

The Future of Work; Reflections on the Next Global Stage

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Abstract

To quote Yogi Berra: “Making predictions is dangerous, particularly ones about the future.” Perhaps one should take his advice and leave the future to itself. However, as long as the universe prompts us with cues, the temptation to read between the lines and to identify trends and patterns is impossible to resist. Five emerging trends – Networks, Co-creation, Globalization, Open Innovation, and the Ubiquitous Computer – have captured the limelight during the opening decade of the 21st century. As we explore the mosaic resulting from the convergence of these five forces, work takes on a new meaning. Are we properly preparing the emerging workforce for the future of work?

On the Future of Work

As I look back at the 20th century and review the major social and economic transformations humanity experienced in those 100 years, I can’t avoid feeling overwhelmed. As if handling the transformation from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy weren’t enough, the world shifted into overdrive with the advent of the computer and the emergence of the post-capital society. The information age took charge and the knowledge economy ruled.

As the 20th century came to a close, many social and economic forces converged to pave the way for the 21st century. Some of these forces emerged as natural progressions from the information and knowledge economy. Others seemed to serendipitously appear as accidents of time. Whichever the case, these forces are forming the future of society and the future of the world. As protagonists of the global stage, we must understand where these forces are taking us and prepare accordingly. Let’s review these forces individually and try to gain a sense of what the emerging scenario of work will dispatch us.

Networks

“Are you connected?” has become the key question of the decade! No longer are we limited by the knowledge, resources, and capabilities contained within the walls of our organizations. Both physical as well as virtual connectivity become the avenue to create and deliver value to customers. Partnerships, alliances, and virtual connections are occurring in the exploration plane, the mobilization plane, and the operations plane. These three planes cover the planet and allow entities from all over the globe to interact and create new offerings (exploration plane), team-up to solve problems (mobilization

plane), and deliver value (operations plane). Individuals – once looked upon as cogs in the industrial economy – have emerged as knowledge hubs in the connected society. Virtual networks allow professionals to connect with colleagues throughout the planet and harness knowledge previously unavailable. Finally, the proliferation of wireless internet, broadband availability, and collaborative virtual tools will empower professionals in all fields.

Co-creation

Co-creation can be defined as the direct and active involvement of users in the design of products, services, solutions, and experiences. Rather than merely evaluate a provider’s value proposition, consumers are now able to engage in an active role co-defining and co-creating the proposition. This trend, enabled by collaborative and interactive technologies, will have a major impact on how businesses attract, delight, and retain customers.

Of the five forces I review in this article, co-creation is perhaps the least recognized and most underestimated. Yet, it has already ignited a revolution. Consumers and providers are starting to redefine their roles and expectations regarding the value creation and value delivery process. New interaction rules are being laid on the table and professionals sitting on both sides need to abide by them.

Co-creation means that consumers and consumer communities participate in the value proposition formulation process. It means that consumers become research and development scientists, key players in innovation, that they customize solutions in real-time, and that they co-create experiences. Co-creation also means that employees and network of firms collaborate physically and virtually to obtain synergies in research and development, provide total-solutions and to optimize the value-chain.

Next time you are tempted to retreat with your management team and forge a new value proposition, consider spending that time designing the physical and virtual infrastructure that can enable your customers to co-create the value proposition with you.

Globalization

With all the talk of globalization during the past twenty years one would think that the mention of this socio-economic phenomenon is passé. However, to abuse a much used phrase: “we ain’t seen nothing yet!” What we’ve experienced so far

barely scratches the surface; particularly with 3 billion new players getting ready to enter the playing field. As more and more players from China, India, Russia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Central Asia emerge as capable consumers and empowered professionals, the economics of business will continue to change. Professionals will need to be ready to cross geographical and cultural boundaries, and collaborate through physical and virtual value networks to deliver goods, services, and experiences to the global market.

Open Innovation

Are you ready for the next “Innovation Jam”? Companies all over the world are capitalizing on the promise of open innovation by hosting events that allow people from all walks of life to participate and contribute to their innovation agenda. IBM, for example, has recently announced its intent to tap “100,000 minds” to feed its new products and new business pipeline with ideas and concepts it would probably miss on its own.

The open innovation trend promises to increase as connectivity and collaborative tools proliferate. For example, the web site www.innocentive.com provides scientists with a web-based community matching R&D challenges with their areas of expertise. Innocentive provides a powerful online forum enabling major companies to reward scientific innovation through financial incentives. But this trend is not limited to scientists. Another web site – www.bigideahunts.net – serves as a meeting ground for inventors and corporations to tackle innovation challenges. Recently, General Mills used the site to fetch new ideas for “fun and healthy kids’ snacks.”

The Ubiquitous Computer

With global connectivity and pin-point traceability via GPS technology, we can trace a package as it is delivered around the world, we can observe our child being fed in the day-care center while we work 50 miles away, and we can review the inventory at hand in our warehouse in Italy as we take an order for products in Vancouver.

As computing and communication capabilities get embedded into everything we manufacture, the concept of real-time will evolve towards “things talking with things”. For example, using RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) technology, your refrigerator will know when it’s down to the last quart of milk. It’ll send a shopping list to the computer of your favorite grocery store which will be printed on the internet kiosk at its entrance when you walk by or downloaded to your cellular phone or PDA. You’ll pay for your purchase by “wandering” your cell phone by the cash register, authorizing a bank transfer. This same cell phone will call your doctor when the implant you have on your left knee signals it needs recalibration.

If anything, we should expect the pressure for real-time solutions to increase; bringing new challenges and opportunities for the emerging work force.

Implications

These five forces have created a wave of change that is impacting us in many realms. As they converge, they synergistically amplify each other, creating “the perfect storm”.

Although I foresee consequences and implications in many social and economic dimensions, I will limit my closing remarks to the management of work.

As work occurs, more and more, outside of the walls of the traditional organization, our management practices will need to evolve. The participative management movement of the 1950’s and the empowerment movement of the 1970’s were proper challenges to the autocratic management styles of the early 20th century. What challenges will the early 21st century bring?

The concepts of “intrapreneurship” and “extrapreneurship” are worth considering as we reflect on the future of work and the future of management. “Intrapreneurship” relates to employees acting as owners of the company, empowered to add value and contribute to the organization’s top and bottom line. Employees don’t have to leave the company to explore new ventures or to experiment with new business models. And compensation schemes such as stock options and SARs (Stock Appreciation Rights) help materialize a win-win engagement. Enabled by technology, “extrapreneurship” takes the “intrapreneurship” concept a step further. Employee and manager become partners. Alliances and service level agreements become the tools of the trade. Self management becomes a key skill for interdependent professionals that operate more as independent contractors and less as employees.

These forces will catapult us to the future. As professionals, we will need to both partner with change as well as invent the future of work. Our forefathers managed to ride the wave of the 1900’s and delivered us a brave new world. Let us do our part for the generations to come.

Biography

Ulises Pabón is the Chief Operations Officer for QBS, Inc. His principle areas of expertise are Business Concept Innovation; Strategy Formulation and Deployment; Organizational Learning; Systems Thinking; and Creativity and Innovation Methodologies. He currently serves on the Board of Directors of the American Creativity Association. Pabon is a contributing author in the book “Competitividad, Estrategias y un Nuevo Modelo Económico para Puerto Rico” (1994) and is the author of the book “Creatividad Organizacional” (2001). His upcoming book, “The Future of Innovation” is scheduled for publication in 2007 and will expand on the concepts covered in this article.