Today’s workplace is characterised by multiplicity. A multiplicity of contracts, of expectations, of gender and ethnicity, and of generations. In the 21st century workplace there is no ‘one size fits all’. Organisations require tailored solutions and companies are increasingly diversifying in order to meet their needs. So what are these multiplicities and what impact are they having on the workplace?

Firstly there is the multiplicity of contracts. Over the past thirty years contracts have evolved beyond the traditional open-ended relationship and widened to encompass a large range of variations. Today we see fixed term contracts, where people are hired for a certain timeframe in order to carry out a job; part-time contracts where workers are contracted for perhaps two or three days per week; freelance contracts where people work for an organisation when it needs them; sole traders and SME contracts where people form a company which is then contracted to undertake a certain task; and training contracts where workers are part working and part still studying for qualifications. In markets like France and Belgium more than 30 different types of contract are in operation and companies employ people in a dozen different ways. These contracts suit companies and increasingly they are suiting workers too.

This leads to our second multiplicity – that of expectations. Many people want to work to live, not live to work, and seek a better work/life balance with flexibility in when and how they work. Perhaps they want more spare time to pursue hobbies, or to take care of young children or elderly relatives. Whatever the motivation, expectations within the workforce vary greatly. The young person just starting work and wishing to carve a career has a very different set of expectations from the man of 60, who decides to work part-time in the run-up to retirement, or the young mother who wants to leave at 4pm each day to collect her children from school. Each of these people work alongside one another in companies but have very differing expectations of their working lives. We also see a multiplicity in the physical location of workers. Globalisation means that companies may have employees across the globe, but even workers based at the same site will increasingly work remotely or be working from home.
The next multiplicity is of course gender and ethnicity. More woman are working than ever before.

In Europe and the US, women in the workplace is an established norm while in Japan for example there is still work to be done to smooth the path for women to work outside of the home. The same can be said for ethnicity. In our multi-cultural society we experience many different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds working under one corporate roof. While their work may be the same, their values and motivations can differ a great deal.

A further multiplicity is that of generations. Ageing demographics combined with an ever higher pensionable age means that nowadays it is not uncommon to have three generations in the workplace. Pensions in much of Asia are now typically over 70 and the pensionable age is also retreating further in the west. The result is different generations in the workforce with widely different expectations and motivations. The baby boomers of 55+ have been raised with a somewhat classic view of loyal work leading to advancement and rewards. Generation X by contrast is looking for more independence and freedom in the workplace and is likely to change jobs frequently. Meanwhile Generation Y, sometimes known as Millennials, who are just entering the workforce are seeking much more collaborative culture where they will be listened to and feel valued.

While this multiplicity is undeniably enriching, and can bring a great deal to companies, it is also a minefield that requires careful navigation. In this ever complicated world of work organisations increasingly need specialist help in simplifying and managing the process. They are looking to experts to guide them and support them in harnessing the potential that this multiplicity offers. This presents a significant opportunity for the employment industry. As Professor Thomas Malone, Founding Director of the MIT Centre for Collective Intelligence at the MIT Sloan School of Management has rightly observed: “Cultivating Communities of Workers will become one of the key disciplines of 21st Century business.”