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Building the future of work together

The thirst for freedom – how start-uppers, slashers and co-workers are reinventing work

By Denis Pennel

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The fundamentals of employment are being increasingly challenged. While salaried work and all it entails - subordination, fixed hours and working environment, monthly salary and linear careers – might have suited our parents and grandparents, today’s workers want more freedom and are starting to reinvent work.

A 2016 survey undertaken in France probed 200.000 salaried workers on their attitudes to their jobs and found 50% said they had no autonomy in organising their work and 34% felt like a machine. Meanwhile, a Gallup global survey on employee engagement found just 13% of employees were engaged at work, with 87% claiming they were not engaged.

A sort of war of independence at work has begun as workers seek greater autonomy, passion and creativity in their work. One in every three millennials wants to work for himself according to a recent YouGov survey for Monster and indeed the vertical and integrated organisation which reached its zenith in the latter half of the 20th century is in decline. We are witnessing a growth in alternative economic activity as Venkatesh Rao elaborates in his *Brief History of the Corporation: 1600 to 2100*, while French philosopher Bernard Stiegler in his book *Jobs are dead, long live work*, argues that the employment developed over the past two centuries gradually destroyed work and people are now waking up to the notion of work as the means to develop and accomplish something for themselves.

Certainly we are facing a new industrial revolution based around the needs of the on-demand economy. So what is driving and enabling this? Firstly, comes changing societal behaviour. People today are more individualistic. They expect personal services in real time, and are looking for choice and alternative economic models. Secondly, the technological revolution, where digitalization, mobile platforms, online payment and social networks enable everyone to have equal access to markets; Lastly, the emergence of a new economic model with an abundance of goods, services and options - many of them sold before they are even produced. The on-demand model is based on buying at the lowest price and selling at the highest and is constantly on the hunt for new markets.

With this new revolution we are seeing an alliance between shareholders and consumers. Gone is the 19th and 20th system where management held the reins, today this is being replaced by a society driven by the people – as owners and/or consumers. Value creation is no longer based on large, pyramidal organisations, mass producing for a largely silent population. Today, organisations are more flat and based on a connected network. Consumers are active and vocal about what they want and products and services are individual, customised on a grand scale and the model is constantly innovating and being reinvented.

Thomas Malone captures this well in his book ‘The Age of Hyperspecialisation’ where he suggests that the management of communities of workers will become one of the key characteristics of organisations in the 21st century. The employment industry defines this as Total Talent Management, and is helping organisations source and contract talent and workers in a range of different ways – from full-time, permanent jobs, to fixed term contracts, outside contractors and collaborative work. I like to describe these different ways of acquiring talent as buying, borrowing, renting and sharing.

A host of new forms of work are bursting onto the employment scene and I believe this is only the beginning. Today’s workers have never been so well qualified and they recognise their value. They constantly update and renew their skills and are in control of when, where and how they work – often virtually, thanks to new technologies. They expect a convivial working environment too and organisations with a reputation for nurturing talent will have the pick of the crop. Speed is also an important feature of the on-demand economy with a job for life being replaced by contracts for just a week or even for a matter of hours or minutes.

In many ways this reflects the past where artisanal workers were responsible for their own workload, owned their production tools and were paid by results. They mostly worked from home, took pride in what they did and built a reputation and a network of contacts that assured them continued work. Instead of the contracts, titles and functions of employment they enjoyed the benefits of work - a role, profession and activities. Where employees are subordinated, salaried and tied to a hierarchy and career, workers are paid a fee for the work they do and their working relationship is based on respect and confidence. They work in a collaborative way while remaining independent and free to determine their own working lives and parameters.

My prognosis is that while jobs might indeed be dead, work remains in excellent health.

Denis Pennel
Managing Director, World Employment Confederation
 @PennelDenis