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INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS CENTRE



Queen's University IRC 2015 Workplace in Motion Summit Proceedings

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Introduction

The world of work is changing, and the most successful organizations and practitioners are those that understand how these changes impact the way they do business. To help them do so, and to foster further dialogue, Queen's IRC hosted the Workplace in Motion Summit in Toronto on April 16th, 2015. Over 100 human resource, labour relations, and organizational development professionals from across Canada attended the Summit. Chaired by IRC facilitator Brenda Barker Scott, the Summit provided a forum to stimulate new ideas and new perspectives on the dynamic new world of work.

The Summit focused on a variety of questions of interest to today's human resource, labour relations, and organizational development professionals. More specifically, it helped participants:

- Identify issues and best practices related to current trends and practices in human resource management, labour relations, and organizational development.
- Explore how rapidly emerging technologies are shaping and re-shaping modern workplaces and the way we work.
- Investigate the impact of changing demographics on contemporary organizations.

This was all done with the intent of identifying how they can better lead change and promote excellence within and beyond their organizations and professional networks.

Over the course of the Summit, several themes emerged that were particularly critical to today's human resource, labour relations, and organizational development professionals. These included the need to:

- Manage change and transformation in order to advance organizational and professional interests with as little disruption as possible.
- Create the physical space, infrastructure, technologies, and systems necessary to support a collaborative, open, and innovative workplace and work culture.
- Engage, retain, and motivate the new generation of employees and to bridge inter-generational gaps in the workplace.
- Think outside the box in order to appropriately encourage risk-taking and innovation.

This report elaborates on the most important questions, issues, and themes identified by Summit participants going forward.

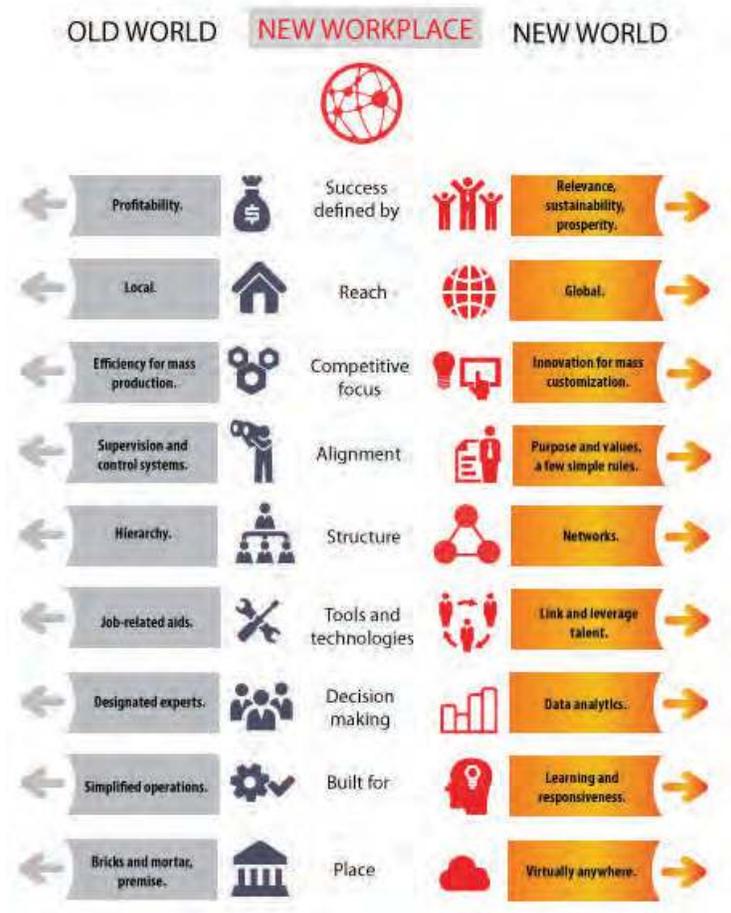
The New Workplace

At one point in time, 'work' was synonymous with a place that employees went on regularly scheduled and predetermined times. While we have not moved completely beyond this notion, the fact is that 'work' is less and less synonymous with an actual place and related increasingly to the actual tasks and activities that employees do and the organizations for whom they work. Many workplaces today – especially in emerging sectors and industries – are discovering ways of moving away from defined work spaces (i.e. cubicles) and beyond rigid work schedules (i.e. 9 to 5) as a means to be more responsive to the needs of both their employees and clientele.

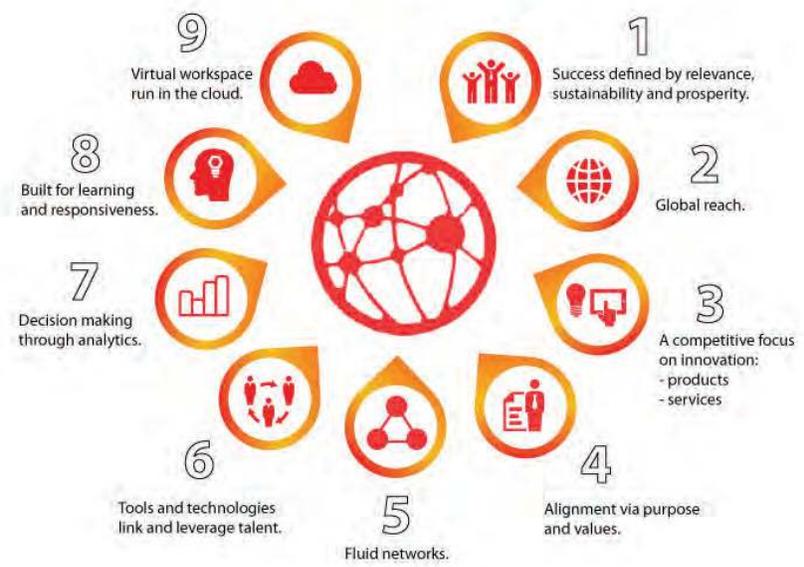
Technology plays a crucial role in facilitating these changes. Rapid advances in communication technology enhance not just connectivity within and outside the organization, but collaboration as well. In many cases, these technologies provide new, virtual spaces for collaboration and learning. They also help support intra-organizational learning, and allow employees to develop a more holistic picture of the organization and to better understand and appreciate the work and knowledge of their colleagues. Social media and information-sharing technologies ensure a more efficient and just-in-time flow of knowledge, increasing the responsiveness of people and organizations to change. Finally, and especially when compared to only two decades earlier, the sheer volume of data and information that is available to organizations is astonishing. As guest speaker Hugh Ritchie (OpenText) noted, accessing data is no longer the challenge that it once was. Instead, the challenge lies in determining what information is relevant and how data analysis can help an organization meet its goals.

There was a consensus among Summit participants that shifts away from defined work spaces and hours and embracing technology and data were a central part of many contemporary workplaces. However, participants also approached these shifts with caution and a critical eye. For example, while participants agreed that open and collaborative workplaces were desirable, they were hesitant to deny the importance of 'bricks and mortar' facilities and defined personal workspaces, largely due to the security, privacy, and stability they offer. They also discussed the tendency of new technologies to be faddish and cost-inefficient. In light of this, many participants spoke to the importance of critically appraising whether new technologies are the right fit for the organization and the work that needs to be done, and if they truly provide value. The need to embrace technology while maintaining work-life balance was also central to these discussions. Yes, participants agreed that technology facilitates flexibility and mobility among employees. However, it can also create undue stress and disrupt personal lives. This has proven so challenging in some cases that several organizations and collective agreements have enacted policies and regulations that limit employees' use of email and other work-related IT resources when they are away from the office and/or in the evening and on weekends.

As discussions continued throughout the day, it became apparent that balancing established and emerging systems of workplace organization was a key to success. Few, if any participants supported doing away with traditional buildings, plants, and offices altogether, or denying the importance of new technologies. Rather, they felt that combining more established structures with open, collaborative, and virtual workspaces, and engaging with the right technologies and the right information for the right reasons provided a foundation for success.



9 Characteristics of the New Workplace



Developing New Work Cultures

Alongside changes to the workplace are changes to attitudes and practices surrounding work. Taken together, these result in new and emerging work cultures. Summit participants were forthcoming regarding how the culture of work is changing in their organizations, the changes to work culture that they anticipate in the future, and the changes that they believe are necessary in order to ensure future success. Participants focused on a variety of aspects of work, although several issues – most of which are inter-related – pertaining to work culture were prominent. These issues were related to job descriptions, trust, leadership, and information-sharing.

Organizations are increasingly focused on developing work cultures that help them leverage the talent and the knowledge of their employees in order to gain competitive advantages and realize efficiencies. However, and in order to do so, many were required to disrupt long-established work cultures. One aspect of this identified by many participants was the need to move beyond rigid job descriptions or classifications that placed limits and constraints on the activities, tasks, and projects in which an employee or group of employees could engage. Most employees may be trained in particular disciplines or vocations, yet their experience, world view, and ability to think critically may provide just as much value to an organization as their functional specialties. As participants noted, such rigid and/or narrow job descriptions and classifications tend to place employees within organizational ‘silos.’ When employees are ‘siloed’, their understanding and engagement with the organization as a whole is limited. This leaves value on the table and diminishes the potential contributions of highly talented employees.

Another important aspect of emerging workplace cultures surrounds senior leadership. In the past, many organizations functioned through top-down, command-and-control decision-making processes whereby only senior leaders had authority and employees (usually with rigid and narrowly-defined job descriptions) were responsible for carrying out work. These senior leaders were also privy to critical information that, despite its value to employees in their day-to-day work, was not readily shared across the organization. Not surprisingly, this led to work cultures fraught with mistrust and low levels of employee engagement. These work cultures are less and less sustainable in an increasingly competitive environment where value must be realized across all of the organization’s activities. Summit participants spoke frequently (and loudly) of the need for senior leaders to move beyond such outdated practices in order to foster work cultures that engage employees in such a way that their talents are leveraged to the greatest extent possible and to do so in a way that facilitates enough trust within the organization that information and knowledge is transferred freely.



7 Characteristics of the New Work



Vignette – Shopify’s Hack Days

One of the highlights of the Summit was guest speaker Brittany Forsyth of Shopify, an Ottawa-based organization that produces software with retail and point-of-sale applications. Ms. Forsyth’s presentation focused on how Shopify’s human resource and employee engagement practices helped build a unique work culture that facilitates learning, innovation, and collaboration. With the help of a video presentation, she elaborated on a particular initiative that she credited as part of their success: ‘hack days.’

Reminiscent of ‘skunkworks’ or ‘bootlegging’ projects made famous by the likes of Lockheed, Google, and 3M (and that brought us innovations as diverse as fighter jets, post-it notes, and driverless cars), ‘hack days’ are designed for all Shopify employees to put aside their day-to-day and week-to-week tasks and focus on projects of their own choice over two days. In addition to innovations that benefit both the organization and individual career development, Shopify’s hack days allow employees who seldom interact to work and learn from one another. It also allows them to showcase their creativity and problem-solving abilities in a manner that provides additional value to the organization. This, according to Ms. Forsyth, is an important pillar in developing the sense of community that is central to her organization’s work culture.

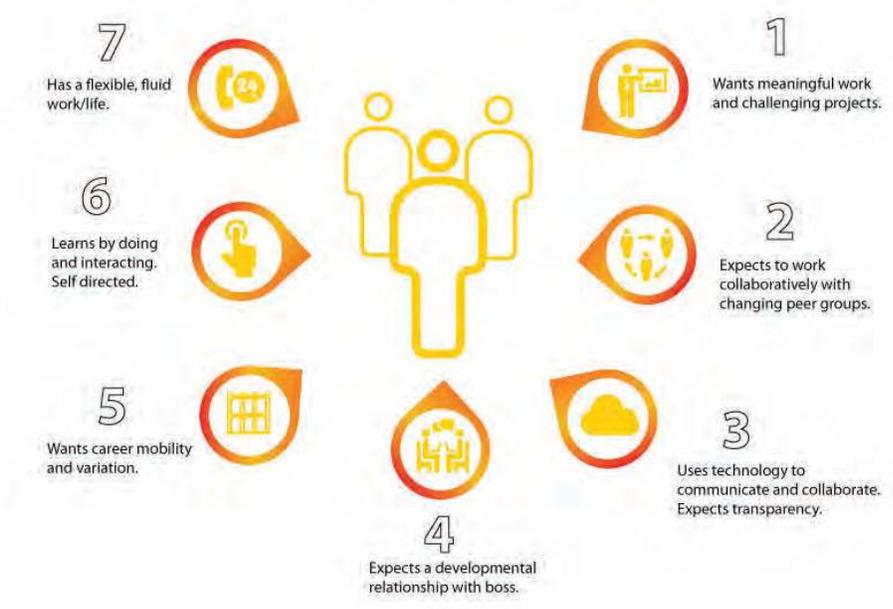
Needless to say, Summit participants were impressed by Shopify’s ‘hack days’. Some of the core tenets of Shopify’s ‘hack days’ resurfaced throughout the day as discussions turned towards developing work cultures conducive to success. The ability to foster collaboration not simply among close-knit groups of employees but across the organization, to encourage risk-taking in the pursuit of innovation to better the organization, and the project-based and results-oriented focus were all perceived to be strong examples of practices that can help develop successful cultures for the new world of work.

Engaging the New Workforce

Engaging a new generation of employees – often referred to as ‘millennials’ – is one of the most persistent questions for human resource, labour relations, and organizational development practitioners, especially in light of the high volume of retirements anticipated in the Canadian labour market in the next decade. This issue was a high priority for Summit participants. Developing strategies to attract, retain, and engage the new generation of employees was perhaps the most discussed and deliberated issue of the day.



7 Characteristics of the New Employee



In the Summit's first plenary, guest speakers James Prince (Me to We) and Courtney Joliffe (Free the Children, the non-profit partner of Me to We) provided a particular perspective regarding the motivations and mindset of millennials in the workplace today. Both described how they sought jobs that offered travel, dynamic environments that provide opportunities for continuous personal and professional development, collaborative work environments, and an alignment of work and personal lives. Both speakers also emphasized their desire to work for organizations that allowed them to have an immediate and tangible impact, that offered opportunities for upward *and* lateral mobility (i.e. the 'career lattice' as opposed to the 'career ladder'), and that emphasized the 'triple bottom line'; or those that prioritized social and environmental goals as well as profits or cost management.

Not surprisingly, their comments elicited significant debate and insight into the question of engaging new generations of workers into participants' organizations. Many participants were quick to point out that the organizations for which they worked were very different than those that employed the guest speakers, and doubted that they would ever be able to provide the same opportunities and mobility. They also noted that the speakers' desire for geographic mobility and alignment of work and personal lives did not match the desires of many of the younger workers currently employed by their organizations. That said, the perspectives of the speakers led to in-depth discussion of the myths and facts surrounding younger employees.

One of the most pressing issues surrounded the stereotyping of younger employees. Without going into specific detail, many participants noted that colleagues within their own organizations too often held negative or misleading assumptions and perceptions about younger employees. They also noted that these assumptions and perceptions often led to challenges within their workplaces, particularly around communication and integration. Certainly there are characteristics common to younger generations of employees that are different than those that are more established. There was some consensus that younger employees desire to engage in both dynamic and meaningful work (and to see the impact that they have made), work collaboratively within their organizations, and value flexibility and work-life balance. They also engage with technology differently than other generations, especially when communicating and collaborating with co-workers and supervisors. Moreover, they expect and benefit greatly from regular feedback and mentorship from supervisors and established co-workers (whether received face-to-face or electronically). After some reflection, some participants came away perplexed as to how these traits and characteristics led to negative, rather than positive, stereotypes of younger employees.

Designing organizations and developing workplace cultures in a way that helps integrate younger employees was a priority for most participants. Yet participants noted that it was also important to ensure that, in so doing, more experienced and established employees were not neglected or ignored. These points considered, there was a general consensus that organizations that could properly design systems and develop workplace cultures that integrated employees of different generations and allowed them to learn from one another were more likely to succeed, particularly when it came to the retention and engagement of younger employees. One strategy to do so, as introduced by guest speaker Brittany Forsyth and reiterated by participants in several activities and discussions throughout the day, was to hire for potential, emphasizing characteristics such as resourcefulness and a willingness to experiment and challenge established boundaries. Others noted that younger employees – who are often in the most mobile stage of their working lives – are often frustrated when told that they first must 'pay their dues.' Such employees, who prioritize career development, autonomy, and flexibility, can and will move on to another employer where this is the case. Successful organizations are those that carefully consider these intergenerational differences; they are also aware that if they fail to integrate and engage younger employees now, they may face significant talent deficits in the future.

Vignette – Mind Mapping (Or, How to Ensure Failure)

Summit participants engaged in a group mind-mapping exercise, in which they were asked to determine what an organization would have to do in order to ensure failure in the new world of work. Participants identified dozens of practices that would ensure failure, although several stood out from the rest. These were related to technology, collaboration, work schedules, job descriptions and departmental functions, and the relationship of executives and senior leaders to the rest of the organization.

According to an overwhelming majority of participants, an organization was doomed to fail in the new world of work if it shunned or failed to adopt new technology, and was unprepared to continually adapt to technological changes. Lack of reliable access to the internet, Wi-Fi, email, and data hosted on internal servers were sure-fire mechanisms for failure. A reluctance to engage with cloud-based and teleconferencing technologies was also frequently cited as mechanisms for failure, as was an organizational unwillingness to permit the use of personal devices for work-related tasks, when appropriate. Denying the importance of social media and other collaborative networking tools was also frequently cited by participants as an impediment to success.

Participants also identified a lack of or unwillingness to foster collaboration as a barrier to innovation, organizational learning, and efficiency. To do so, the organization that sought failure would promote a culture that inhibited collaboration and focused solely on top-down managerial strategies. This workplace would be devoid of comfortable and well-equipped spaces for collaboration (e.g. meeting and breakout rooms) and employees would instead be confined to individual cubicles or offices (doors closed of course!). Technologies that promoted and facilitated collaboration would be avoided at all costs.

Organizations seeking to fail would also limit flexibility and promote rigidity. They would do this in several ways. Employees would be required to work 9 to 5 with no consideration for flextime or telework to help maintain a reasonable work-life balance. They would also be regularly asked to work evenings and weekends (on short notice). Job descriptions would be limiting, as would the function of individual divisions and departments. Promotions and compensation would be based solely on seniority with no consideration given to performance. Silos would be promoted and enforced throughout the organization. Managers would be given full control and employee autonomy would be severely restricted.

Finally, participants determined that organizations that sought failure would rely exclusively on senior leaders for direction, information, and innovations. Employees would place complete trust in senior leaders (all of whom were over the age of 60), and would be discouraged from sharing any critical input or innovative ideas with management or co-workers; rather, they would await direction from the top. Senior leaders would, of course, be virtually inaccessible to most employees by most means of communication. And if, despite their best efforts at failure, the organization did achieve some measure of success, senior leaders would receive all the credit.

Takeaways and Lessons – What Did We Learn?

It is clear that the way work is organized, employees' attachments to the workplace, and the demographics of the workforce are changing. In order to promote success, organizations and their human resource, labour relations, and organizational development professionals must understand the impact of these changes. The purpose of the Workplace in Motion Summit was to foster dialogue around these issues in order to determine their impacts and some of the effective ways that organizations and individual practitioners have adapted. And while it is evident that there is no one-size-fits-all or cookie-cutter approach to these issues, Summit participants identified a number of the most important issues and engaged in productive discussions regarding strategies and practices to address them moving forward.

- **Successful organizations create environments for collaboration.** In some cases, this requires physical changes to the workplace. Collaboration is increasingly important, and is facilitated by physical spaces that are conducive to creativity, communication, and innovation. Conversely, when physical constraints are present, collaboration suffers. In addition to creating physical spaces for such activities, it is also important to adopt technologies that enable and encourage collaboration.
- **Successful organizations embrace technology, when and where appropriate.** It goes without saying: technology has drastically changed the way we live our lives. It has also changed the way we do work (and will continue to do so). It is thus increasingly important that we understand the opportunities that technology provides, as well as its limitations.
- **Successful organizations recruit and engage younger generations of employees.** These generations are educated, talented, insightful, and ready to contribute. They are tech-savvy, which is reflected in their preferred methods of communication. They place a high value on collaboration and welcome regular feedback and mentorship. They will also constitute a significant portion of the workforce in the very near future. Organizations should therefore prioritize the development of strategies to help attract, engage, and retain this generation of employee, and encourage inter-generational learning and collaboration. Otherwise, the best and the brightest of this generation will take their talent, skills, and efforts elsewhere!
- **Successful organizations foster a culture that allows them to leverage the talent of employees.** They also foster a culture that promotes information-sharing, knowledge transfer, and learning.
- **Successful organizations have senior leaders that will provide support in order to help realize change and move their organizations forward.** Importantly, these same leaders will also work to mobilize the resources necessary to do so.

A Model for the New World of Work



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About the Author



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Dr. Brendan Sweeney brings over ten years of experience teaching and researching labour relations in Canada and the US, with a particular emphasis on the natural resource, manufacturing, and education sectors. He currently works full-time at McMaster University, where he manages the Automotive Policy Research Centre and teaches in the School of Labour Studies. In addition, Brendan has experience working and teaching at Queen's, the University of Washington, and the University of Manitoba. Brendan's research has been widely recognized, and he has received several awards, including a Fulbright Fellowship, a Labor and Employment Relations' Association 2012 Best Paper Award, a nomination for the University of Manitoba Teaching Excellence Award, and the Canadian Association of Geographers' 2010 New Scholar Award for Excellence in Publication. Brendan's research is featured or forthcoming in almost a dozen high-profile academic journals. Brendan presents at the Queen's IRC *Building Smart Teams* program.

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