

CHAPTER 1

A Quick History of Work

The caveman was the original freelancer. He honed a skill, put it to work, and with any luck, made a subsistence living. There is not much record keeping on the numbers from back then, but the species persevered, so we can assume it was step one on the road to today's workplace.

At some point, trade and commerce began, perhaps in prehistoric times or maybe after that, depending on which historians you believe. Regardless, over the millennia a system evolved that allowed people to move their goods. Hunters could trade pelts for spices or teas and the bowls and utensils needed to eat. People learned about agriculture and created farms. A feudal system later emerged: serfs working on a lord's estate—in his fields, mines, and forests. Skilled trades developed: the blacksmith, the silk craftsman, the stonemason. A merchant class emerged. These were people fundamentally out for themselves in the developing marketplace—the small businessman or, to use today's terminology, the entrepreneur.

The seventeenth century saw the birth of the modern-day corporation—a legal construct that created a way for a group of people to act as a single entity. The Dutch East India Company was formed in 1602, and the Hudson's Bay Company, a Canadian entity, was incorporated a few decades later.

The first Industrial Revolution dates back to the mechanization of the textile industry in England in the late eighteenth century. That means that around the time the British were losing the Revolutionary War, they were also helping to revolutionize production.

Garments once painstakingly made by hand could now be stamped out by machines, powered by steam engines. Giant cotton mills sprung up around England, replacing weavers' cottages, and the factory was born. The early twentieth century welcomed the workingman wisdom of Henry Ford and saw the start of the second Industrial Revolution. This was the era of mass production and assembly lines: people performing the same basic task over and over again. By the 1950s, we minted the Organization Man, and then the Sixties rejected that, in part as a backlash against the dark side of being a cog in the corporate wheel. It was the birth of the individual creative spark in the workplace—the early stirrings of modern innovation—as we know it today.

Disruptive innovation, however, dates back at least to the weavers' cottages, if not before. There were no doubt some unhappy monks when Gutenberg's printing press made it unnecessary for them to copy all those books by hand. The cotton mills rendered the handloom largely obsolete, just as Ford would put a lot of carriage makers out of business with mass-produced cars. Yet the very tangible upside of progress was cleverly illustrated just a few years ago by a man named Andy George, who decided to make a chicken sandwich from scratch. George pickled his own cucumbers and made his own cheese. He harvested the wheat needed to make the bread and raised and killed a chicken for the meat. The preparation of this one sandwich took him six months and cost \$1,500.¹ A darned-fine chicken salad aside, there's a lot to be said for division of labor, mechanization, and mass-market capitalism. Without it, we'd be so busy tending our cows and growing our vegetables that we wouldn't have time to search for a cure for cancer or new energy resources, much less catch up on our Netflix and Hulu series.

¹Steven Hoffer, "Man Spends 6 Months, \$1,500 to Make ONE Sandwich from Scratch," HuffPost, September 17, 2015, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/1500-sandwich-from-scratch_us_55fabea1e4b08820d9177a2e.

The widespread, affordable personal computer has ushered in the third Industrial Revolution. The Internet and other digital technologies have upended and transformed entire industries. Nothing remains untouched. From the smallest player to the multinational behemoths, everything is monitored, tracked, and digitized. The ruthless quest for efficiency has helped mark this era. Technology has made possible on-demand manufacturing and just-in-time ordering. Artificial intelligence and virtual reality are moving us from the realm of the factory to the furthest excesses of the imagination. We're embracing driverless cars and three-dimensional printing, while drones are taking the place of factory workers and delivery drivers. Machine learning is stepping in where experts and judgment once ruled.

Yet for all our progress, much about the work experience hasn't changed in the past 50 years. People commute to work today the same as they did back then, except now they're likely to spend more time stuck in traffic.² Casual Fridays became casual every day at most companies, and you wouldn't want to own stock in a tie-making company. We became mobile, and mobility allowed some of us to work from home, but home quickly morphed into an Internet-wired coffee shop where a free outlet was as valuable as a pour-over demitasse of organic Jamaican Blue espresso. Everything changed and yet nothing changed. You still move to the Dallas office if that's where your employer tells you to go. The average office worker still spends 8 or 10 or 12 hours a day doing work in exchange for a paycheck, and then wakes up to the shriek of the alarm clock. You think you can't take it for another second and then you get up and do it again.

²Christopher Ingraham, "The astonishing human potential wasted on commutes," February 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/02/25/how-much-of-your-life-youre-wasting-on-your-commute/?utm_term=.1cc85ac0d87e.

The Internet was supposed to transform everything. Yet compare today's office worker to his or her 1965 counterpart. Apart from the fact that today's desk jockey uses a laptop instead of a typewriter and sends emails instead of printed memos, not much is different. Work was repetitive then and it's repetitive now. The stressed-out worker back then drank his share of martinis; today you'll find them taking Ashtanga yoga (and probably knocking back a craft cocktail afterwards: progress!). But work in 1965 involved repetitive tasks that fit snugly into a narrow box, and that's our work ethic today. The new world order was supposed to deliver a higher sense of fulfillment and meaning for today's professional. Instead we got cubicle culture and the expectation that we'd be at a manager's beck and call 24/7 given the small devices we carry around with us everywhere and every second. Weekend free time is a thing of the past. We're infinitely more likely to check email before we go to bed than any other number of activities that once used to be considered the platinum standard of our search for a meaningful existence.

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The iconic work lament movie *Office Space* was released in 1999. But for a conspicuous lack of smartphones, it seems to spoof perfectly today's work world. Life is dreary for Peter Gibbons, the movie's protagonist. He works for a tech company and suffers the wounds of alienation. His managers hassle him for the mundane and ridiculous nits that we still associate with work today. As a programmer, Peter supposedly sits near the top of the work hierarchy, but work for him is nothing but a paycheck. His boss is smarmy and loathsome; he too is frustrated, unmotivated, and alienated. Peter and two coworkers are so miserable that they initiate a plot to commit corporate fraud as an escape route. The film portrays what a sad state of affairs the workplace has become, then and now.

The worker "becomes an appendage of the machine who must learn only the most simple, monotonous, most easily acquired

knack,” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*. The alarming part is that their words seem relevant to many talented people working in today’s corporation. From Marx to *Office Space*, the typical professional worker’s mission and purpose, along with free will, are still subjugated to those of the corporation—should they choose to stay trapped in a situation that makes them unhappy.

Polling confirms what most of us know: for too many people, work is a grind. Gallup has been studying workforce attitudes in the United States since 2012. Its most recent “State of the American Workplace” report revealed that 70 percent of people do not feel engaged at work.³ Only 13 percent feel proud to work where they do. One in four admit that they are “actively disengaged,” which Gallup defined as being so emotionally disconnected from the workplace that they were acting out on their unhappiness. In 2005, *The European Journal of Epidemiology* published a study that concluded that heart attack rates are lowest on weekends and then spike significantly on Mondays, when people return to work.⁴ Work is literally killing us. Is it any wonder that so many of us are dissatisfied, Jacob Morgan asked in his book *The Future of Work*: “We have literally built our companies from the ground up with the notion that employees are just cogs and that work is drudgery.”⁵

It would be easy to lower oneself into this well-documented, oft-written-about pit of corporate despair and throw in the towel. Plenty have before us. However, we are of a more optimistic bent, which brings us to what we think of as the potential for a fourth Industrial Revolution—as unveiled by the World Economic Forum

³<http://Gallup.com>, 2017, www.gallup.com/services/178514/state-american-workplace.aspx.

⁴Anahad O’Connor, “The Claim: Heart Attacks are more common on Mondays,” March 14, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2006/03/14/health/14real.html.

⁵Jacob Morgan, *The Future of Work* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), xiv.

in 2016. That would be the reinvention of work that removes the corporation from the center of things and reinserts the individual in its place. We spend such a large portion of our life at work, thinking about work, or stressed out because of work. It is the center of our universe, and technology has made it even more so. It's the one place (at least on an hours basis) where things like satisfaction and fulfillment should be paramount, and yet nothing could be further from that truth. Isn't it time to think about a new paradigm? For example, maybe the best place to work isn't the cubicle where you toil 50 weeks out of the year. How about an office you've designed for yourself in your own home? Or, if you are a person who needs some modicum of daily human interaction, what about one of the multiple coworking locations that are springing up in urban areas (and even suburban) around the country? Our worldview even allows for the individual who longs to go off grid and yet still stay gainfully employed. You really can move to that coastal village in Maine, buy that used lobster boat, and license a few dozen pots while still taking on a flexible corporate job that helps pay the bills.

It would be kind of like returning to the way it used to be 12,000 years ago, when the world was made up entirely of free agents and people managed to look out for themselves. Not that we were thinking about any of this in 2013, when we first came up with the idea that eventually became Catalant. But it strikes us as obvious now—just as it is to plenty of people outside corporate America and many forward-thinking people within. The world has moved forward, mainly enabled by technology. We've got the tools; we are only limited by our imagination and willpower. Are we really going to keep queuing up on the major freeways like the ghastly 405 and 495 and the Long Island Expressway, punching the clock, and wiling away the best years of our lives? There must be a better way to work.