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INTRODUCTION

Shaping a Path for Tomorrow

The future ain't what it used to be

Yogi Berra (1925–)

On a bleak November day in 2008 I was sitting alongside some former colleagues in an East Sussex church. We had gathered for the funeral of an old friend. Before the service the vicar had asked us to ensure that our mobile phones were either turned off or silent.

The memorial tributes were overrunning and I noticed a colleague next to me look at his watch. A few seconds later he was scrolling down the glowing screen of his BlackBerry hand-held communicator and a few seconds after that he excused himself and disappeared outside.

I know that work is changing. It is, after all, the subject of this book. But I hadn't realized before that incident quite how much these changes have penetrated every facet of our lives—and deaths. Or perhaps I had, in that the incident aroused nothing more than curiosity coupled with a mild sense of irritation. Can nothing be free anymore from the intrusion of working life? Not even our funerals?

The BlackBerry has come to symbolize the “work anywhere” culture of our times. This pocket-sized device that can tell us our precise location on the planet, that can access information and communicate in a roll and click of a finger, is a triumph of primate evolution, combining the advantages of bipedalism, the opposable thumb and an enlarged brain to create the ultimate in flexible, mobile living.

Living or working? It's a taxing question—literally, if your expertise is revenue gathering—but the question is just as tough for the rest of us. The fusion of work, rest and leisure has become an underlying source of tension in our lives. Our gradual liberation from offices and factories is forcing us to reshape our understanding of work. What is work today?

For years during speaking engagements I have felt comfortable in defining work to audiences as “something we would rather not be doing.” It usually draws some knowing smiles. In spite of those who claim that they love their work, this more negative definition still seems to resonate with many people.

It is the definition that holds for those who drag themselves out of bed on a morning, stand bleary-eyed in front of the mirror, rush out of the door, then struggle for a seat in the daily commute or grumble with frustration in traffic jams. It is the definition that holds for those who watch the minute hand on its slow but resolute journey around the dial, who dread the arrival of their boss and feel they are slowly crumbling under the strain of what the poet, Philip Larkin, called the “toad work.”

Larkin resented what he called in his poem, “Toads,” the “sickening poison” of office work and its grip on his life, yet in a later poem, “Toads Revisited,” he acknowledged it suited him more than a walk in the park. “Give me my in-tray, my loaf-haired secretary,” he wrote, acknowledging for all of us the sense of duty that regulates our responses. Work, he knew, would accompany him to the grave: “Give me your arm, old toad; help me down Cemetery Road,” he wrote.

Larkin’s view of work was depressing but recognizable. He understood that work was more than a means of earning a living; it was part of his identity, “for something sufficiently toad-like squats in me, too,” he wrote.

My last book, exploring the history of work, began life as an investigation of the protestant work ethic that underpins such sentiments. This earlier book, written almost a decade ago, was also inspired by feelings that the workplace was undergoing some fundamental changes.

It seemed to me that the way we lived and worked was approaching one of the great watersheds in human history as significant as the agrarian and industrial revolutions. But, if this is the case—and much of this book will be devoted to exploring the evidence—where did it start and where will it end?

Both of these questions are a matter of debate. With previous watersheds it is quite possible to put forward an argument for gradual change. While the agrarian revolution is usually dated at

around 10,000 years ago, grindstones for milling grain have been dated as far back as 40,000 years.

Equally the industrial revolution was very much a Western European development. In the US, large-scale industrial change did not happen for nearly 100 years after the textile industry began to transform working life in Europe.

But we talk and write about these events under convenient headings because they help us to understand the dynamics of change. This understanding is broader when change is viewed in context with other developments in history.

Sometimes, however, changes are tangible. People certainly sat up and noticed the changes at the Ford Motor Company in 1913 when it switched to the moving assembly of cars. But perceptions of such changes would have differed, depending on individual perspectives.

Industrial workers would have been aware of the changing shift patterns and pay rates. Those with savings would have noticed the growing affordability, reliability and range of cars as metaled roads extended beyond city boundaries.

Artists, politicians and revolutionaries noticed the impact of these developments on social habits and power structures. The same is happening today. Late in 2008 I went to the first screening of a film called *Us Now* examining the potential of social networks and their associated technologies for changing democratic governance.¹

It was screened not long after the US presidential election, won by Barack Obama, whose campaign had relied heavily on an army of activists, often organized through web-based social networks, extending practical and financial support to the campaign in ways that emphasized personal involvement.

US Now was highlighting the power of the Internet for changing the nature of representative democracy and governance. How does the manager relate to his job at a football team such as Ebsfleet United, wholly owned by its supporters, who can outline their team choices online before every match? The answer is that he can consult their opinions, even if he chooses to ignore them. The film also illustrated the power of self-organization on the Internet in a web-based bank called Zopa, where everyone is

the manager, making individual lending decisions over their own savings.²

Much of the Internet's social and information-sharing structure has arisen from the ground up. It does not belong to some grand strategy devised by a corporate chief executive or political power broker. Instead it relies on sparks of innovation and the cumulative endeavors of mass collaboration. While part of this structure is supported by corporate organizations, significant chunks of Internet knowledge are founded on collaborative principles.

The full-time workforces of Wikipedia—the online encyclopedia—can be counted on two hands. The Wikipedia business card is a collector's item. Supporting the sprinkling of full-time staff, however, are 75,000 active contributors and 1200 moderators. With this decentralized, voluntary army of knowledge, Wikipedia has grown rapidly into one of the largest reference sites on the Internet, attracting 684m visitors a year by 2008, reading and sometimes adding to some 10m articles in more than 260 languages.

Has there ever been such collective volunteerism on a comparable scale? Yes there has. Historically we might point to the spread of religions, but for speed of uptake we could look at a last century example—the scouting movement, established by Lord Robert Baden Powell in 1907. Scouting spread rapidly through book distribution, a sound set of values and strong organizational support at a time that radio and telephony were in their infancy. *Scouting for Boys* went on to sell 150m copies, the fourth most successful book of the twentieth century, and today there are some 28m scouts and guides around the world.

It is worth recalling the dimensions of the scouting movement when comparing the penetration of the Internet. While there is no doubting the transformational power of the World Wide Web, we should maintain a sense of perspective over the nature and range of its influence.

No matter how successful it becomes in replicating our everyday existence, the virtual world of the Internet will never replace the vital, living, breathing sensory experience of human interaction. A screen-kiss can melt our hearts but the visual experience is no substitute for reality. We do not and shall never choose to kiss a screen.

We shall, nevertheless, allow the screen to substitute more expensive face-to-face meetings with colleagues, customers and clients in different parts of the world. What once required a time-consuming flight and complex itinerary can now be staged in face-to-screen meetings over conferencing links that have ironed out the technical limitations of the past.

At the same time we are learning new levels of communications etiquette presented with an ever more bewildering menu of individual preferences. Once we simply dictated a letter or picked up the phone and dialled. Today we might text a message, engage in instant messaging, send an e-mail, construct a podcast or broadcast a thought in a blog or over a social network, depending on either the specific aims or the tastes and preferences of the intended recipient. Such relatively new tools are not only testing our collaborative skills but also the personal boundaries we choose to impose on our privacy at work and in the home.

If the computer screen is not yet the Big Brother of George Orwell's dystopian 1984, along with invasive accomplices such as the BlackBerry and the iPhone, it may be seen as a kind of tolerated little brother ever tugging at our sleeves for attention. Are these devices indispensable labor-saving aids or are they technological accelerators of ADHD (attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder), or possibly both in a perpetual state of conflict, from which we seek some equilibrium?

Like Aki Maita's tamagotchi toy pet that enjoyed a cult influence among children in 1996, computers, whether hand-held, laptop or deskbound, demand and get—but do not always earn—levels of devotion that can border on obsession, promoting addictive behavior.

Not since television dominated the lives of post-Second World War families, has a communications technology taken such a grip on people's lives. The difference between this and previous technologies, however, is the degree of interaction and creativity enabled by digital technology and the Internet.

Take an example from my own life. One Sunday morning last winter we had the only snowfall of the year. It was heavy but short-lived. Our two youngest boys, Robert and George, went out on to the grassy hill outside our home and did what youngsters have done for hundreds of years—they made a snowman.

I could see it from my office window. It had the obligatory carrot nose, cinder eyes and black hat. The next time I looked it had been demolished. I felt slightly irritated—all that time spent creating something, simply to kick it down. It seemed a waste and so uncharacteristic of the boys. Is this what their mother and I had reared them to do?

We needn't have worried. The boys belong to the Internet generation. Within half an hour, they were showing us their 30-second video, complete with its surprise ending, music mash up, and YouTube distribution to a growing audience all before lunchtime when the snow had disappeared.

To aid distribution there followed a blog on my website and links to Facebook and various other websites where my children have left their imprints. By the afternoon they were making a remix and counting their viewing figures in the thousands. This wasn't a school project or a piece of homework, but in this short exercise they were demonstrating all kinds of skills expected of those working in the creative industries.

First there was the concept. Then there was building on the idea, use of technology, sampling playlists, matching music to action, editing, then marketing and distribution. The end result was raw but entertaining, a small and amusing product of their imagination that the boys found intrinsically satisfying.

Today they are back at school and university preparing for exams that will give them the certificates on which employers make their judgments about suitability for work. Yet little in these certificates will tell recruiters about a potential job candidate's creative sparkle. Instead the certificates will say more about an individual's willingness to follow a set work pattern—to digest, to analyze, to remember facts, to distil and assemble information. For most employers today those skills are highly prized. But their significance, I believe, is waning.

This is why I wanted to write this book. The world has already changed for our children, but it is changing for all of us just as quickly. Unless my generation—and I belong to the boomer age group (those born between 1945 and 1960)—learns to understand and take advantage of these changes, we are going to create a damaging economic and organizational vacuum for future generations.

It is already happening. The reasons for the credit crunch and its near-catastrophic undermining of the global banking industry were multifaceted and complex. Intrinsicly, however, they reflected a society chained to production-led economic growth. There is an apparently virtuous circularity to this society. We are paid to make things which are bought with the money we earn. It is a very simple kind of economic roundabout, oiled by debt, supported by earnings. If one part of this mechanism fails or becomes distorted, the whole machine is placed in jeopardy.

This is what happened when banks and other lending institutions overstretched themselves extending and trading in high-risk mortgage debt, insured, as it was, by rising property prices. As soon as property prices began falling, as people began defaulting on their debts, these policies rebounded, squeezing financial liquidity to such an extent that banks and building societies, relying on an ease of sourcing credit for their daily transactions, became forced increasingly to look to their own resources. Those with few cash reserves were in trouble.

I do not intend this book to be a commentary on the credit crunch. After all, it is not the first time that we have seen failures in the capitalist system. But I do think that this global collapse in confidence is lending even more fuel to generational disillusionment among the young.

Youthful disillusionment is not new either. It helped to bring about the end of the Vietnam War and to ease the rigidities in China's communist system. Much of the youthful unrest in the boomer generation manifested itself in student protest and radicalism. In the 2009 Iranian elections it filtered through in blogs and online messages, outlining dissent in spite of government attempts to block Internet broadcasts.

Today, however, the underground movement that is exposing the threadbare fabric of work is not so much a movement or a protest, but simply the silent endeavor of millions—creating, blogging, uploading, downloading, copying, borrowing, stealing, feeding and expanding creatively on the Internet. This work—if we can call it that—much of it unpaid and unfocused, led to complaints in Andrew Keen's provocative polemic, *The Cult of the Amateur*, that the Internet had equipped the hoi polloi with the means to infest the world's information channels with all kinds

of gibberish undermining the work of intellectuals and respected journalists.

He likened the explosion of blogging to T. H. Huxley's "infinite monkey theorem" where Huxley argued that if you provided an infinite number of monkeys with an infinite number of typewriters one of them would one day create a masterpiece to equal Shakespeare.

There must have been similar fears in the Vatican when Gutenberg's printing press made its way across Europe in the late fifteenth-century, allowing mass publications of the Bible in the vernacular for the first time. The Vatican feared, justifiably, that this kind of mass media would challenge its authority, and so came the Reformation. Would we have known Shakespeare without it?

Today we are on the cusp of a new Reformation, but this is a reformation of the workplace from the ground upwards. It is not organized or collectivized, nor is it revolutionary in nature (although it may become so); it is born of a persistent drip-feeding of change fed by diffuse influences that I will explore thematically in the chapters of this book (see Figure I.1).

Robert Peston, the BBC's business editor, has been speaking eloquently about a new kind of capitalism, emerging from the embers of the 2008 banking crisis. The post-2008 business environment may well see a reversion to traditional values in the workplace, placing an emphasis on trust and personal relationships. But I don't see it yet, even though I believe, passionately, that these have always been, and must remain, the fundamental characteristics of the best working arrangements.

Tomorrow's workplace will be defined, not only by a reversion to what we might recognize as old-fashioned values, but also by broader international forces such as those of environmentalism. A growing understanding that the world cannot rely forever on fossil fuels is leading to a backlash against unadulterated economic growth in a resource-hungry world. We don't know when oil will run out but it is just possible that we have already reached the point known as Peak Oil, after which the rate of oil extraction and refinement will begin to reduce. The influence of this decline and the transitions that must accompany reducing oil supplies and diminishing mineral stocks will very likely ensure that sustainable

living will be the prime economic concern at some stage within the next two generations, quite possibly even in mine.

These are the underpinnings of disquiet among all generations, but particularly those who are about to inherit the workplace. Employers will find they can no longer rely on the unconditional support of employees and potential employees in the headlong pursuit of material wealth. But they should not interpret changing attitudes solely as a reaction to the events of 2008. The sea change began some years earlier.

In 1997 McKinsey & Co, the management consultant, published a study called *The War for Talent* that heralded an increasingly competitive marketplace in recruitment and leadership development. No longer could employers sit back and cherry-pick their future leaders from thousands of willing candidates. No longer could they assume a craving for long-term institutional employment. McKinsey & Co consultants Ed Michaels, Helen Handfield-Jones and Beth Axelrod argued that if companies were serious about retaining and developing the best leaders, they would need to recognize the strategic value of human capital.

I shall return to the idea of human capital in Chapter 10 as it is often misunderstood or simply dismissed as a trendy term for human resources management, just as HR itself was regarded as a fancier term for personnel management (an argument with which I have some sympathy).

Suffice to say that companies have needed to change their thinking and approaches to recruitment and development radically since the 1990s when the old social contract disappeared and with it any sense of loyalty and long-term career expectations.

What created this transformation? We can look, perhaps, to the changing political landscape of the 1980s when the Thatcher and Reagan governments in the UK and the US introduced sharper, more market-driven approaches to their economic policies. The result was a wholesale clear out among unprofitable industries and a drastic paring down among others, encouraging tighter, leaner, systems of management.

The harsher climate of monetarism provided a fresh canvas for the ideas of Michael Hammer and James Champy whose *Harvard Business Review* article of 1990 and subsequent book, *Reengineering the Corporation: A Manifesto for Business*

Revolution in 1993 heralded unprecedented white-collar job-shedding in the private sector.

New service industries were born overnight. One of these was outplacement—a service that provided support for outgoing executives in job-searching, organizing curriculum vitae, interviewing approaches and networking skills. Another one was interim management. Interims are contracting executives who work, either by choice or circumstance, outside the traditional jobs market. They find work through their networks or using agencies that sprang up, offering skilled executives to undertake temporary managerial roles on a day-rate basis.

Typically these individuals are overqualified for the jobs they are expected to undertake. But their willingness to work at short notice for limited periods of a few weeks or months, combined with the gaps in leadership that resulted from overzealous pruning, enabled them to attract a premium for their services.

When Charles Handy, the management writer, interviewed some of these executives in the early days of the industry he observed that their work was no longer a single job but a collection or portfolio of jobs, hence his subsequent description of this kind of work as the “portfolio career.”

Business writing was abuzz with these concepts during the 1990s. Bill Bridges wrote *Jobshift* in which he predicted that the job as we knew it would disappear. So, he predicted, would middle management. Daniel Pink’s book, *Free Agent Nation*, envisaged an army of freelance workers replacing the institution of the permanent job. But the reality of free agency, while not a myth, turned out to be something less than representative of working life. As the world moved in to a new millennium, salaried or waged employment remained and continues to remain the predominant model of employment.

But it can’t claim to be a happy model. If one kind of workplace epitomized the late twentieth-century job it had to be the office. The jargon-riddled language of office administration has been savaged in print by *Dilbert*, the Scott Adams cartoon strip and on television in *The Office*, a pastiche of everything that is bland and unedifying about office work. Ricky Gervais’s David Brent character is the nightmare manager, larger than life, but only just. We watched *The Office*, cringing with a knowing

curiosity because Gervais was reflecting a recognizable caricature of sterile working relationships, underpinned by the ubiquitous appraisal form and so-called performance management.

Performance management was the alter ego of collective bargaining. As trade union influence declined during the 1980s it was replaced by a new individualism, particularly in management ranks, where each individual was accountable for their own success or failure. This focus on the individual reached its zenith in General Electric under Jack Welch during the 1990s after the introduction of what Welch called “Session C” appraisals.³ Managers were required each year to grade the members of their teams as As, Bs, or Cs. The As were the star performers, the anointed ones, destined for promotion; the Bs, the solid, dependable types; and the Cs? Well the Cs could either shape up or ship out.

The system was described by consultants, transferring it across the US workplace, as “forced ranking”. It heralded a harsher, more Darwinian style of corporate management that was translated into television entertainment on the *The Apprentice*, a realty business-based TV show launched in 2004 and headed by property tycoon, Donald Trump. Those who failed to make the grade were shown the door and told “You’re fired!”

The format was repeated in the UK, this time headed by Sir Alan Sugar, the founder of Amstrad, the computer company. By this time, however, the television schedules were accustomed to harsher-edged rejection formats. The audience-participation “vote off” was pioneered in the Dutch TV creation, *Big Brother*, where the audience played a voyeuristic role, viewing so-called housemates gathered together in sealed living quarters. Members of the TV audience chose who they wished to leave the house. The format was later repeated in dozens of TV shows. In the TV quiz show, *The Weakest Link*, the humiliation of rejection was emphasized when contestants were told by presenter Anne Robinson: “You are the weakest link, goodbye!” and asked to take the “walk of shame.”

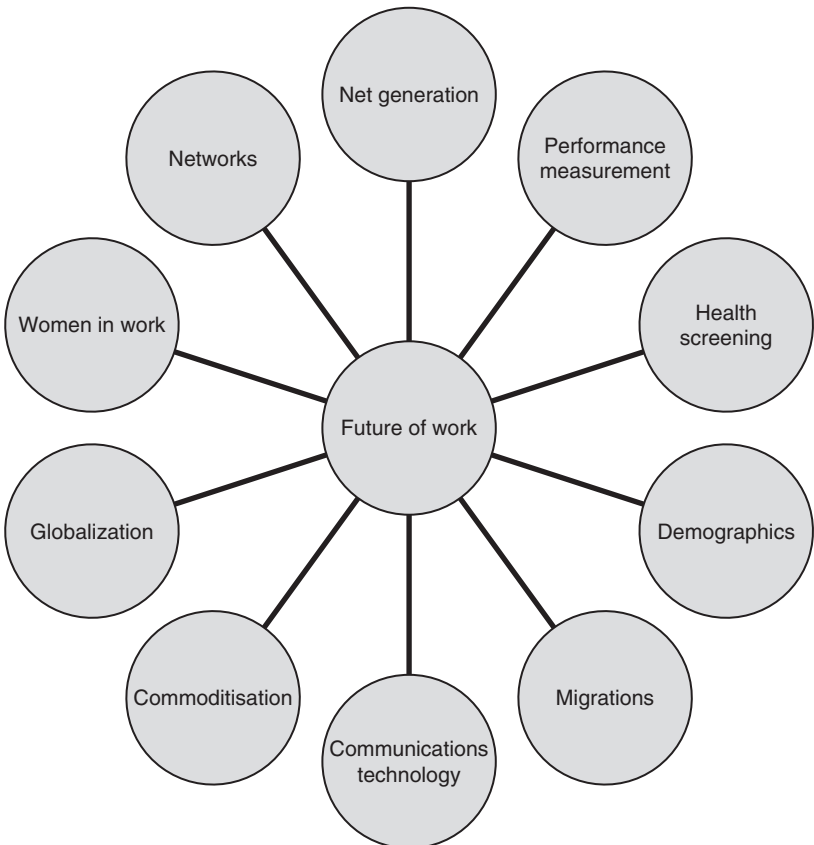
So who was copying who? Were the television stations simply reflecting a tougher workplace, or was the “vote off” simply a reflection of our baser characteristics, only concealed by otherwise polite behavior? Is there something more honest about

the blunt appraisal? After all, no one forces us to enter a talent show.

I want to investigate these issues in the forthcoming chapters while examining what I believe are some of the most significant themes influencing the changing workplace (see Figure I.1). Some of these themes, including forced ranking, perhaps, may prove to be nothing more than short-lived fashion.

Some, like the current interest in healthy workplaces, may flourish briefly as they did during the 1920s and 1930s when progressive large companies made space for playing fields and organized sports and social clubs for employees.

FIGURE I.1 Circle of influences



But other influences, such as the Internet, appear to be here to stay and workplaces must learn to exploit the possibilities of the new information and communications media and the way they are shaping behaviors among what the Canadian management writer, Don Tapscott, in his book, *Growing Up Digital*, calls the “net generation.”

Yet other influences, such as human capital, deserve greater scrutiny and demand broader understanding if employers are to develop meaningful, reliable and useful ways of measuring and stimulating excellent, rewarding work. After all, that’s what really matters about work isn’t it—that it’s good work?⁴

How can work be improved? On the eve of his presidential inauguration, Barack Obama visited a shelter for homeless teenagers and quoted Martin Luther King’s advice urging young people, whatever their talents, to give of their best. King said, “If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of Heaven and Earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.”

On the day of the inauguration some 1.8m people crammed into Washington’s National Mall as Obama took his oath of office, leaving behind them 100 tons of litter swept up by 300 street cleaners and 20 cleaning machines. Other workers set about disposing of the contents of 7000 portaloos. Somebody has to do this work and it won’t go away, at least not in the near future. While there may have been relatively few Beethovens and Michelangelos among the cleaners, the challenge to make such work intrinsically rewarding remains.

Job content matters. So does our experience of work. Don’t we deserve to be happy in work? Is it acceptable today simply to tolerate work as the source of our earnings, to accept with a sense of resignation that it will ever be something we would rather avoid? Or can work be something better, something finer, something uplifting and purposeful? It seemed to feel that way to Jim Webber, who died in late 2008 at the age of 105 after working the land for 93 years in his native Dorset, latterly as a gardener before arthritis enforced his retirement at the age of 104.⁵

When work defines a life, including the “triumphs and disasters,” from Kipling’s memorable poem, *If*, it becomes inseparable from who we are and what we do. In these circumstances, terms such as retirement lose their meaning. Neither might we care about that ghastly, meaningless neologism, “work-life balance” as if the two are somehow separable, as if to work is not to live. In a perfect world the two would be one and the same and, though we may never achieve perfection, it behoves of us to try.

That’s what this book is about. It is my own attempt, drawn from a lifetime of work and some 15 years specializing in work and management, much of it in the pages of the *Financial Times*, to make some sense of what we do and what we should be doing in our approach to work and the management of work.

Not all of this is theoretical. For the past seven years I have pursued my own living experiment, mixing work and leisure, seeking opportunities to “learn and earn” from the things I enjoy such as walking, fishing and sailing. Plowing this independent furrow I have learned the importance of fitness and health in work, of organization, learning and the power of the network. I wouldn’t portray this kind of working and living as an ideal or, indeed, the future of work. It can be lonely, disheartening and confusing at times. But it does feel like living rather than working. On the other hand it is not always easy to identify the things I might have once viewed as leisure. Of one thing I am certain, the leisure society is a myth.

Work will be as important tomorrow as it has always been but we must find better ways to learn and prepare for working lives, better ways to exploit and make the best of talent, better reward systems and better forms of management. Here’s a confession at the outset: I don’t know, any more than anyone else what the future has in store for us. Any trend is subject to unforeseen variables. So this isn’t intended as a book of predictions with visions of wizzy technology, although in Chapter 13, *The Day Work Ended*, I do include a somewhat tongue-in-cheek vision of 50 years hence as food for thought. Do I think the more egalitarian world portrayed at the end of the book will come to pass? I doubt it, but I do retain a sense of optimism about the future. Capitalism and corporatism are so strong that I think it would take a destabilizing financial meltdown much more severe

than happened in 2008 for the world's power brokers to accept more democratic systems of governance, even where technology exists to make it possible. I hope I am wrong in this conclusion, however, and would love to see some of our biggest institutions dragged kicking and screaming, if it has to be that way, to more democratic forms of management.

Also, socially, I do not think there is any great desire among most people to adopt the isolating atmosphere of home-working on a grand scale. People like to congregate in big cities. You need only cross Hungerford footbridge in London on an early summer evening, savoring the buzz of people on the south and north banks of the Thames to understand the lure of city-working and city-living. People will still need to feel a sense of permanence in their lives, so either a full-time job, or the promise of continued work will remain important in anchoring people emotionally, not to mention financially. Without safeguards, free agency, for most people, cannot offer such security. But the future may introduce catalysts for radical change: climate change, oil shortages, insurgency, the need for more sustainable lifestyles, each or all of these forces could lead to rapidly transitioning societies.

The bulk of this book, however, is not attempting to ask the question "what if?" Instead it is attempting to outline and interpret significant existing trends and to offer some thoughts and ideas for policymakers, leaders and individuals trying to make sense of work. The shape of tomorrow is fashioned today.

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