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19. The accelerating disconnection of work from time and place: new questions for HR

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INTRODUCTION

Industrial revolutions have always been associated with major shifts in how people work, moving from agricultural and craft-based occupations to factory work in the first one, to assembly line work and scientific management in the second, and to knowledge work in the third industrial revolution (Bower and Christensen, 1995; Bodrožić and Adler, 2017). Currently, societies and organizations everywhere are experiencing a fourth industrial revolution, the key characteristic of which is an increasing blurring of the boundaries between the physical and the digital worlds (Schwab, 2017; Barley et al., 2017). A number of technologies have been associated with this widespread merger of the physical and the digital, ranging from artificial intelligence and robotics to the internet of things (IoT) and 3D printing, resulting in major changes in business models and production methods across industries.

In addition to these industry-level changes, the fourth industrial revolution is also fundamentally changing the way in which people – white-collar knowledge workers, in particular – do their work. The simultaneous development of mobile, virtual and cloud technologies, and the network and broadband infrastructures that enable them, have disrupted the way in which work is carried out by making it possible to do more and more aspects of knowledge work from any location (not just the corporate office that has been the primary workplace in past decades) and at any time (not just during the traditional working hours of nine-to-five, Monday-to-Friday). Easier access to people and information means that knowledge work can be done in many different places and at flexible times, depending on either personal needs or organizational requirements: from homes and second homes, coworking spaces and coffee shops, and while travelling.

These changes in ways of working will also have significant consequences for how human resources (HR) are managed going forward. Given that traditional models of human resource management (HRM) have been developed in relatively stable environments, in which most work takes place in corporate offices during office hours, they may prove less useful in the future. We, therefore, need to shift our focus from the effectiveness of our current practices towards understanding what the new time- and place-independent ways of working (Cooke et al., 2022) mean for HR. Against

this background, in this chapter we explore the HR implications of the disconnection of work from time and place, highlighting important new questions and concerns that HR needs to consider in the key areas of performance management, recruitment and talent management, training and development and diversity management. Rather than discussing the large number of emerging technologies that have been introduced during the last decade and their complex dependencies and interlinkages (Iansiti, 1995), this chapter focuses on how mobile, virtual and cloud technologies disrupt the way in which work is carried out, and through that, the work of the HR function. In what follows, we first discuss how work has evolved over time in relation to time and place, and then discuss how the current increasing disconnection might impact key HRM practices.

We follow Ulrich and Dulebohn's (2015) call for an increasingly externally oriented perspective on HRM and seek to widen the perspective of existing research on HRM and technology, which has largely focused on 'creating value within and across organizations for targeted employees and management' from an effectiveness perspective (Bondarouk and Ruël, 2009, 507). Our focus is specifically on white-collar knowledge work, referring to the application of domain-specific expertise to complex and novel problems (Van Der Vegt et al., 2006), as knowledge-workers are a business-critical target group of many central HRM processes and practices.

DISCONNECTION OF WORK FROM TIME AND PLACE

Since the first and second industrial revolutions, salaried work has been closely linked to time. Taylorism and Fordism paced work by the clock (Baxter and Kroll-Smith, 2005). A 40-hour workweek was introduced in the first half of the twentieth century, with Monday-to-Friday nine-to-five becoming the standard office hours (Armstrong-Stassen, 1998; Bittman, 2016). With the evolution of personal computing and electronic communication tools such as e-mail, knowledge work started to expand past the traditional working week; the new tools enabled asynchronous work but also resulted in increasing perceptions of time pressure and spill-overs to leisure time (Godbey and Robinson, 1997; Wajcman, 2014; Bittman, 2016).

This relatively bound relationship between work and time is now rapidly dissolving, as mobile, virtual and cloud technologies provide constantly improving access to information and people independently of time. As a consequence, the boundaries of work and non-work time are becoming increasingly blurred (Khallash and Kruse, 2012; Colbert et al., 2016). On the one hand, technology allows for a more blended, multipurpose timetable in which the individual has more freedom to choose and alternate between work and leisure time (Bittman, 2016; Colbert et al., 2016). Increased time flexibility reduces or avoids commuting time, and facilitates the management of personal matters during the day (Ryan and Wessel, 2015; Colbert et al., 2016). Although earlier research depicted the latter as a form of employee misbehaviour (Lim, 2002), more recent research has demonstrated that time autonomy facilitates employee wellbeing (Kattenbach et al., 2010; König and de la Guardia, 2014). On the

other hand, work during the nonstandard evening or weekend hours has significantly increased (Eurofound, 2017a, 2017b), and the growing norm of constant availability (Mazmanian et al., 2013) has led to new concerns, such as collaborative overload (Cross et al., 2016), work-family conflict (Mäkelä et al., 2015), stress and exhaustion (Butts et al., 2015).

The disconnection of work from time is intimately linked with the disconnection of work from a physical place. Issues of teleworking, telecommuting or distance-working have been examined from various angles since the 1980s (Handy, 1984; Hamblin, 1995; Valenduc and Vendramin, 2001; Golden and Raghuram, 2010), with the perceived fairness of different arrangements (Ryan and Wessel, 2015), identity building (Valenduc and Vendramin, 2016) and social ties receiving attention (Grantham, 2000). More recently, the geographies of knowledge and collaboration have become increasingly manifold (Ellem, 2016). Most knowledge-intensive tasks can be performed on our own laptops thanks to increased computing power and cloud access, and virtual and mobile collaboration technologies enable work across distance, not just from home but anywhere (Alghamdi et al., 2016; Standaert et al., 2016). Talent and expertise are more dispersed geographically, and working in global virtual teams has fast become the *modus operandi* of multinational organizations in particular (Zander et al., 2012; Nurmi and Hinds, 2016). The pandemic has further accelerated remote working arrangements, leading to record levels of mobility in the job market (OECD, 2021).

In sum, the disconnection of work from time and place has been developing over a long time, with the COVID-19 pandemic accelerating and intensifying the development significantly (Grömling, 2021). In terms of place, remote and hybrid work (the latter combining office-based work with working from home or third places) are likely to become permanent features of future working life. Relatedly, the blurring and intertwining of work- and life-time will also likely expand, both in terms of life seeping into traditional work times and work spilling over to all times (Teodorovicz et al., 2021). These changes bring many new questions for employers and their human resource management practices, to which we turn next.

NEW QUESTIONS RELATED TO CURRENT HRM PRACTICES

Above, we have described the accelerating process of technology-driven change in white-collar knowledge work, using the two interlinked disconnections of work from time and place as organizing labels. We now move on to consider what these disconnections mean for human resource management. We first discuss potential new questions related to the current HRM practices of performance management, recruitment and talent management, training and development and diversity management, and then move on to exploring new elements that HR will need to focus on going forward. These new elements have to do with building employee engagement and an inspiring organizational culture in a virtual and hybrid environment, focusing on the

sustainability of working life and proactive employee wellbeing to a much greater extent than before, and facilitating a resilient mindset among employees that allows them to thrive in a constantly changing environment.

New Questions Related to Performance Management

Performance management practices have already, for some time, been criticized for being overly static, heavy and process-driven (Cappelli and Tavis, 2016), which is at odds with the rapidly evolving business environment. This has, in parallel with the changing role of time and place, increased interest among both practitioners and researchers for technology-aided, real-time performance management practices. Performance management is moving away from time (annual cycle of once- or twice-yearly meetings) and place (relatively standardized face-to-face supervisor meetings in the office)-bound processes towards more output- and results-based approaches characterized by real-time data, dashboards and pulse surveys (Curzi et al., 2019). This real-time and data-driven approach requires more from HR, in that goals need to be clear and cascade down the organization, data has to be open and transparent and systems need to be digital and accessible. This requires significant investments in digital systems, data capabilities and process design, and many organizations are already moving in these directions.

A more challenging development is the recent emergence of electronic performance monitoring (EPM) capabilities that enable digital observation of measures such as keyboard strokes, mouse movements and email use (Jeske, 2021) or log-in/log-off times and working pace (Kalischko and Riedl, 2021). On the positive side, EPM tools enable data-driven management (Schwarz Müller et al., 2018), which can add value by providing insight into effective ways of working. On the other side, employees dislike continuous monitoring (Jeske and Santuzzi, 2015), which is perceived as dehumanizing and stressful (Jeske, 2021) and can lead to mistrust and lower job satisfaction (Kalischko and Riedl, 2021). The use of EPMS also relates to important code of conduct considerations that HR needs to pay attention to going forward. A central question is how EPMS are used in an ethical way (Ravid et al., 2020); for example, the implementation of EPMS needs to be coupled with transparency to employees about what exactly is being monitored, at which level of anonymity, when, where, and why. Information privacy and data protection concerning individuals (Bélanger and Crossler, 2011; Carpenter et al., 2016) is a core issue and is currently approached quite differently depending on national cultures, laws and regulations (Kalischko and Riedl, 2021). The jury is still out on these technologies, but given their rapid development, HR will likely need to take an operational and ethical stand on them sooner rather than later.

New Questions Related to Recruitment and Talent Management

The disconnection of work from time and place opens up global talent markets more broadly than before – an increasing number of jobs in an increasing number of fields

can be done from anywhere at any time. This means that the employee value proposition to attract the best talent becomes more important than ever before. Organizations and their HR have to ask themselves why the increasingly mobile talent, the best of whom are in high demand, would want to work for them. These ‘stars’ will have more options than ever through remote and hybrid work, new online platforms, networks and digital marketplaces. Amongst the immediate issues facing HR are the commitment and retention related questions (e.g. Morris et al., 2016), which have accelerated during the COVID-19-induced ‘great resignation’ (Sull et al., 2022). As a response, HR may need to find more tailored and personal-needs-based employment contracts for talent that include flexible remote and hybrid arrangements, customized work content, personalized development opportunities or work-life integration (Scholarios and Marks, 2004).

We also see a related shift away from traditional hierarchical career ladders to more individualistic portfolios of meaningful projects, coupled with increasing mobility across organizational and also professional or occupational boundaries. If there is a move towards measuring success not by within-company hierarchical advancement, but by the achievement of personal goals, self-development and psychologically meaningful work portfolios (Banai and Harry, 2004; Sullivan and Baruch, 2009), this means shifting competition for recruitment from more status-driven positions to more values-driven projects. Relatedly, although the benefits of long-term work arrangements may prevail, an important question is whether these more personally driven work arrangements will move from the employment domain to that of entrepreneurial and/or contractual work (Capelli and Keller, 2013). If the talents increasingly work with multiple simultaneous assignments and employers, how do we ensure their commitment to our project? Less skilled employees, for their part, are more likely to be left outside traditional permanent employment: either contracted temporarily as needed with potentially fluctuating wages, removed altogether as a result of automatization and robotization, or moved to low-cost areas on a much broader basis than today, made possible by telepresence and augmented reality (Kristoffersson et al., 2013).

New Questions Related to Training and Development

Continuous, holistically designed, lifelong training is positively and directly related to organizational performance (Garavan et al., 2021a, 2021b), and increasingly a necessity in all areas of work. Technological development makes extant skills rapidly obsolete, which has put continuous education firmly on the agenda for most governments (Eurofound, 2017a, 2017b), both in terms of securing jobs in the country and ensuring that there are enough skilled employees for those jobs. For HR, the key question becomes whether companies should be responsible for lifelong learning or if the responsibility resides primarily with the individual. And who should fund the training – companies, individuals or governments (Hytti and O’Gorman, 2004; Kost et al., 2020). The answer is probably all of these, but solutions for this question are currently being debated and are yet to be worked out.

Organizations have responded to the growing pressures by raising upskilling high on the strategic agenda and investing in training and development, even if COVID-19 has created a slight drop in these figures (Kieran et al., 2021). There is research evidence that the strength of the relationship between training and organizational performance has increased every year over time, as the complexity of the business environment has increased (Garavan et al., 2021a, 2021b). There is, however, less clarity on what types of skills will be most important for white-collar employees in the future. Some stress hard skills such as technological knowledge, problem-solving and logical thinking (Tuomi et al., 2018), while others predict that soft skills such as creativity and emotional intelligence will hold increasing significance in coming decades (Gray, 2016). A third group emphasizes digital skills such as IT competencies, teleworking abilities and digital communication skills as enablers (Schwarz Müller et al., 2018). This breadth of needed skills means that HR needs to adopt a broad, holistic perspective when analysing and planning organizational training and development needs and investments, including both general and firm-specific training (Garavan et al., 2021a, 2021b). Garavan et al. (2021a) further suggest that HR should be able to do an organizational skills analysis and have the skills levels and needs of their own employees as their starting point when designing training and development.

New Questions Related to Diversity Management

Diversity management, or promoting the inclusion of employees from different backgrounds in the organization, has been an HR focus area for some time already. While previous literature has acknowledged the importance and potential benefits of a diverse workforce, it has simultaneously recognized that simply having a diverse workforce does not guarantee the realization of benefits for the organization or the individual (Randel et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened existing inequalities in working life, creating a further imperative for focusing on diversity and inclusion in the workforce (ILO, 2021; Lee et al., 2022). What is more, as particularly top talents' employment arrangements are likely to become more personalized, they need to be coupled with growing transparency.

The complexities of managing an increasingly diverse workforce will require a more holistic approach from HR than before (Triana et al., 2021), broadening the focus of diversity management from equal opportunities towards inclusion. Inclusive organizations not only acknowledge the importance and potential benefits of diverse backgrounds among personnel (Randel et al., 2018), but also strive to adopt practices that enable the full participation and contribution of everyone (Roberson, 2006; Ferdman, 2014). A key question for HR thus becomes how to ensure that all employees have the necessary skills and opportunities to fully participate in and contribute to the organization despite their background, where they work from and whether they work in a face-to-face or virtual mode. This includes aspects such as recruiting individuals with an inclusive and open mindset (Richard et al., 2013; Noon and Ogbonna, 2021), reviewing existing HRM practices and ways of working from an inclusion and

identity-conscious perspective (Roberson et al., 2020) and fostering an environment open to different points of view (Ragins and Ehrhardt, 2020).

DISCUSSION

As we have outlined above, the nature of white-collar work is changing rapidly as a result of technological developments, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated the change. New ways of working and managing people are emerging; some are discussed in this chapter, while others are not yet foreseeable. In this chapter we used two disconnections as a way of conceptualizing some of the key changes – the disconnection between work and time, and the disconnection between work and place – and discussed the implication of these changes for HR in terms of how existing HRM practices may need to be adapted and redesigned.

The changes also mean that, in addition to rethinking existing HRM practices, HR needs to expand its role to address new elements that have not been considered in earlier research or practice to a sufficient extent, or much at all. When work is increasingly disconnected from time and place, organizing it becomes more complex and heterogeneous than before, and individuals need to be able to function in a more uncertain and ambiguous environment. Addressing this increasing complexity and uncertainty with an overall aim of finding more socially sustainable ways of managing people in the hybrid workplace requires new capabilities from HR, both in terms of managing tensions, and recognizing the challenges of aligning multiple perspectives with reduced resources (Collings et al., 2021).

First, HR needs to be able to build employee engagement and an inspiring organizational culture in a working environment that is characterized by remote, virtual and hybrid working modes. Remote work increases autonomy and flexibility in that the individual has more degrees of freedom to choose how to work, it can also negatively influence the physical, emotional and social working environments of employees, and it is often associated with perceived isolation from social aspects of organizations (Wiesenfeld et al., 2001). Previous research has shown that lack of embeddedness in an organization carries risks in terms of decreased wellbeing and increased employee turnover (Mitchell et al., 2001). Due to the pandemic, this risk is now more actual than ever, as widespread remote work and separation has led to an erosion of engagement and shared organizational culture (Sull et al., 2022).

Second, the sustainability of working life in the constantly changing environment requires HR to shift emphasis from occupational healthcare interventions to promoting employee wellbeing more proactively. Blurring work-life boundaries allows individuals to organize their work to better suit their individual needs, but it also creates pressure to be constantly available and reachable. The mental burden of balancing job demands and resources (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), and constant connectivity and interruptions in particular, have emerged as central concerns over and above the previously dominant physical safety issues (Eurofound, 2017b).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

As work will continue to disconnect from time and place, a key area in which HR needs to take action concerns how to build employee engagement and organizational culture in remote and virtual working modes. The mindset of the HR function and management will also need to be reconsidered. HR research and practice has traditionally focused on the question of whether organizational units such as subsidiaries of a multinational corporation should have globally standardized versus locally responsive HRM policies, practices and service delivery (Rosenzweig and Nohria, 1994). In light of the ongoing changes, this may no longer be the most important distinction. Instead, HR may need to think increasingly about individualized and flexible work arrangements. This leads to the key HRM question being not between global standardization and local responsiveness, but rather between standardization and individualization. How do firms design practices that facilitate all the change and can be tailored to individuals rather than groups or locations? Such an HR-as-a-facilitator model may become a mass-adapted modular and stackable portfolio of different services that individuals can have access to, or choose from, and forgo the current global versus local dilemma altogether. In a similar vein, organizations may need to gradually move away from line-management supervision towards a more trust-based self-management model, where employees have higher personal responsibility and self-leadership. HR needs to act as a facilitator of the required skills and modes of working. Furthermore, previously nonexistent forms of HR, such as digital marketplace HRM, may altogether replace some of the activities currently executed by company-internal HR.

The increased blurriness of work-life boundaries that comes with technological developments means that an urgent new question for HR is how to develop policies and practices to protect and look after employee wellbeing in a proactive way, before occupational healthcare interventions are needed (Cleveland et al., 2015). Wellbeing literature has thus far developed as a largely separate stream from HR literature (Guest, 2017), but the time has come to connect research findings and practical learning from both.

The new challenges concerning existing HRM practices also require new capabilities and competencies from HR professionals. In addition to, or in lieu of, the more traditional educational backgrounds of (organizational) psychology, business and management and (adult) education, HR professionals will need to have increasingly strong data and statistical skills. HR managers need to master new technologies, which will also likely decrease the need for traditional HR staff – but these new technologies will potentially also free up time for HR professionals to focus on more strategic issues. Another issue concerns the skills required from HR professionals in managing the increasing virtuality of the workplace. Dealing with people and culture-related issues virtually, including complicated and emotionally heavy issues such as downsizing, is a major challenge. Individual-level issues such as under-performance or illness will also be further complicated by distance and virtual communication. Lastly, the importance of diversity and inclusion and other

ethical questions is rising, and researchers have expressed concerns that current HR education might no longer be sufficient when dealing with the growing complexities of managing a diverse workforce (Triana et al., 2021).

There are also other more macro-level changes driven by technological development, and by automation and robotization in particular, that will require dedicated analysis to be properly unpacked. The implications of all these changes – the disappearance of many types of jobs and the resulting creation of a ‘new precariat’ (Standing, 2014) – go well beyond HR. Although they have far-reaching consequences on all levels of analysis from psychological to societal and political, they are outside the scope of this paper. Ethical questions alone pose a serious professional challenge, as current legal frameworks largely lag behind technological developments. Although challenging, the increased need for ethical considerations may also offer a new way for HR to assert its relevance.

Finally, the employee-organization relationship is also changing at an accelerating pace (Coyle-Shapiro and Shore, 2007; Ryan and Wessel, 2015), with employees no longer being bound to their organizations in the same way as before. Emerging electronic platforms and network-based business models (e.g. Stanford, 2017) will provide viable opportunities for more types of workers and professionals than today to sell their expertise through self-managed portfolios both locally and globally. For HR, this raises new questions related to things like how to attract and retain individual freelancers/entrepreneurs, how to compete for them internationally, how to engage them and how to create contracts that hinder them from spilling confidential elements of their assignments. Recruitment may need to be approached differently – what is on offer, if not employment? On the other hand, matching sellers and buyers of work can be fully automated with the help of various platforms, crowd feedback and artificial intelligence, removing many HR tasks altogether.

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