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## Re-visiting the Leadership Gap: How to lead in a task-focused work system?

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### Abstract

The organisational focus on workplace automation is fuelling the evolution of the labour market towards task focused work systems, and an emerging gig economy. This evolution creates new demands on organisational leaders to introduce flexible and agile management techniques, whilst maintaining a strategic focus on upskilling and reskilling their employees for a digitalised world. We revisit our previous GJSD paper, “Mind the leadership gap”, to further emphasise these aspects of the changing work environment and introduce 1. Their potential influence on organisational belonging, and 2. The resultant impact on leadership styles and skills. This paper presents a short synthesis of the complex challenges faced by leaders within such an operating environment. This is followed by four further proposals for the future research agenda along with two suggested research methods which enhance our previous call to action on the leadership gap.

**Keywords/key phrases:** leadership, automation, task-focused work, gig economy, belonging, skills.

### 1. Introduction

In our previous paper (Murphy and Turnbull, 2023), we called for the need to revisit leadership theory in a post-pandemic world. Specifically, we discussed the new challenges faced by leaders caused by the remote working dynamic, and the changing generational demographics in the workplace, which combine to bring new needs and expectations to the leadership role. We highlighted knowledge gaps in the extant literature surrounding our understanding of how to lead remote teams and a multigenerational workforce, whilst protecting wellbeing and enabling performance. We suggested five areas of future research, calling for scholars to conduct studies into the new leadership practices and qualities needed in a post-pandemic world, and an exploration of how these practices could be cultivated. We now revisit this research agenda to cover another emerging topic, which is set to add further complexity and demands onto the role of leadership; the transition towards task-focused work systems.

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## 2. Task-Focused Work Systems

Historically accepted models of Work Design and Job Enrichment Theory tell us that work is not designed into static jobs but is instead formed of dynamic tasks (Waschull et al., 2020). Employees traditionally work on these dynamic tasks in a sequence or combination that contributes to an over-arching organisational goal or strategy. However, the unprecedented organisational drive towards digital transformation is disrupting traditional ways of working, and causing a work design revolution that has never been seen before (Wiklund, 2022). Organisations in all corners of the globe are investing in automation to benefit from reduced costs, service improvements, and innovations driving competitive advantage (Murphy, 2023). Some scholars refer to this as the fourth industrial revolution (Bankins et al., 2023; Kwiotkowska and Gebczynska, 2022), otherwise coined industry 4.0 (Sony and Mekoth, 2022), or the second machine age (Bankins et al., 2023). Some scholars caution that the intersection of physical and digital worlds introduced by the fourth industrial revolution is already challenging our social systems (Rotatori et al., 2021). Whilst traditionally industrial manufacturing plants were the main beneficiaries of automated work, recent advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) now see automation being driven across all industries (Garibay et al., 2023) including health care (Sampson, 2021), law and accounting (Spring et al., 2022), customer services, operations, aviation and aerospace (Dogan and Yildirim, 2022) and many others. Whilst historic technological revolutions have mainly impacted the work of lower-skilled, manual, blue-collar workers (Mondolo, 2021), the new capabilities of AI are also resulting in work changes for higher-skilled, white-collar workers (McGuinness et al., 2023).

In the workplace, automation very rarely automates the end-to-end responsibilities of a job role. Instead, specific tasks within that role are usually automated, with the remaining tasks being completed by a human, or new tasks being created (Garibay et al., 2023; Medici et al., 2023). As a result, scholars suggest we are moving towards a task-focused work system, where work is deconstructed into tasks, which can be assigned to both employees and machines (Boudreau and Donner, 2021). Boudreau and Donner (2021) suggest that, in future, employees will thus be seen as not holding a specific job but possessing skillsets which can be applied across the organisation on different tasks that complement them. They suggest that this will drive organisational change, whereby employees no longer sit under hierarchies but will be free-floating in a matrix design, and the role of leaders will evolve to manage these workers, assembling them and disassembling them to achieve goals across the different domains of the organisation. Leaders will essentially become large scale coordinators, and project managers, balancing skill profiles and capacity for the tasks needed across the organisation.

Some authors argue that task-focused working systems are already being implemented and fuelling the phenomena coined the ‘gig economy’. Braganza et al. (2022) define the gig economy as specific time-bound jobs, where multiple ‘gigs’ can be worked concurrently, utilising temporary or zero hours workers. Braganza et al. note how the rise of process automation leads to ‘task leftovers’ which lead to higher levels of gig work. The evolution of this gig economy, and increased reliance on temporary workers, is also resulting in a more flexible yet fragmented workforce (Van den Groendaal et al., 2023). Studies have shown that the rise of gig work can reduce social cohesion (Braganza et al., 2022) and destabilise employee trust and commitment to organisations (Van den Groenendaal et al., 2023). Therefore, one of the perils of a task-focused work system is the impact on social connectedness and the resultant feelings of organisational belonging. Leaders now carry an additional burden not only to

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manage projects and teams, but also to enhance their social and humanistic skills to maintain employee connection and loyalty (Ashford et al., 2018). This increasingly individualistic working environment will also call upon leaders to consider fewer mechanisms of team-based motivation and increase the need for focused personal relationships (Ashford et al., 2018).

However, scholars have found that increasing a leader's effort to convey emotion often results in a reduced inclination to do so, thus transitioning the employee and leader relationship to a transactional state (Silard et al., 2022). This raises new concerns, since our previous paper in this journal confirmed that younger generations, such as millennials, now seek more personal, one-to-one relationships with their leaders, and reject older transactional forms of leadership (Murphy and Turnbull, 2023). Thus, to counteract the impact of feelings of organisational belonging in a task-focused work environment, it is clear that leaders will need to enhance their humanistic skills, such as their self-awareness, empathy, communication, and listening (Allen et al., 2021).

### **3. Future Research Agenda**

It is evident from the research presented thus far that the transition towards task-focused work systems, and the gig economy, raise a new dynamic to the leadership gaps we discussed in our previous paper (Murphy and Turnbull, 2023). New questions now arise to further the future research agenda, such as:

1. *Organisational belonging:*
  - a. How should organisations build and cultivate humanistic skills in leaders to drive organisational belonging?
  - b. How should leaders apply these skills for different generational workforces?
2. *Maintaining motivation:*
  - a. How should leaders maintain employee motivation in a task-focused work system, where the nature of work is fluid and ever changing?
3. *New working style skills:*
  - a. What skills do leaders need to transition into a mass coordination and project management role?
  - b. What are the methods in which they should balance skill profiles and capacity for the tasks needed across the organisation?
  - c. How does this increase in complexity in a gig economy whereby workers may consist of a constant movement of non-contractual resources?
4. *Employee skillsets:*
  - a. How do leaders encourage and maintain employee skillsets to suit the emerging fluidity of work?

#### **3.1. Research Methods**

As we suggested in our previous paper, we call for qualitative studies in the aforementioned research areas, to drive rich insight into the leadership skills needed in the new ways of working. We suggest scholars consider contributing to knowledge by conducting case studies in organisations to discover what is working well today, or what approaches are needed to build

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said skills, and thus discovering practices which can be re-applied in other companies and industries. We suggest two research methods to accomplish this:

1. *Action Research* - Action research is a collaborative investigative process that involves individuals within an organisation who are intimately familiar with its operations. The primary objective of action research is to yield immediate impacts on the day-to-day functions of the organisation (Noffke & Somekh, 2011). While sharing similarities with conventional problem-solving approaches, the distinctive feature of action research is its focus on enhancing the situations experienced by the participants, rather than solely generating knowledge for its own sake (Brewerton & Millward, 2006). Proponents argue that this method enables increased socialisation along with the growth of participants' knowledge and ownership in improving a given situation or process (Noffke & Somekh, 2011). Furthermore, the active participation of "insiders" within the organisation supports change management processes and the adoption of recommended measures (Brewerton & Millward, 2006).
2. *Appreciative Inquiry* –Appreciative Inquiry has garnered attention historically for its successful application in facilitating organisational change (Coghlan et al., 2003), by drawing participants towards the positive images of the future (Michael, 2005). Appreciative Inquiry is a model that seeks to create energy and a sense of hope towards achieving that future, by discovering and surfacing the elements that are working well in an organisation today (Michael, 2005). It is in this unique way of looking at organisational challenges that Appreciative Inquiry draws its strengths, in that it does not assess causes and solutions of problems but envisions what the best future scenario might look like (Coghlan et al., 2003). This approach is rooted in the social-constructionism epistemology and could be a useful tool to help construct the beliefs of participants in the organisation, towards recommending real change and creating buy-in.

#### 4. Conclusion

As we have said before, the future of leadership is changing. Both scholars and practitioners need to address the newly emerging phenomena to ensure our leaders are armed with the right skills, and methods of skills development, to meet the task of leading the modern workforce. While the new fluidity of work will raise challenges for leaders and employees in maintaining organisational belonging, motivation and relevant skillsets, it will also create new job opportunities and diversify the day-to-day working experience for many. This paper has built on our previous call to action by furthering the future research agenda, and continuing practitioner discussion on the leadership gaps in modern organisations. We have presented a short synthesis and background to the emerging phenomenon of task-focused work systems and the gig-economy and recommended several research questions for scholars to consider in future studies. It is envisaged that these new research areas and approaches will drive new value for organisations through the output of organisational change recommendations, enabling executives and HR offices to train their leaders in the right way, and with the right skills, and better manage their employee pipelines.

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