

Talent, not Labour, is the Future of Work

Harold Jarche,
Principal at Jarche
Consulting and Partner
at Internet Time
Alliance (Canada)

They were there looking for people who had the talent to think outside the box. It never occurred to them that, if everyone had to think outside the box, maybe it was the box that needed fixing.

—Malcolm Gladwell
The Talent Myth (2004)



Abstract

As routine and procedural work gets automated, human work will be increasingly complex, requiring permanent skills for continuous learning and adaptation. Creativity and empathy will be more important than compliance and intelligence. This requires a rethinking of jobs, employment, and organizational management.





What is the major difference between the scientific management framework that informed so many of our work practices, and the new management requirements for the connected enterprise in the network age?

In 1911, Frederick Winslow Taylor started with a basic assumption about the difference between labour and management. Labour was stupid and management was intelligent.

Now one of the very first requirements for a man who is fit to handle pig iron as a regular occupation is that he shall be so stupid and so phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his mental make-up the ox than any other type. The man who is mentally alert and intelligent is for this very reason entirely unsuited to what would, for him, be the grinding monotony of work of this character. Therefore the workman who is best suited to handling pig iron is unable to understand the real science of doing this class of work.

—F.W. Taylor
*Principles of Scientific
Management* (1911)

Taylor went on to say that labourers should be well-compensated for their manual work but that the duty of enforcing standards of work rests “with management alone”. This attitude still permeates most of our organizations, whether we realize it or not.

The assumption of any organizational hierarchy is that the further up the organization chart you go, then the more educated and intelligent you are. Most compensation models are based on this assumption. This system works well when work is simple or even

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complicated and for which processes can be identified and mapped. However this type of work is getting more automated by machines and software. If a work process can be modelled, then in time it will be automated.

There are many types of work that machines cannot easily replicate. These are tasks that require creativity, curiosity, empathy, humour, and passion. Much of the knowledge for this type of work, like caring for other humans, is made up of implicit knowledge which is difficult to codify and therefore automate. I call this type of work: talent. Machines are good for work that requires obedience, compliance, perseverance, intelligence, and analysis. This is work based on explicit knowledge which can be codified. I call this type of work: Labour. It is becoming clear that human work in the near future will deal with increasingly more complex tasks, as routine and standardized work will be done by machines. Human work will be based on talent.



What happens when the work at the bottom of the pyramid becomes more complex? Taylor assumed that only management could see the whole system. In today's connected enterprise everyone has to see the whole system, all the time. This makes many of our previous assumptions about how work should be organized completely irrelevant, and perhaps even dangerous for any organization where its outputs are important to society, investors, management, or workers. It puts the entire concept of a standardized job, which

can be filled by any qualified person, in question.

A network-centric management perspective assumes human creative potential can be realized in supportive and challenging environments by engaging everyone. A focus on talent development means growing and supporting customized work and letting the machines do the Labour. It requires fundamental organizational redesign, from compensation, to competencies, and even redefining management. Good network era management focuses on human talent development. Everything else is superfluous.

Valued and paid work in the emerging network era will have high task variety, requiring continuous informal learning, based on mostly implicit knowledge that cannot be easily codified or shared. Talent is not easy to automate or replace. If most work is talent, then why do we need jobs? We are moving from an economy based on jobs-to-be-filled to one focused on work-to-be-done.

Talent (creativity, curiosity, empathy, humour, passion) is based on what have traditionally been called 'soft skills' rather than more technical 'hard skills' such as the currently in-demand skill of data-mining. But these soft skills are what separates humans from machines. Soft skills are permanent ones, while hard skills are temporary. For the past several centuries we have used human labour to do what machines cannot. First the machines caught up with us and surpassed

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humans with their brute force. Now they are surpassing us with their brute intelligence. Today there is little need for machine-like human work which is routine, standardized, or brute.

If we are moving into a post-job economy, then we need to restructure how work gets done and how it is compensated. We cannot stay tied to the concept of the job as the primary way to work. For example, enabling people to easily change work roles, without the straight jacket of the Human Resources department's competency models, is one way to get rid of the standardized job. All organizations and workers have to face the fact that the loss of routine work will continue.

Value creation in the emerging creative network economy is having ideas, connecting ideas, and trying new things out based on these ideas. Not only do these activities take time, they are highly social, as success often depends on who we work with. But being creative is not something people can just turn on and off, as any artist knows. To encourage creativity we need to change how we structure work.

Supporting talent for customized work requires a culture of continuous learning. Today, if people are not able to speak, read, or write, then work cannot get done. It would be impossible to run any modern organization without people who can effectively communicate. We are moving into an era where it will be impossible to run a company where everyone is not constantly learning. This does not mean everyone will be on standardized training

courses though. Curiosity, creativity, and empathy are not developed through training. These are social skills which must be practiced and reinforced in creative workplaces between engaged co-workers. Most importantly, a creative network economy workplace will require constant independent and interdependent learning by doing. This is social. In the very near future, those who cannot learn with others will miss out on creative work opportunities.

Everyone can learn but many in the workforce have forgotten how to take control of their professional development. Our focus for education, training, and work must be on helping people be better humans, not better machines. Creativity, curiosity, and empathy become powerful human tools when we continuously learn with each other. No machine can match the creativity of socially connected humans. Machines can only solve complicated problems. They cannot solve complex problems. Valued work is no longer standardized. Therefore a standardized approach for education and training to support creative work is obsolete.

Our economy needs a rethink of how we categorize work, define jobs, attract and retain talent. It also means a rethink of our education systems. Talent is not developed through a standardized curriculum. It's time to take the long-term view on human work and learning. Hard skills are temporary ones for changing market and technological conditions. Talent is our long-term value as humans to each other. ■

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