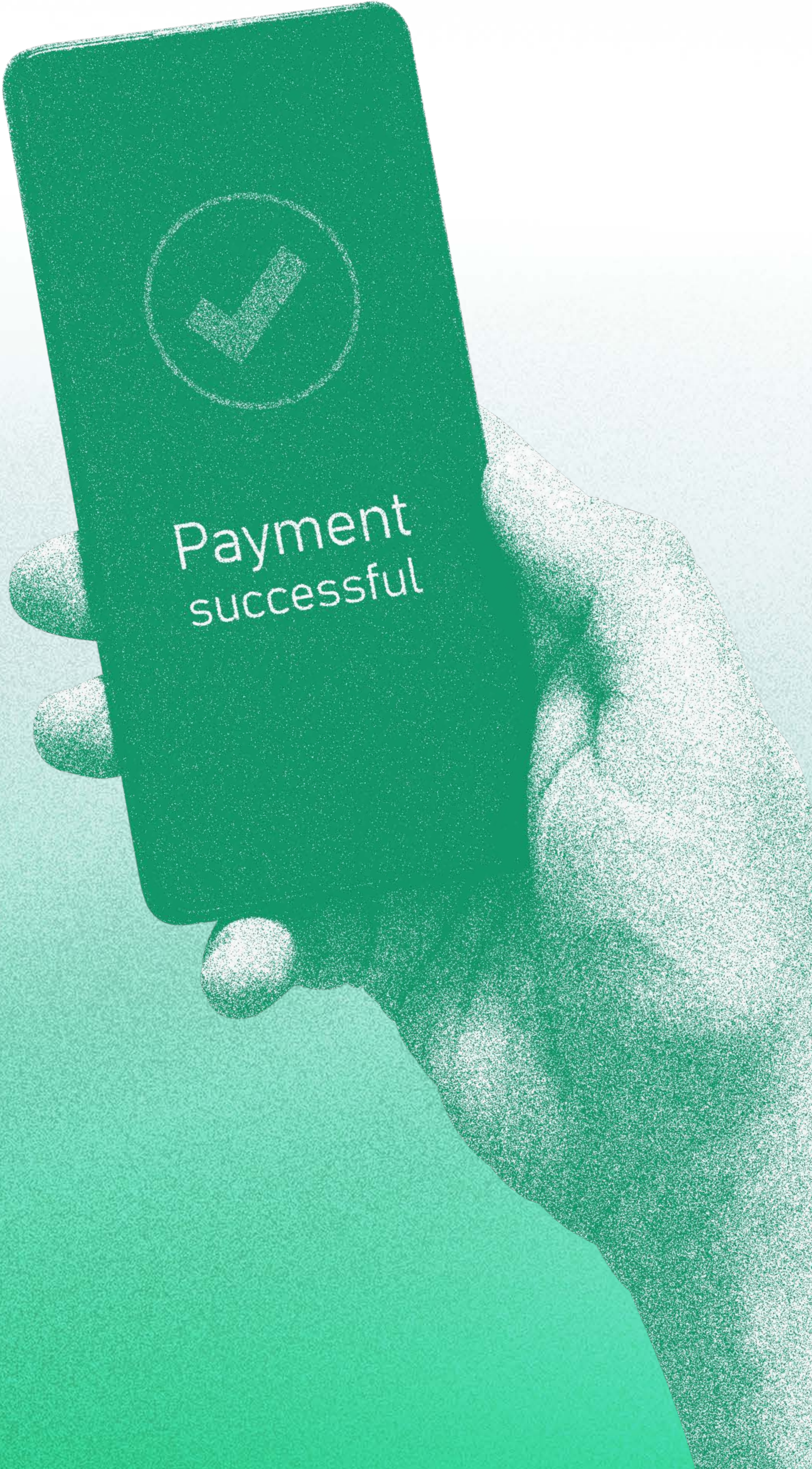
Customized compensation

Looking forward, these flexible pay practices will pave the way for a new era of financial empowerment in the workplace. Imagine, for example, if there was a sort of pay menu that allowed current and prospective employees to customize their compensation package according to their priorities. In practice, this might mean giving people the opportunity to choose the amount of cash they want versus the amount of equity they want. So while an employee looking to buy a house soon might choose more upfront cash, a younger employee with no large upcoming expenses might opt for more equity now in hopes of a larger payoff later on.

To help workers navigate these decisions, companies could even set them up with a personal financial consultant. With shaky economic times ahead, personalized payment terms will be a key differentiator in attracting and retaining talent.

WHAT IF...

- Pay negotiations started with an open conversation around personal financial goals and challenges?
- Employers offered a pay menu that allowed workers to choose their ideal combination of benefits, cash, and equity?
- All gig platforms showed not just the predicted payout, but predicted profit? Accounting for personal expenses like transportation costs, wear and tear of equipment, and insurance.



MANAGING TURBULENCE

From climate change to AI to aging populations, major forces are set to disrupt work as we know it. But while some employers avoid confronting these challenges, others are viewing them as an opportunity to change work for the better. The most resilient organizations will be those that proactively protect their workforce in the face of turbulence.





"The future of work is not about technology trends. It's about the trends in humanity."

Jacob Morgan,
The Employee Experience Advantage

The biggest threats to the future of work are becoming an employer's biggest competitive advantage.

DRIVING THE SHIFT



Rising temperatures are harming productivity and putting workers at risk

By 2030, the equivalent of more than 2% of total working hours worldwide is projected to be lost every year, either because it is too hot to work or because people have to work at a slower pace.³²



The world's demographic sweet spots are changing fast

While leading economies are rapidly aging, many low-income countries will soon have huge prime-age labor forces for the first time.



AI is replacing some jobs, but creating millions of others

Nearly half of hiring managers plan to hire more freelancers and full-time employees to accommodate the increasing capacity for thoughtful, creative work accelerated by AI.³³



WAY IN 1

HEAT PROTECTIONS



Climate change is officially a labor issue. As temperatures soar, outdoor workers are bearing the brunt of extreme heat—sometimes at the cost of their lives. And with record-breaking temperatures expected to continue, workplace heat protections will only become more essential.

Almost every company today will say that climate change is a priority. Much fewer companies, though, are ready to talk about how they're protecting their employees from one of the most dangerous impacts of climate change: extreme heat. To put things into perspective, UN secretary general António Guterres recently declared that we've moved from global warming to "the era of global boiling" after July was confirmed to be the world's hottest month on record. Not only is this wreaking havoc on the economy—with worker productivity losses due to extreme heat costing nations hundreds of billions of dollars—but much more alarming is the fact that it's threatening the lives of millions of laborers.³⁴

Heat's impact is not evenly distributed, either. Outdoor jobs—think delivery drivers, coal miners, construction workers, farmers, landscapers, etc.—are all roles that tend to be filled by a higher percentage of migrants and minorities. Heat also disproportionately impacts older employees in countries like Japan, where over a third of construction workers are now over 55.³⁵ And on a global scale, it poses greater risks for climate-vulnerable areas of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, where temperatures are projected to exceed "the upper limit for survivability" by 2100.³⁶ Outdoor work under those conditions will be impossible.

The lowest-paid 20% of workers suffer five times as many heat-related injuries as the highest-paid 20% of workers.³⁷

Public Citizen

Awareness heats up

The good news is that awareness is growing. The governments of [India](#), [Japan](#), [Qatar](#), and [the US](#), have all recently put heat action plans in place. Entrepreneurs and innovators are also paying closer attention, with this year’s Extreme Heat Countermeasures Exhibition in Tokyo specifically focused on [solutions](#) for workers in high temperatures. And employees around the world are increasingly speaking out and demanding change. Unionized workers at the Acropolis in Athens recently [voted](#) to strike during the hottest four hours of each day; bus drivers and garbage collectors in Italy are [threatening](#) to walk off their jobs if heat protections aren’t put in place; and in the US, delivery drivers from both Amazon and UPS have protested unsafe working conditions due to unbearable heat.

But despite these subtle signs of progress, the reality is that many countries are still far from prepared to deal with this hot new normal. And without adequate protections mandated at a government level, it will be up to employers to enforce their own safety guidelines however they see fit.

Restructuring work around weather

Immediate action from employers can make a real difference. At a basic level, companies should be providing tools that make the heat more manageable on a day-to-day basis. Think uniforms made of cooling fabrics, safety helmets with built-in fans, plenty of shade and water, large-scale outdoor fans, and wearables that alert people when it’s too hot to be working. One company well-positioned to help is UK-based [TechNiche](#), which supplied smart cooling workwear to 150,000 construction workers for the Qatar World Cup.

But beyond these incremental improvements, companies also need to be thinking about how to completely restructure work around extreme weather. In the agriculture industry, for example, more farmers are switching to [night harvesting](#) in order to avoid working at the hottest times of day. Other changes might include mandatory breaks in shaded or air conditioned areas, training people to look out for signs of heat stress in their coworkers, and most importantly, coming up with a contingency plan for the growing number of days when it will simply be too hot to work. James Lanier, managing partner for waste management company Ryland Environmental, [says](#) that if climate trends continue, he would even consider adding greater automation so that the company’s garbage collectors could spend more time in the air-conditioned cab instead of outside. For all of these ideas to be properly tested and implemented, it’s very likely that Chief Heat Officers will become a common job title within organizations, just as [is happening](#) in cities around the world.

Closing the heat gap

The consequences of not implementing these measures are far too great to be ignored. Even more lives will be lost, healthcare costs will continue to increase alongside the rise in heat-related illnesses, and lawsuits will be in order for any company that fails to take heat protections seriously. On the contrary, the businesses that take the lead in developing heat action plans will take a crucial step in closing the gap between those who work outside and those with the luxury of an air-conditioned office. Heat protections are now essential workers’ rights.

WHAT IF...



Competitors teamed up to create industry-wide heat action plans? Sharing data and learnings to come up with comprehensive guidelines.



Businesses promoted their heat-protection strategies as much as they promoted their sustainability initiatives? Bringing much-needed visibility to a hidden issue.



Chief Heat Officer became an essential role within companies that employ weather-vulnerable workers?

WAY IN 2

PRODUCTIVE AGING



Once overlooked, older employees are making up a larger share of the workforce—giving companies no choice but to pay attention to their needs. From upskilling programs to workplace redesigns, planning for worker longevity is now essential.

When it comes to planning for the future, employers tend to focus on young people entering the workforce. The reality, though, is that the future is looking more and more gray. Workers age 55 and above will fill 150 million more jobs globally by 2030, exceeding 25% of the workforce in high-income countries.³⁸ The trend is playing out in low- and middle-income countries too. China's 65+ population is set to double by 2050, and Brazil's proportion of workers over 55 is approaching the mid-teens.³⁸

At the same time, people are living longer than ever before, meaning their work lives are also getting longer. See the global rise in "unretirement," where the formerly retired are returning to work either out of financial necessity or simply to keep busy.

Yet despite this very clear shift, prioritizing older workers is still far from the norm. A worldwide study from 2020 found that fewer than 4% of organizations have programs in place to integrate older workers into their talent system, with just 27% saying they were "very likely" to consider doing so in the future.³⁹ That has to change.

"The uncomfortable truth is that age-related work discrimination is widespread. Demographic reality will catch up with that attitude soon enough."

**Bain &
Company**

Understanding generational motivations

Designing roles for a graying workforce starts with understanding their motivations. And unlike most other workers, good compensation isn’t their top priority. Rather, global [research](#) shows that around age 60, interesting work becomes the number one job attribute, and both autonomy and flexibility also significantly increase in importance.³⁸ In other words, they want to do work that’s fulfilling, and they want the freedom to do it when and how they please.

With this in mind, employers might consider adding more fractional or part-time roles that allow older workers to control their own hours. Or, with travel a priority for many people nearing retirement, what if global companies developed a program for employees over 55 to live and work in several different countries? Disproving the notion that travel has to wait until after retirement.

In terms of the desire for “interesting work,” companies should also consider leveraging the insight of those 55+ to come up with innovations geared toward their age demographic. After all, an aging population also means an aging customer base, and who better understands the needs of older generations than older generations themselves? With demand for senior-centric products and services set to blow up, this would create a win-win for both sides.

Bridging the skills gap

Keeping older employees not just eligible for the jobs of tomorrow, but highly engaged in them, will also require tailored upskilling programs. One company leading by example is global tech firm Atos. In 2021, the company launched a “[Bridging the Generation Skills Gap](#)” program geared toward its 21,000 employees over the age of 50. Employees set personal goals and decide which courses and certifications would benefit them—all provided for free.

Another approach is to zero in on one of the biggest reasons people leave the workforce before they’re ready: frustration with new tech. [Studies](#) show that the faster a company installs new software, the faster it loses older workers.⁴⁰ But it doesn’t have to be that way. In addition to digital skills trainings, companies can also explore cross-generational mentorship programs that pair up older and younger workers. This would allow younger digital natives to pass on their tech tips, while more senior workers could share their expertise or hold leadership trainings.

Addressing physical realities

Reskilling is especially important for older employees who need to transition out of physically taxing roles. A 60-year-old cashier may no longer be comfortable standing for several consecutive hours, for example, but their experience interacting with customers could make them a perfect candidate for a customer service role.

For workers who either can’t or don’t wish to transition out of physical work, there are other ways to reduce risk of injury. In Japan, where those over 55 will approach [40%](#) of the workforce by 2031,³⁸ older employees are using [exosuits](#) to stay in the workforce longer. Other solutions might include tweaking workplace ergonomics for older employees (think seating adjustments or softer floors), or instituting wellness programs focused on healthy aging.

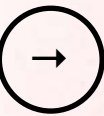
A new appreciation for aging

Extending the longevity of the workforce will require a holistic approach to aging—accounting for all the ways in which mental, emotional, and physical needs evolve over time. And while the solutions themselves are nearly limitless, the main takeaway is that putting older workers professionally out to pasture is no longer an option. The companies that turn their skills into a competitive advantage will be best positioned to stick around for the long haul.

WHAT IF...



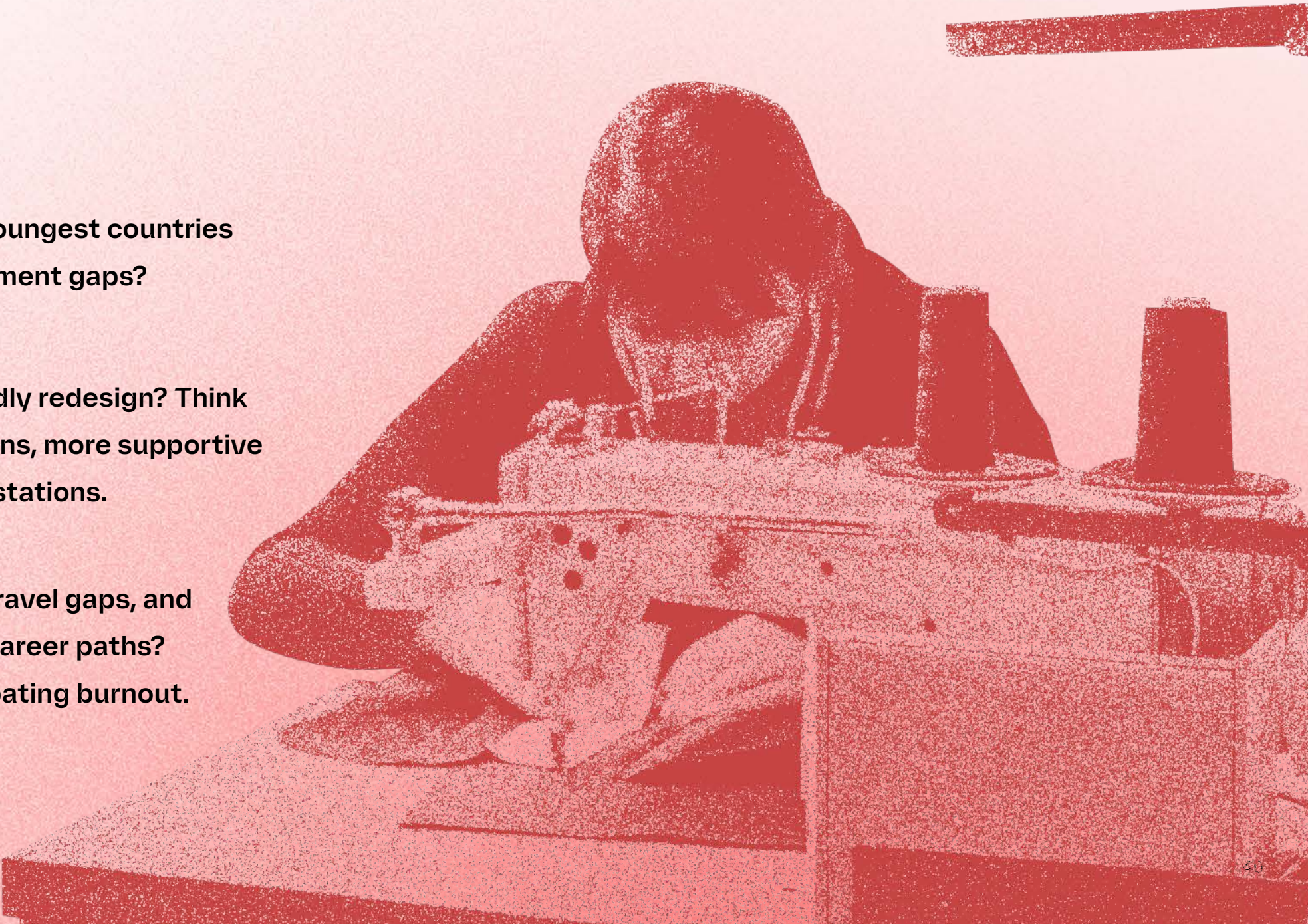
Companies in the oldest and youngest countries worked together to fill employment gaps?



Workplaces got an aging-friendly redesign? Think easier-to-read computer screens, more supportive uniforms, and ergonomic workstations.



Businesses built sabbaticals, travel gaps, and regular breaks into employee career paths? Allowing for longevity by combating burnout.



WAY IN 3

HUMANS OFF DUTY



Rather than AI taking human jobs, what if AI could make work more human again—taking over undesirable tasks, preventing burnout, and allowing us to all spend a little more time off duty? Here, we explore how AI-powered platforms and digital doubles could allow man and machine to exist in harmony.

Panic around AI taking our jobs is nothing new. But while past fears centered around the automation of specific tasks, today's workers are being forced to reckon with a something far more daunting: a future where fully virtual humans replace living, breathing talent.

While it sounds like something out of a sci-fi film, the evidence is already building. Companies are hiring AI interns with fake faces and real names; Hollywood actors are striking over AI-generated actors taking their roles; metahumans are serving as news anchors and government communicators; and some are predicting that even CEOs won't be safe from the robot revolution. At the same time, a growing group of artists, authors, and coders are suing tech companies for training AI on their work without credit or compensation.

The downside of these developments are well-documented—ranging from job displacement to privacy concerns to much bigger ethical debates. But what if we explored a more optimistic outcome? One where humans win, and where we weren't slaves to the AI machine, but rather, it was the other way around.

AI creator economy

One way to paint a more positive picture is by examining all the ways in which AI will unlock new sources of independent income. Think of it as the creator economy 2.0, where you can license your talents to AI, own those inputs, and profit from the outputs in perpetuity. For instance, artists could submit their work to AI image generators like Ascendent Art, which is promising to pay royalties to people who help train their models; singers could license their voices as AI clones via platforms like Myvox; and creatives could design virtual sneakers through Nike's SWOOSH community and earn a cut of the sales. Just as social media has offered a solid income stream for millions of creators today, these AI platforms—if built with the proper protections in place—could allow people to generate passive income while also becoming co-owners and co-creators of a company's future.

The liquid workforce

Taking things a step further, imagine if a knowledge worker had a digital double to work on their behalf. In other words, we wouldn't just be licensing out our artwork or our voices. We would be licensing our real intelligence to an artificial one that thinks like us and acts like us, just hundreds of times more efficiently.

“Very soon, any person will be able to have a virtual twin for professional use that can deliver content on their behalf, speak in any language and scale their productivity in ways previously unimaginable.”

Oren Aharon, CEO and founder of Hour One

Similar to what happens with employees now, these AI twins could be modeled for specific workstreams and clients, and be trained using proprietary company information. Human oversight and creative problem solving would still be required, of course, but if done thoughtfully, such a system could free people up to pursue work that is quintessentially human. This might include skilled jobs you perform with your hands, like carpentry, physical therapy, and even artisan cheese making, as well as jobs that depend on personal, face-to-face connection, like teaching, hospitality, counseling, and caregiving. So instead of deploying robots to look after the elderly, for example, we can all spend a bit more time looking after each other. And instead of working one job for 40 hours a week, we would be able to contribute to various projects—whether paid or simply for pleasure—that align with our various interests.

Employee-owned AI

The key caveat here, and it's a big one, is that individuals maintain total ownership and control over their work avatar. Otherwise, we could very well get into a situation where all intelligence is public domain, meaning companies no longer have an incentive to pay people for their ideas, and people no longer have an incentive to come up with them.

In addition to ownership, other big questions remain. How would employers price out human work hours vs. hours worked by your digital double? When employees leave a company, will they earn residuals on the AI they helped train? How will these digital doubles work together when they're being modeled on different opinions and different ways of thinking?

Just as it's crucial to examine the potential dark sides of an AI-driven workforce, we also owe it to ourselves to explore a brighter future where humans and machines coexist and collaborate for good. Only then can we begin laying the foundations to get there.

WHAT IF...



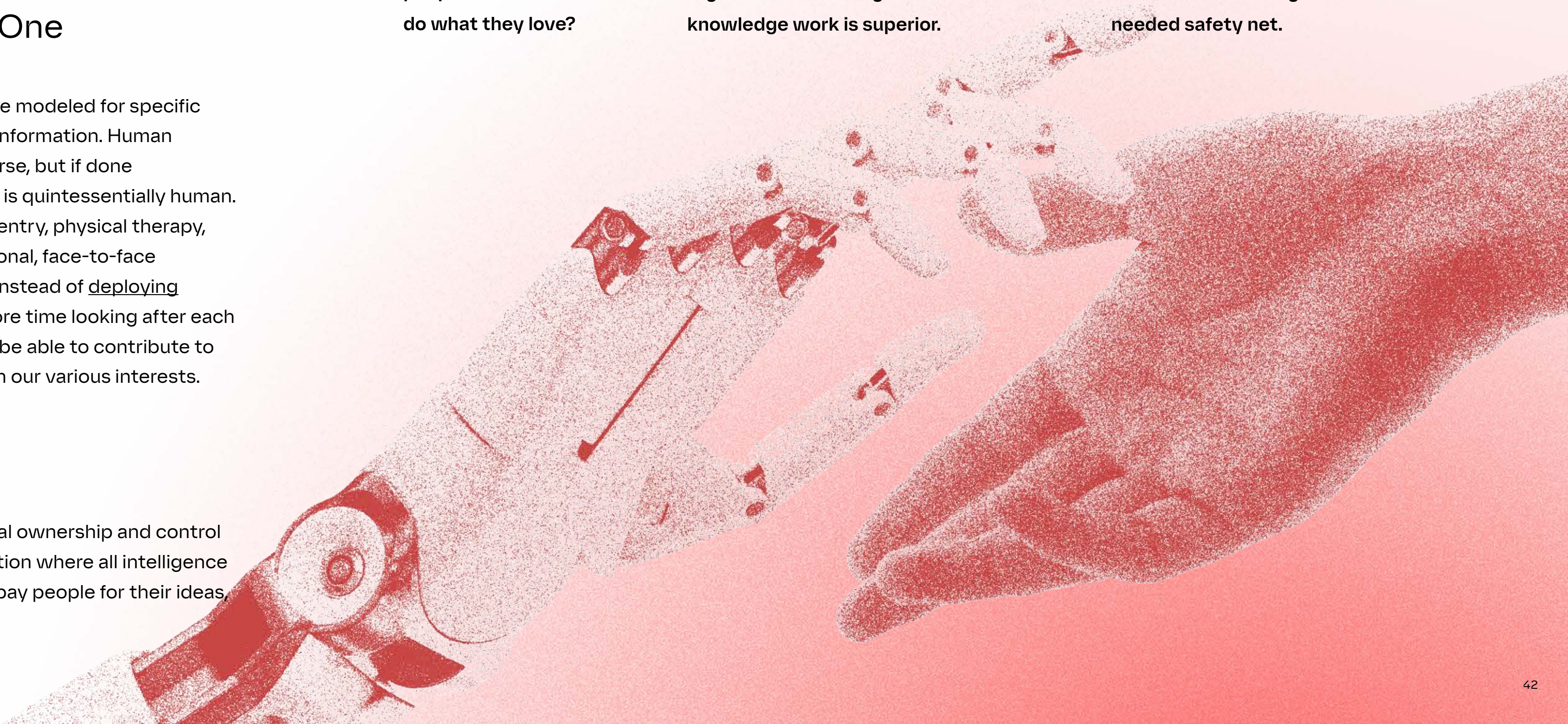
Income generated by digital doubles gave people the freedom to do what they love?



Jobs that require a physical, human touch became the most highly regarded? Debunking the idea that knowledge work is superior.



AI platforms allowed people to earn passive income through retirement? Offering a much-needed safety net.



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EDGES SHAPING THE FUTURE *OF* EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

ARTIFICIAL CREATIVITY

Creativity is undergoing an AI revolution. Giant leaps in the progression and availability of generative AI tools are driving a shift from purely logical, task-oriented applications to more artful, previously impossible outputs. As AI pushes further into creative industries, culture wars around ownership, value, and definitions of “real” creativity will ensue. Say goodbye to the creative process as you know it.

CONNECTION QUEST

We’re simultaneously more connected and more isolated than ever before. With our world no longer built to facilitate face-to-face interactions, businesses are stepping in to fill the void with new social spaces, community concepts, and apps for intentional companionship. The connection economy is booming, and our collective well-being is at stake.

GAP COLLAPSE

The fight against inequality is growing more nuanced. No longer just a wealth gap—the climate gap, health gap, education gap, and digital divide are exposing the very real consequences of rising inequality. And human rights are at stake. In the race to rebalance the scales, unlocking access is the next big market opportunity.

HEALTH HEDONISM

A once-sterile healthcare industry is taking cues from the pleasurable parts of wellness, ushering in a more holistic and hyper-personalized approach. As wellness fuses with everything from beauty, to entertainment, to fashion, everyday rituals will get a self-care makeover. Who says the journey to better health can’t be enjoyable?

INCLUSIVE BY DESIGN

Inclusivity isn’t a checkbox, it’s a form of design thinking. As expectations around inclusivity skyrocket, hyper-critical consumers will sniff out tokenism and expose empty promises. Genuine inclusion requires an entirely new blueprint—building systems, laws, spaces, products, and experiences to be accessible from the bottom up. A fairer future awaits.

LIQUID REALITY

It’s the end of reality as we know it. From synthetic media to the rise of virtual everything, metaverse tech is ushering in a heightened era of on/ off-line blur. As the limits of our physical world are shattered, new possibilities for self-expression and deeper immersion abound.

EDGES SHAPING THE FUTURE *OF* EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

MONEY OUT LOUD

Money is being taken off the do-not-discuss list. From salary transparency to financial therapy, culture is getting candid about the role money plays in our lives. The end of secrecy will mark the start of a more honest, equal, and holistic approach to all things finance.

NEO- COLLECTIVISM

A renewed emphasis on collectivism is redistributing power at scale. Realizing that individualism can only get us so far, brands and organizations are relinquishing control and inviting participation in the form of decentralization, crowdsourcing, and co-creation. The future belongs to all of us.

OPTIMIZED ANATOMY

A desire for control has us taking biology into our own hands. From disease interventions to ultra high-tech tools, a growing category of treatments and products are helping people hack their way to a healthier, stronger, younger version of themselves. In the business of self-optimization, no upgrade is out of reach.

STABILITY PURSUIT

With disruptive forces making it harder to predict the jobs of tomorrow, stability is in high demand. Workers are chasing companies that will invest in their future, while employers are aiming to attract and retain talent with practical perks and upskilling opportunities. The new dream job is the one that's future-proof.

WORK-LIFE BOUNDARIES

A burnt-out workforce is putting life first. As employees reassess their relationship with work, rising demand for clear boundaries and better protections will spur a modern-day labor movement. Work-to-live is the new mentality, and flexibility is the new expectation.

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