



# REDESIGNING WORK IN A WAY THAT WORKS FOR EVERYONE

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# We are experiencing what is undoubtedly the greatest global shift in work for a century.

Our collective experience of the pandemic has created a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to rethink what the workers among us want from work and our working lives and what those of us who are leaders want to encourage and institute within our organizations. We've had a chance to question many fundamental assumptions, adopt new habits, and form new narratives of how work gets done. We are now faced with some significant choices—do we go back to our old ways of working or do we use this as an opportunity to completely redesign work and make it more purposeful, productive and fulfilling for all?

Drawing from my own research and advisory experience, I have created a design process to support you in answering these questions about purpose and capabilities. It takes you and your team through four steps: understanding people, networks and jobs; reimagining work; modelling and testing your redesign ideas; and acting on your models and creating new ways of working. This design process is crucial because, in my experience, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach will not work. Instead, you have the opportunity to create a way of working that fully resonates with your unique purpose and values, that acknowledges the capabilities and motivations of your employees and that ultimately increases productivity and fulfilment. This is your corporate 'signature'.

Here, I want to focus on that third step: **model and test ideas.**

Specifically, how can we ensure that the model of work we ask employees to adhere to works for everyone?

## **MODEL AND TEST: THAT THE MODEL OF WORK IS FAIR AND JUST**

Is the model for the redesign of work fair and just? Is it likely to build, maintain or deplete trust among employees?

Of course, when redesigning work, no executive deliberately sets out to deplete trust and create unfair practices but it could become an unintended consequence.

Businesses are facing a time of significant disruption, ambiguities and unforeseen events. In navigating through this period, employee trust will be a crucial asset. High-trust organizations are more agile and flexible, and employees of high-trust organizations are significantly less stressed, more energetic and productive, more engaged and satisfied, and less likely to experience burnout.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, people in high-trust organizations are more likely to benefit from 'psychological safety'—they feel able to talk about their real feelings, to challenge others and to have confidence that their group will not embarrass, ridicule or reject their ideas and views. They feel more able to 'speak up'.

Creating a model of work that is fair and just will be crucial.

## MAKE SURE EVERYONE BENEFITS FROM THE REDESIGN

Looking back to the early phases of the pandemic, when many companies were in the ‘unfreeze’ state, there was much conversation about listening to employees and their specific needs and also excitement about the possibilities of changing working practices. Perhaps, executives debated, people could work from home more, or have work designed in a way that created more opportunities to be engaged in tasks that required focus and undisturbed time.

Yet, as the consequences became clearer, another narrative began to emerge. There was growing unease that the very aspects of redesign that seemed to work so well for some would not work for others; there would be losers as well as winners. We began to see the first signals of unintended consequences.

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**PRIMARY CARERS |** Executives fretted that in this shift to working from home, it was carers who seemed to get the worst deal. And, as described earlier, in some households it was women who were putting in more domestic time, and were more likely to take homeworking rather than office options. If carers (either men or women) stayed at home when others returned to the office, the concern was that this would impact on their longer-term promotion prospects.

**YOUNGER WORKERS |** There was also a growing realization that for some groups of employees—particularly younger workers, who often shared their home space with flatmates, the chance to work at home was not a big draw and could be seen as a disadvantage. Also, removing the chance to learn through observation put them in danger of losing that important connection to more experienced people and their knowledge.

**THOSE FOR WHOM HOMEWORKING IS NOT AN OPTION |** Beyond the excitement about homeworking, the simple truth was that for many workers this was not, and never would be, an option. That is true for doctors and nurses in hospitals and care workers in the community; for people working in the manufacturing, delivery and supply chain; and for the millions of people engaged as platform workers in companies like Deliveroo or Uber. In fact, as the 2021 census survey in the UK (which took place during the pandemic on 21 March) reported, only 46 per cent of employed people said they were working from home that day (in the US the figure was about 47 per cent). That still left a lot of people who weren't working from home. Imagine if you worked on the assembly line of a car plant and on two days a week you saw the offices of your administrative colleagues empty because they were working from home—how would you feel?

In the early phases of the pandemic I saw how many companies, when they began experimenting with new approaches to work, typically allowed managers to drive the process on an ad hoc basis. Some executives left it to individual managers to talk with their teams to make it work. On the face of it, this makes sense, but over time, with no guiding principles or collaborative decision making, inevitably this gave rise to accusations of unfairness. As it played out, different departments and teams were afforded different degrees of flexibility and freedom. Some began to feel unfairly treated.

## THE TOUGH DECISIONS TO BE FACED

Whilst the redesign of work has great opportunities, it also has the potential to create significant possibilities for unfairness. To understand these possibilities more, I asked executives in a series of workshops, webinars and interviews which judgement calls they thought could, if not handled properly, result in feelings of unfairness. Here are some example responses: 'How do we manage home/office flexibility?' 'Who should be in the office and who should work from home?' 'How do we build a system of time flexibility that acknowledges the caring responsibilities of parents of young children but does not put an undue burden on those without caring responsibilities?' 'How do we know that people working at home are productive rather than shirking, and how do we ensure that we don't put in place monitoring systems that assume they are not trusted?' 'How do we balance office work, where flexibility of working from home is a possibility, with other jobs where there is no flexibility around place?'

## THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE FAIRNESS AND JUSTICE

Think of an employee faced with a situation where fairness will be in issue. Take two examples: Amy, a single person without caring responsibilities in a group where two of her co-workers have young children to care for, and Eric, an assembly-line worker with office-based colleagues.

How do Amy and Eric decide whether they have been treated fairly? It could be, for example, that Amy feels it's unfair she has to cover for her colleagues with caring responsibilities, and Eric feels it's unfair he doesn't have the flexibility that his office-based colleagues have. Over many years various studies have teased out what influences perceptions of fairness. It turns out this has not just one factor but several. And as you consider whether the model for the redesign of work you have in mind is fair, you will need to reference each of these factors—outcomes, procedures and interactions.

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**WAS THE OUTCOME FAIR?** When Amy and Eric think about their working experiences they will consider whether the outcome (what researchers call distributed fairness) is in their judgement equitable. Perhaps Amy feels that she is being treated unfairly because on three occasions in the last week she was asked to put in extra hours because the two people with caring responsibilities had to leave early to look after their children. Whilst Amy is happy to do this occasionally, she is beginning to feel unfairly treated and taken for granted. She is beginning to wonder whether this will become a norm, whether it will be she who has to step up whenever there is a crunch in projects. Eric might feel he is being treated unfairly for very different reasons. He could notice, as mentioned, that the offices are empty on some days, so he cannot simply pop into the office with a quick question should an issue arise. In addition, Eric and his colleagues might feel that, compared to the office workers, they are getting the raw end of the deal.

**WAS THE PROCEDURE FAIR?** Clearly, it's the outcome that is the most obvious factor when we think about fairness. But behind these feelings of fairness about the outcome is a sense of the process that was used to reach that outcome. We judge a process to be fair on a range of criteria: Is it consistent over time and between people? Do we trust that it is not biased by the self-interest of the decision makers? Is it accurate in the sense of being based on reliable information? Does it represent the needs, values and outlook of all those it will affect? Is it ethical in the sense that it is compatible with our own moral and ethical values?

What is important about the impact of procedural fairness is that, whilst it is about a single process, when we feel we have been treated unfairly with regard to this single process our reactions are directed to the whole organization and every process.

Let's take a closer look at Amy's situation to examine this. Imagine that Amy was not consulted about covering when colleagues are looking after their children. It was simply assumed that she would do so. She will see that the procedure, or rather lack of one, is unfair. What might be a fairer process? It could be that the whole team sits down to discuss the issue beforehand. As a team they can decide on a number of possible ways forward; perhaps those with caring responsibilities give as much notice of unavailability as possible, or arrange among themselves to job-share, or work longer days and/or a shorter week. And if people like Amy are asked to step in, then they are able to take time off to compensate.

We can play out the procedural options for Eric as well. Like Amy, he is more likely to feel he has been unfairly treated if there is no procedure in place. The simplest of procedures would be to acknowledge to Eric and the others on the assembly line that office workers have flexibility about the place of work and assembly workers do not. But are there opportunities to create flexibility for assembly-line workers like Eric—not around place, of course, but around time? It might be possible, for example, to use the redesign of work as an opportunity to look at time flexibility: working longer shifts in the day so that the week is four days rather than five; or moving to a four-day week; or working seven days on and three days off.

**WAS THE INTERACTION JUST AND FAIR?** The third factor that influences our feelings of fairness and justice is the manner of the interactions with team leaders and managers. This is the human side of organizational practices—the way the manager behaves towards the recipients. Do employees feel they are being treated with politeness, honesty and respect?<sup>2</sup>

You can get a sense of the importance of this in a study that Jerald Greenberg, professor of management and human resources at Ohio State University, conducted.<sup>3</sup> He looked at how pay cuts were handled at two manufacturing plants (A and B). The vice-presidents took slightly different approaches. In plant A the vice-president called a meeting at the end of the working week and announced that the company would implement a 15 per cent pay cut, across the board, for ten weeks. He very briefly explained why, thanked employees and answered a few questions—the whole episode was over in fifteen minutes. In plant B, where an identical pay cut was being communicated, the company vice-president handled things slightly differently. He first told the affected employees that other cost-saving options such as lay offs had been considered, but that a pay cut seemed to be the least unpalatable choice. He then took an hour and a half to address employees' questions and concerns, and he repeatedly expressed regret about having to take this step. Even the scale of these interactional differences made an impact. Greenberg found that during the following ten-week period, employee theft was nearly 80 per cent lower in Plant B than at Plant A, and employees were fifteen times less likely to resign.

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So, we can assume that if Amy is simply informed by email or by a harassed and overworked manager that she is expected to cover for her colleagues with caring responsibilities, she is much more likely to feel that she has been treated unfairly than if her manager sits down with her, shows empathy with her situation, listens to her point of view and then describes why they have concluded that she has to cover. The same is true for Eric. He is more likely to feel that he has been treated fairly if his supervisor meets him and his workmates to talk through the issues, is empathetic to their situation and acknowledges that their deal is not the same as the office workers', before telling them the decision that the executive team have come to.

## WHY IT'S SO HARD TO BE FAIR

On the face of it, these three factors of fairness seem relatively straightforward—ensure the outcome and procedure are fair and that interactions involved are empathic. But the reality is that these qualities are often hard to deliver—and ever more so during the pandemic. In part that's because many tough decisions were made at a time when the resources to make these decisions fair were stretched. This was one of the issues the executives in my Future of Work Consortium addressed in the series of workshops in October 2020. There was clear evidence that these were tough times and for each of the three factors there were significant strains.

**OUTCOME FAIRNESS—THE PRESSURE TO GET THINGS DONE** | As managers grappled with the impact of the pandemic and its aftermath, many felt under real pressure to get the job done and make quick decisions. As a consequence there were times when they cut corners and failed to represent the needs of everyone.

They were operating under conditions of significant uncertainty and ambiguity, and faced with an unpredictable future, it was hard to know exactly what to do for the best. At the same time, employees were feeling anxious and unprepared: Would they lose their job? Would a program or machine take over a significant slice of their work? A survey conducted in the midst of the pandemic reported that 83 per cent of employees said they feared becoming unemployed—citing the likely causes as the gig economy, a looming recession, a lack of skills, cheaper foreign competitors, immigrants who will work for less, automation, or jobs being moved to other countries.<sup>4</sup> As companies move into the next phase of redesigning work, it is clear that skilled managers will play a central role in ensuring outcomes are fair and there is much that can be done to assist managers—both by restructuring their jobs and by providing much needed support and development opportunities.

**PROCEDURAL FAIRNESS—THE PLIGHT OF OTHERS** | During the pandemic, many workers were either temporarily or permanently laid off. This inevitably had an impact on those who remained, sometimes called ‘survival guilt’. Layoffs can also create in those employees who remain a sense that they’ve lost control, the fate of their ex-peers sending a clear signal that hard work and good performance do not guarantee immunity. Indeed, one 2002 study found that, after a layoff, survivors experienced a 41 per cent decline in job satisfaction, a 36 per cent decline in organizational commitment and a 20 per cent decline in job performance.<sup>5</sup>

So, even when the process was fair, there were times when people were too anxious to acknowledge this. That puts a real emphasis on engaging employees across your company in conversations about what is happening and how they are feeling. The ‘leader’s narrative’ can do much to lay out a future that people can feel positive about and engage with.

**INTERACTIONAL FAIRNESS—THE CHALLENGE OF REMOTE WORK |** There can be significant barriers to managers' empathy and the integrity of their message. That is especially true for managers and colleagues who work remotely. As people work remotely so their support networks reduce, and so too did the opportunities for those encounters when managers could seek in-the-moment guidance from colleagues, or speak informally to a team member over a coffee. During the pandemic, for many the conversion from face-to-face to virtual communication hampered these sensitive conversations. That's because much of the way we naturally empathize with one another is through visual signals—we can gauge someone's emotional state with a quick glance. Such interpretation becomes much harder via a computer monitor or phone screen. During the pandemic this combination of time stress, uncertainty and isolation resulted in people finding it more difficult to create a fair process.

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As post-pandemic ways of working are designed, often with an emphasis on both face-to-face and virtual work, these issues of interactional fairness will have to be addressed. That means bringing employees together in ways that make them feel connected, even in a virtual environment, and being more intentional about each of the factors of fairness. Engaging people in conversations about the choices and trade-offs they face and acknowledging that in these times of uncertainty, the executive team won't always get it right.

Some executive teams are working hard to achieve this. They are giving employees time to reflect and think about their situation, and making sure there is time to have their voice heard. They are listening and sharing stories that frame the dilemmas people face so they can understand them more deeply. They have framed the redesign of work as a series of experiments from which everyone is learning, not as a one-off intervention, but rather as part of a long-term collaboration.

## BECOME PART OF A REDESIGNING WORK LEARNING COMMUNITY

I believe that when it comes to organization learning, insight from peers in other companies is crucial. That's why I launched the Future of Work Consortium more than a decade ago. My aspiration was to bring together executives and researchers to make them aware of the forces that are shaping work and how best to respond to them. It has been this consortium group of executives that has steered much of my own thinking as we all responded to the challenges and the opportunities of the pandemic. You can find out more about this consortium at [www.hsm-advisory.com/redesigning-work](http://www.hsm-advisory.com/redesigning-work).

As part of my support to companies, my advisory team created an action-based programme that works with organizations to support managers on how to redesign work. Go to our website to learn more about what this is, and how it works. In joining it, you would become part of a learning community that is dedicated to redesigning work.

These are extraordinary transformational times. We face real challenges, yet also real opportunities. We have a chance now to fundamentally change our relationship to the work we do, to our colleagues and to our organizations. **We will transform this relationship by redesigning work.** ☀

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Lynda Gratton is Professor of Management Practice at the London Business School and Founder of the consultancy practice HSM Advisory. For over a decade she has been ranked among the top management thinkers globally by Thinkers50. She is the author of ten books, including *The Shift*, *The Key*, and with Andrew J. Scott, *The 100-Year Life* and *The New Long Life*.

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## Endnotes

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2. J. Brockner, 'Why it's so hard to be fair', *Harvard Business Review*, March 2006.
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