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The surge of workers leaving their jobs as the COVID-19 pandemic wears on — adding to employers' talent woes in the midst of an already tight labor market — has drawn predictable responses. Organizations are typically reacting to the Great Resignation with increased pay and flexibility and better, more personalized benefits. But these are short-term solutions to a long-term problem. If the job opportunities your company offers are the same as everyone else's, and pay and benefits are your only differentiator, then you will continue to churn through workers in an ever-escalating war for talent and an ever-escalating cost structure.

What if, instead, you offered better work?

Bend the Demand Curve

With most organizations focused on addressing the labor supply side of the equation, progressive organizations recognize the opportunity to use today's fight for talent as a catalyst to rethink and reorganize work. In our new book, *Work Without Jobs*, we show how job deconstruction can help bend the demand side of the work equation through the creation of an agile, flexible, inclusive, and resilient new work operating system.

The most common challenge employers face in trying to attract and retain talent stems from the assumption that the job itself is fixed and what needs changing is who does it. This leads to a false choice: Retain someone to continue doing the work, or seek a replacement with comparable experience and expertise. The solution to this false choice is to perpetually deconstruct and reinvent the work itself, making it both more attractive to talent and of greater value to the organization.

Today many organizations query from the supply side: "How do we find or build talent with the skills that fit with future automation?" In a new work operating system that bends the demand curve, they would ask, "How do we rebuild the work to optimize the combination of humans doing some tasks while automation does others?" Supply-side thinking leads to the question, "How can we get our jobs done with the right policy about remote-hybrid-onsite work?" Demand-side thinkers ask, "What new jobs can we invent

to optimally combine the tasks that should be done in each work arrangement?” Reframing the question creates more options for making work more attractive and solving prominent dilemmas such as labor shortages and resignations.

Pivot Skills to Work to Be Done

In our new work operating system, organizations now think beyond jobs and jobholders, and talent sourcing moves beyond matching the “right” candidate to a job. The correct question is not “Is this worker fully qualified for this job?” but rather “What tasks are bundled together into this job, which workers are qualified to perform which of those tasks, and how could the tasks be unbundled and reconstructed?” Deconstructing and reconstructing the work while optimizing against worker qualifications requires a work system capable of seeing each worker as an array of capabilities and skills rather than as a holder of a degree or a job.

This reframing becomes increasingly vital in times of labor shortages or rapid change. In the new work operating system, organizations don’t have obsolete workers. Rather, they pivot known skills to new work. They address capability gaps by integrating well-known supply-side options like building, borrowing, buying, or automating with demand-side options like work sharing, deconstructing jobs into projects, and reconstructing work into new jobs. Operating in this new way requires insight at the deconstructed level of things like tasks/projects and skills/capabilities.

For example, COVID-19 handed retail organizations a simultaneous surplus of in-store associates and a shortage of call center associates. In-store associates, traditionally seen merely as jobholders, might have been terminated. However, the new work operating system sees the job of in-store associate as a bundle of tasks and the workers as bundles of skills/capabilities. Seen this way, the in-store associates can qualify for new types of work. Savvy retail organizations created new jobs that enabled employees to work part time in the store and part time at home doing virtual call center tasks. There might never before have been a job of home

call center associate, but in-store associates have the vast majority of the skills needed for this new job, lacking only the skills to set up and run an in-home call center station.

Deconstructing jobs into tasks and identifying underlying skills/capabilities becomes a potent solution for critical talent and labor gaps. Options emerge that are not apparent in the traditional job-based system, such as achieving some objectives through projects or “inside gigs.” A large European insurer seeking to shift from its traditional, agent-based distribution model to a direct-to-consumer model realized that the digital talent required to power this shift in priorities was captive within its traditional functional structure, significantly hindering its progress. The organization made the radical decision to pull all of its digital talent (such as data scientists, user interface/user experience designers, and software developers) out of its functional areas and into a virtual “talent cloud.” Managers were taught how to design projects to develop their direct-to-consumer channels; they obtained the resources they needed through the company’s internal talent marketplace. This matched the particular skills needed for each project with talent that flowed from one project to the next in a series of inside gigs.

Isolate and Reassign Tasks

Reducing rigidity can bring relief in tight labor markets because it automatically widens the pool of talent to draw from. Melting down or relaxing the job requires proactive deconstruction — isolating relevant work elements: tasks, activities, or projects.

The health care sector and its well-publicized labor supply issues are a prime example of how shifting focus to demand can solve for shortages. Providence Health & Services, a nonprofit Catholic health system operating multiple hospitals across eight states, tackled its nursing shortage by deconstructing the job of a nurse. Providence observed that the nursing job contained some tasks that were “top of license,” meaning they required and drew upon the unique high-level medical skills in which nurses had been trained. However, the job had evolved to also involve a significant amount of time spent on tasks that did not draw upon or require those skills, such as taking patient temperatures and

recording information on their hospital charts. This “below license” work contributed to both excess costs and decreased employee engagement and job satisfaction. *Organizations Work Operating System* (MIT Press).

While this situation might have been acceptable at a time when health care was stable and there was an adequate supply of nurses, it had become evident that massive nurse shortages meant the organization could ill afford to have its nurses spend time on tasks that did not require their unique capabilities. By deconstructing the nursing job, Providence was able to identify specific tasks and activities that could instead be performed by student nurse assistants. This led to the creation of a new patient attendant role that not only freed up certified nurses but is creating a pipeline of future skilled nurses.

As the Providence example illustrates, reimagining work through deconstruction naturally increases the pool of available workers compared with waiting for a candidate who not only possesses 100% of the current qualifications that are needed but is willing to say “yes” to a job offer.

Increase Agility to Meet New Challenges

When leadership is able to think in terms of tasks rather than jobs, the organization gains not only the capability to more easily find talent, but also more flexibility to meet operating challenges or adopt new technology.

Leaders can rethink workflows or processes (such as manufacturing, information systems, customer service, or supply chains) more expansively by deconstructing jobs. For example, COVID-19 was a new and unforeseen challenge that forced some companies to pivot from one manufacturing focus (making automobiles) to another (making ventilators). The ability to rapidly redeploy workers to address a new priority provides a foundation of business resilience that characterizes the new work operating system.

Likewise, rapid innovation in areas such as AI and robotics demands process and workflow changes that are often too hurried for traditional systems. Commonly, organizations assume that technology can simply substitute for workers and deliver a return on investment through labor cost

reductions. Or they assume that the work will simply adjust to the new technology. But adoption and process failures can result from insufficient consideration of the human factor.

In a new work operating system, leaders can avoid such costly problems by reinventing work at both the task and capability levels. For example, when a large global retailer was considering new automation within its distribution center, it didn't lead with the assumption that a new conveyor system that would speed the flow of products through its warehouses could replace the talent involved in the current, manual process. Instead, managers analyzed the process and determined which specific human activities the technology would substitute for and which it would augment. From there, they considered the implications for the workforce: which capabilities would no longer be needed, and what new capabilities would be required for the talent to work with the machines on tasks that augmented their productivity.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and accelerated the need for organizations to bend the demand curve in order to create more sustainable, resilient work and workforces. Thriving in a future of work that includes more-empowered workers will require that leaders have true insight into work and workers that goes well beyond our current system based on jobs and jobholders. A new work operating system based on worker skills/capabilities and job tasks/projects increases the efficiency, responsiveness, inclusiveness, and transparency of the labor market by replacing the traditional one-to-one relationship between a person and a job with many-to-many relationships between skills and tasks.

About the Authors

Ravin Jesuthasan (@ravinjesuthasan) is global leader for transformation services at Mercer and a member of the World Economic Forum's steering committee on work and employment. John W. Boudreau (@johnwboudreau) is a professor emeritus at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business and a senior research scientist at its Center for Effective Organizations. The authors' new book is titled *Work Without Jobs: How to Reboot Your Organization's Work Operating System* (MIT Press).



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