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The changing nature of work and organizations: Implications for human resource management[☆]

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Abstract

This manuscript considers how changes in the external environment of organizations have altered the world of work. While global trends are identified, particular attention is paid to the Canadian context. Canada is currently experiencing a period of economic growth. But some new challenges have appeared. Canadian organizations are facing skill shortages and an aging workforce. The former is being addressed by increased use of technology and by higher levels of immigration, raising concerns about skill utilization, discrimination and the need to capitalize on this increasing workforce diversity. Organizations in Canada, similar to those in other developed economies, are also grappling with changing workforce demographics, attitudes and values, incorporating and utilizing the rapid advances in technology, and addressing globalization-related challenges such as increased competitive pressures, outsourcing and offshoring, and a global workforce that places a higher premium on cross-cultural sensitivities and skills.

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1. Introduction

In this special issue on the changing nature of work and organizations, we explore how changes in the external environment affect the world of work. Over the past decade, several factors have come together to impact the role, relevance and practice of human resource management in organizations (Burke & Cooper, 2000; Cooper & Burke, 2002). These factors operate at many different levels and raise important issues and challenges for the management of organizations. For example, individuals in the workforce have somewhat different values and expectations about work now. Organizations are employing the most educated workforce in the history of the world. Employees have higher salary expectations, the availability of opportunities to participate in organizational decision making, and the need to be treated fairly and with respect. In addition, more employees are concerned about the effects of work demands and work hours on their family and on their personal lives.

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2. The current state of employment in Canada

Canada is currently enjoying a sustained period of economic growth and record low levels of unemployment. However, the Canadian labour market faces two main challenges in maintaining this momentum of economic growth. The two challenges, namely a shortage of skills and an aging workforce, are expected to impact employers in several ways. They include a lag in productivity levels, a rise in early withdrawal from the workforce, and a decrease in the levels of economic activity. The issue of skills shortage is also a top concern among business and labour leaders ([Corporate Leadership Council, 2003](#)). Forty-four percent of businesses already reported having difficulty finding qualified labour ([Ministry of Advanced Education, 2001](#)). The Canadian Federation of Independent Labour estimated that there are currently 300,000 unfilled skilled jobs in small and medium sized organizations ([Bruce, 2001](#)). It is estimated that by 2010, Canada could lack 1.5 million skilled workers ([Corporate Leadership Council, 2003](#)). A shortage of skilled workers coupled with an aging workforce could lead to a war for talent among organizations.

Some Canadian organizations are hoping that advances in technology may balance the reduction in workforce. As technology increases productivity for certain business processes, organizations will require fewer workers for tasks that may be automated, and the need for skilled workers may decrease at a rate sufficient to account for the loss of labour. The Canadian government has also sought to address the skills gap by increasing worker immigration into the country ([Conference Board of Canada, 2005](#)). Immigrants now account 70% of the current labour force growth, and these workers are expected to make up 100% of the new growth by 2011 ([Corporate Leadership Council, 2003](#)). Although many organizations indicate plans to utilize the influx of immigrants to compensate for the shortage of skilled workers, they have yet to effectively utilize the skills of these immigrants. Discrimination continues to hinder these minority employees from securing highly skilled jobs. The biggest challenge facing organizations when considering immigrants is fostering an environment of tolerance and diversity in the workplace.

Demographers David Foot and Andrew Sharpe, head of the Centre for the Study of Living Standards, indicated that labour shortages are still 20 years away and young people graduating from schools ready to join the workforce will compensate for any shortages. However, the next generation of workers (“NetGen”) is expected to bring values and expectations, different from previous generations, to the workplace. Many are highly educated and ambitious, and few expect to stay long term with a single employer. Employers will need to meet the demands of the new workers in order to compete for this pool of talent. As the global competition intensifies and the demand for talent heats up, it will be the workers who will be selecting which organizations they want to work for, based on the kinds of working conditions and flexibility employers offer in terms of location, technology, workspace, and human resource policies. Organizations that can create a work environment that workers find attractive and productive will succeed in the war for talent ([Burke & Cooper, 2005](#)).

In this introduction, we will discuss three main drivers of change – demographics, technology, and globalization – and how they affect the world of work. The goal here is to understand *why* work is changing and *how* to take advantage and cope with these changes. The factors that are driving the way we work are not independent factors. For example, globalization is driven in no small part by technology, while technology has advanced rapidly because of globalization and the pressure for economic efficiency. We will begin our discussion first with demographic changes because of the workforce shortages that have been created, and organizations that ignore demographics do so at their own peril.

3. Demographic changes

One of the most powerful forces affecting work and organizations is changing worker demographics. The workforce of 2015 will be different than it is in 2005. Lower birth rates coupled with an aging workforce have resulted in a shrinking labour pool. The age distribution of the workforce will shift dramatically, while the characteristics, values, and expectations of new workforce entrants will be remarkably different than that of the past. On the demand side, the kinds of workers who are required to do the kind of work that needs to be done will also be different in a knowledge-based economy. In light of this, we need to do some rethinking about how current human resource policies and practices can match the changes that are taking place.

3.1. Aging of the workforce

The median age for working age Canadians has increased by 3.2 years over the past ten years to 41.3 years, and is expected to climb to 43.7 years by 2011 ([Corporate Leadership Council, 2003](#)). As Canada’s baby boomer generation

marches towards retirement age, as many as one third of them will opt for early retirement. An aging workforce, combined with low birth rates, and an increasing number of young workers delaying work with higher education is contributing to a shortage of skills and workers. Organizations are affected by an aging workforce in a number of ways. Organizations are losing their workforce in large numbers through earlier retirement. Organizations are also losing skills and knowledge when experienced workers retire. There will be increased competition for a younger workforce leading to the war for talent.

One way in which organizations can retain older workers is by delaying their retirement. The provinces of Manitoba and Quebec have ended mandatory retirement on the basis of human rights, while Ontario is bringing in similar legislation. However, these policies merely prevent older workers who wished to stay from being forced out, but do not promote the retention of older workers. It should be noted that the working conditions older workers are seeking are different from one they were used to or have tolerated in the past. As a result, organizations must respond with the appropriate human resource policies to entice older workers to stay. These would include such things as customized flexible work arrangements, retraining, and offering rewards and benefits that older workers find attractive.

The retention of older workers can also create new challenges in the workplace. For example, older workers are often perceived to have certain undesirable characteristics such as poor health, an inflexible attitude, resistance to change, and low trainability (Chiu, Chan, Snape, & Redman, 2001). Stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes could result in poor retention of older workers, barriers to retraining, and employment for those wishing to reenter the workforce. As a result, employers must ensure that older workers are treated with respect and dignity and do not face undue discrimination as a result of old age. In fact, studies have shown that customers prefer to deal with an older employee than a younger worker (cf. Foot & Stoffman, 1998).

The most important priority for organizations is to ensure the successful transfer of knowledge from the older generation to the next generation. There are often little formal programs and efforts to transfer knowledge from one generation to the other. Organizations can take advantage of existing mentoring programs by pairing older mentors with younger protégés. This will provide younger employees with unique access to the experience and perspectives of older employees. Younger employees also benefit from developmental opportunities particularly in receiving advice on personal and career matters. Salt River Project, an Arizona based utility company, provides new hires with job shadowing opportunities with older employees, while Pacific Gas and Electric places management trainees on rotation for six months with seasoned employees before settling them into their new positions (Corporate Leadership Council, 2005). This provides the new recruits with a view into the resources, techniques, and short cuts that make older workers more efficient and productive. From a strategic perspective, organizations that are successful in managing the transfer of knowledge from the older generation to the younger generation of workers would be least vulnerable to an exodus of retiring workers.

3.2. Increasing workforce diversity

We frequently hear about the “brain drain” problem when highly trained doctors and nurses leave the country. However, many industrialized countries are in fact experiencing a “brain gain.” Australia reported an in-flow of 190,656 professionally qualified immigrants between 1995 and 2000 (Birrell, Dobson, Rapson, & Smith, 2001). Similarly, Canada experienced an influx of 318,821 managers, professionals and skilled technical workers over the same period (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2004). These gains are a direct result of a skilled immigrant policy aimed at low birth/worker replacement rates and an aging workforce (Conference Board of Canada, 2005).

At the same time, many immigrant workers are facing challenges finding work, largely because of systemic discrimination. Although many organizations are experiencing a shortage of skilled workers, they are not doing enough to tap into this new pool of skilled workers. As a result many new immigrants are underutilized and are not working in their trained professions. Many reported barriers to employment and face discrimination because of their ethnicity, culture, race, language, accent, or religion (Statistics Canada, 2003). The most frequently reasons cited for overlooking the new pool of skilled workers include a lack of fit, language barriers, unfamiliarity with the Canadian way, lack of recognition of foreign credentials and work experience, and different performance standards (Conference Board of Canada, 2004a).

In this context, valuing diversity takes on an immediate urgency. Organizations must come to the realization that the workforce is becoming increasingly heterogeneous, and they must learn to manage a diverse pool of workers. According to Dave Ulrich, a University of Michigan professor, diversity must move beyond an intellectual exercise and become an

inherent component of organizational values (Conference Board of Canada, 2004b). In the U.S., the Council of Economic Priorities/*Fortune* survey has shown that minority-friendly companies consistently outperform the Fortune 500 index in terms of financial performance (Fortune, 1999). Researchers (e.g., Cox & Blake, 1991) have touted a diverse workforce, when harnessed, can lead to the attraction of the best talents, greater innovation and creativity, increased marketing success, and improved decision making. Thus, the trend towards managing diversity is no longer a “nice to do” but an economic imperative. From a purely economic point of view, organizations should ensure that valuable human resources are not wasted because of discriminatory practices.

In addition, organizations remained challenged in managing diversity at the individual and group levels as employees from different cultural backgrounds remain uneasy with each other's values. For example, Ng and Burke (2004) found non-North Americans and non-Caucasians to be less supportive of equality. Following the events of September 11, there is also increasing religious persecution among the Muslim community. The Council on American–Islamic Relations reported a 15% increase in claims of mistreatment and bias in the workplace (Morgan, 2004). As a result, organizations should put in place a religious discrimination and harassment policy, and train managers and employees to deal with increasing intolerance of religious plurality in the workplace. As immigrants continue to make up a larger and larger proportion of new workforce entrants, we expect that future concerns about diversity would shift towards cultural differences based on Western, Islamic, and Eastern (Confucian) civilizations.

3.3. The “Net Generation”

After fussing for a decade over “Generation X”, a label given by Douglas Coupland to those born between 1960 to 1976, it is time to shift our attention to the Net Generation (“NetGen”) or those born between 1980 to 1995. These are the children of the baby boomers, and there are roughly 6.5 million of this generation (Foot & Stoffman, 1998). These twenty-something year olds represent the workforce of the future, and present challenges of their own to management and organizations. NetGens come with their own set of expectations, demands, and work habits, including incredible technology literacy. If they are to replace the aging workforce, then organizations have better take note of their work values, beliefs, and behaviours.

Many of NetGens' values, attitudes, and beliefs also reflect those of their baby boomer parents (Loughlin & Barling, 2001). They possess many of the same attitudes in that they are ambitious, they want a good life, and they are not afraid to speak up. These younger workers also have less patience for climbing the corporate ladder. Consequently, organizations with flattened corporate structures are more likely to attract the NetGens. Members of this generation also have high salary expectations, and an emphasis on benefits and opportunities. As a result organizations will need to respond with highly competitive salaries and offer developmental and mentoring opportunities to meet the expectations of these younger workers (Burke & Cooper, 2006).

NetGens are also disloyal and rebellious, and organizations should not expect them to stay in their current job long term. They can become extremely bored, extremely quick and are likely to have many career paths. For example, a recent university graduate working for an investment bank in downtown Toronto admitted that he will learn as much as he can and then move on to “something bigger and better” (Canadian Business, 2005a). NetGens are also more tolerant and have more respect for diversity, having gone to school with children from different ethnic backgrounds, and were exposed to media in favour of equal treatment for all (Ng & Wiesner, 2004). As a result, they are also more social and collaborative, and understand how the diversity of a group can add value to work outcomes.

The most salient characteristic of NetGens is their aptitude with computers and technology (Ware, 2005a). They know how to integrate technology into their lives, and are technologically savvy with the latest PDAs, Blackberries, and other electronic gadgets. NetGens also learn quickly and are early adopters of new ideas and platforms in technology. As a result, organizations can rely on NetGens to take advantage of the latest technological advances to enhance organizational efficiency and productivity. This is an important advantage as the workplace is being transformed by technology changes at the speed of light.

4. Technology

The second factor which drives where we work, and how we organize and manage work is technology (Wallace, 2004). As new technologies are invented, the way we do things changes, and those changes in turn affect us personally and directly, such as where we live and work. The important thing about technology is that it continues to get better,

cheaper, and faster. As a result, we can process enormous quantities of information, share and access data easily, and communicate globally. Suffice to say, we wouldn't be global today without technology.

4.1. Deskilling

Development in machineries and computers has resulted in the elimination of workers and increasing the productivity of organizations. Those in the manufacturing and production are affected most through the replacement of workers with automation. The same burst of technological advancement has also dramatically altered the way other skilled work is done. For example, the digital technology has resulted in the use of AutoCAD in designing and building houses, MS Project in managing projects, and GPS and navigation systems in flying an aircraft. This has led to “deskilling” where craftsman and skilled professional workers are now relegated to machine operators. The competencies required to perform most jobs have changed, as most modern forms of work involved some use of computer technology. In fact, new technology is often so powerful that organizations cannot afford to ignore or not to buy and use them. As new technologies are introduced in the workplace, workers are required to keep up, and to acquire the competencies to use these technologies. Unfortunately, those who are unwilling to learn or keep up risk losing their jobs due to obsolescence of their skills.

4.2. Creation of the knowledge worker

Information technology has also given rise to the creation of a generation of knowledge workers. In his book on the *Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida (2002) described an increasing percentage of workers engaging in creative work. He defined creative work as being different from production or even problem solving. These include work in design, music and film, publishing, research and development, software, video games and other creative type productions. The increasing number of knowledge workers, i.e. those who produce, apply, and distribute knowledge, has driven the emergence of the new “creative class”. The “middle class,” “working class,” and “service class” which were products of the industrial age will soon be an era of the past (Ware, 2005b). As this was being written, Hewlett Packard announced a staff reduction of 14,500, which was followed by Kimberly Clark announcing staff reductions of 11,000 and 10,500 respectively.

Knowledge workers don't like to be told what to do, and they want more autonomy than traditional workers have had in the past (Ware, 2005b). This has created a challenge for managers insofar as how best to manage knowledge workers. Much of knowledge work is invisible and intangible (it's inside their heads!!), and by definition difficult to measure. However, you also cannot manage what you cannot measure. Thus, organizations must turn their attention to measuring and improving their performance, after spending considerable time and effort into attracting and hiring of knowledge workers.

4.3. Telecommuting and distributed work

Technological inventions have also changed where we live and work. The latest developments in communications and mobile technology such as cellular phones, Blackberries, PDAs and *WiFi* (Wireless Fidelity) have facilitated telecommuting or distributed work. The fact that communication technology is getting better, faster, and cheaper has brought new optimism to telecommuting and flexible work arrangements. Workers no longer have to commute long distances to the workplace, but instead can telecommute, meet online, and work in virtual teams. In fact, knowledge workers spend only about forty percent of their work time at the office, thirty percent in their home offices, and the remainder in other “third places” such as coffee shops, airports, etc. (Ware, 2005b). However, the latest technology has also brought little relief to enhancing worklife balance. Instead, workers are finding themselves ever more connected to the workplace. Workers are constantly checking emails, downloading reports, and connecting back to the office during their waking hours rather, than their working hours. Organizations and workers have become dependent and addicted to technology and work itself.

Technology has also made information sharing and distribution possible. Information can now be transmitted and shared across continents, time zones, and cultures, in a matter of seconds. Digital and communication technology has created a surge in knowledge networks which made collaborative work possible. For example, a professor in Israel can collaborate with another in Toronto as if they were down the hallway from each other. Work can now be organized in

networks where producers and consumers can collaborate in the production of goods and services. For example, through iWork, Sun Microsystems have employees in distributed project teams across the continent that deal directly with customers and suppliers without ever needing to meet in person.

4.4. Communication and organizational structure

Finally, technology has altered the way we traditionally communicate in organizations. The ease and availability of communication channels (e.g., company intranet and e-mails) have opened up employee access to senior management and key decision makers. Middle level management is increasingly irrelevant as formal and hierarchical organizational structure is becoming less necessary. The “information is power” cliché has shifted the relative power of managers to subordinates and workers as knowledge networks have placed information in the hands of everyone. The result of all this is the flattening and leveling of corporate structures.

Tom Malone, a professor at the Sloan School of Management, has argued that organizations are also becoming more democratic and less bureaucratic in that process. Frequently, there are far too many decisions that have to be made and they cannot always come from the top in large and complex organizations. Consequently, decision making power must be decentralized and decisions can be made more quickly when information is distributed more widely. [Malone \(2004\)](#) believed that management style must also evolve from “command and control” to “coordinate and cultivate” in order to be more efficient. In the latter role, senior executives must ensure that others are informed and in touch so that they can make intelligent decisions for the entire organization. This requires new mindsets and new skills for both managers and workers. Eastman Chemical, a \$3.4 billion spinoff of East Kodak, uses the “pizza chart” to characterize its new organizational structure, where pepperonis are sprinkled on top of the cheese to symbolize the absence of hierarchy and where leaders are distributed evenly throughout the organization ([Tung, 2002](#)).

5. Globalization

As we have indicated earlier, technology has increasingly linked local markets, cut the cost of moving information, and broken down all kinds of political and cultural barriers. The growth of transportation (e.g., airlines and shipping companies) has enabled us to experience the global marketplace for products and services. While new markets are being discovered, new competitors also emerged. Besides the obvious threat of outsourcing of jobs, globalization has also brought us global labour markets, global collaborations, globally distributed work teams, and the competition for talent. Globalization has also opened up new opportunities for workers and organizations alike. The result of all this is globalization is changing the work experience and environment for individual workers, groups and organizations.

5.1. Outsourcing and offshoring

Global competition is often about price, and companies are striving to be the lower cost producers in order to compete. The result is increased competition and the pressure for efficiency. Organizations have discovered that one of the best ways to cut costs is to take advantage of lower labour costs by outsourcing. Of course, when the lowest cost producers happened to be overseas, it didn’t take very long for outsourcing to turn into offshoring ([Ware, 2005c](#)). Outsourcing effectively transfers work to places where labour can be bought more cheaply. For millions of workers, that means losing their lifetime permanent job, starting from those in the manufacturing and production. The reality is that developing countries (such as Brazil, Russia, India, and China, collectively known as “BRIC”) have become industrialized, and can compete on lower labour costs. This has enabled them to compete in world markets, and effectively made manufacturing capabilities a commodity. As a result, many industrialized economies such as Canada are “hollowing out.” The term is often used to describe the de-industrialization of an economy as a result of transfers of manufacturing and production bases overseas.

Unfortunately, outsourcing is no longer restricted to the manufacturing and production sectors. In a recent [New York Times \(2005\)](#) interview with Nandan Nilekani, CEO of Infosys, Nilekani said that basically any type or work that can be done over a wire is at risk of being outsourced. White-collar, professional, and knowledge work, thought to be “safe” are already being offshored. Canadian graphics chip maker giant, ATI Technologies Inc., recently set up its first research and development facility outside of Canada in Hyderabad, India ([Canadian Business, 2005b](#)). In fact, India

has been dubbed “the digital sweatshop” and “back office to the world” because its English-speaking workforce can perform the same jobs for relatively low wages (Economist, 2001).

Globalization has also changed employment relationships, as work is being parceled out to independent contractors and consultants. Workers will have to contend with more temporary, freelance, and contract work than they were used to in the past. From an employer’s perspective, it is a lot cheaper and easier to hire contract workers than to put them on full-time payroll. Imagine having to layoff hundreds or thousands of employees, close down facilities, and sell the assets than simply terminating a contract. However, organizations must also contend that worker commitment and loyalty to the company are minimal when they are hiring free agents. The challenge for managers becomes one of engaging the free agents as they scramble to find the next job, and move from company to company.

5.2. Global workforce

One of the outcomes of globalization is more regional economic integration, more global strategic alliances and more international cooperative agreements. The result for multinationals is access to a global workforce. Tom Friedman (2005), New York Times journalist and author of *The World is Flat*, estimated that the global labour market has grown by 5 billion people as a result of globalization. In the quest for competitive advantage, companies are hiring and pooling together the most talented people anywhere on the planet. As a result, organizations are requiring more and more of their workers to work in globally distributed teams. The challenge of managing a global workforce has now expanded beyond that of managing a diverse workforce. Managers must now deal with conference calls with different time zones, the potential for misunderstandings arising from language barriers, and cultural assumptions that aren’t recognized or due to a lack of face-to-face contacts.

Roberts, Kossek and Ozeki (1998) identified three major challenges with managing a global workforce. There are deployment, knowledge and innovation dissemination, and talent identification and deployment. Deployment is about getting the skills where they are needed in the organization regardless of geographical location. Knowledge and innovation dissemination is spreading state of the art knowledge and practices throughout the organization regardless of where they originate. Finally, talent identification and development refers to identifying who has the ability to function effectively in a global organization and developing those abilities.

5.3. Global careers

As multinationals expand their operations overseas, they often face the challenge of managing their subsidiaries in foreign countries. Much of the world’s workforce lacked the KSAs or the managerial talent necessary for the modern workplace. Although organizations benefit from cost advantages, they also face challenges in work quality and productivity issues. As a result, global expansion has resulted in the need for a set of skills in operating and managing a global business. These skills are important to build global competence in foreign subsidiary management, market development, transfer of knowledge and organizational learning, and management development.

Traditionally, multinationals have relied on to the use of expatriates to staff foreign operations. However, the incidence of expatriate failure has remained high (Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002) and the trends in international business will only continue as the “BRIC” countries develop into economic powerhouses. While globalization has changed the employment types and relationships in many industrialized countries, it has also created a need for more sophisticated skills in managing a global business. Workers from industrialized countries can fill the skills gap and join an increasing cadre of expatriate workers abroad. For example, many Western Europeans (e.g., British, French, and Germans) and American multinationals already have a long history of sending employees abroad to manage local subsidiaries (Tung, 1982). Similarly, many young university graduates, unable to find employment at home found lucrative jobs teaching English in the far east (National Post, 2005). Thus, as organizations become more global, the need for global managers will increase, and organizations must begin identifying and preparing managers for international assignments.

6. Implications

Several factors have come together over the past decade to impact the role, relevance and practice of human resource management in organizations. These factors operate at many different levels and raise important issues and challenges for the management of organizations.

The past decade has also seen dramatic increases in our understanding of the relationship of HRM practices and firm performance. As a consequence, HRM is now seen as a major competitive advantage that cannot be copied readily by one's competition. The role of HR professionals has been altered, though many HR professionals may not yet be well or fully equipped for their new challenges.

As organizations become more global in orientation, cross-cultural issues and preparing international/global managers need to be addressed. It is still not clear the extent to which globalization is on the rise or waning. What are the business implications following the rise of both India and China as economic powers for international business (Friedman, 2005)? There is likely to be a greater need for creativity and innovation from employees in the new service and knowledge-based industries-sectors that have grown remarkably over the past decade. Industries have become more knowledge-based which has made it more important for employees to continuously learn and update their knowledge and skills. There is also a greater need for employees to work collaboratively with more emphasis being placed on a variety of team-based structures. Finally, organizations will need greater commitment and engagement of staff in order to remain competitive.

Hopefully, this special issue will set the stage for the human resource challenges that lie ahead.

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