

HUMANISING THE WORLD OF WORK

At Work, we are doing more for our people, and to our people, than ever before. How can we continue humanising the world of work?



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| Chapter 1.

**At Work,
we are doing more for our people,
and to our people,
than ever before....**

Employee satisfaction used to be enough...

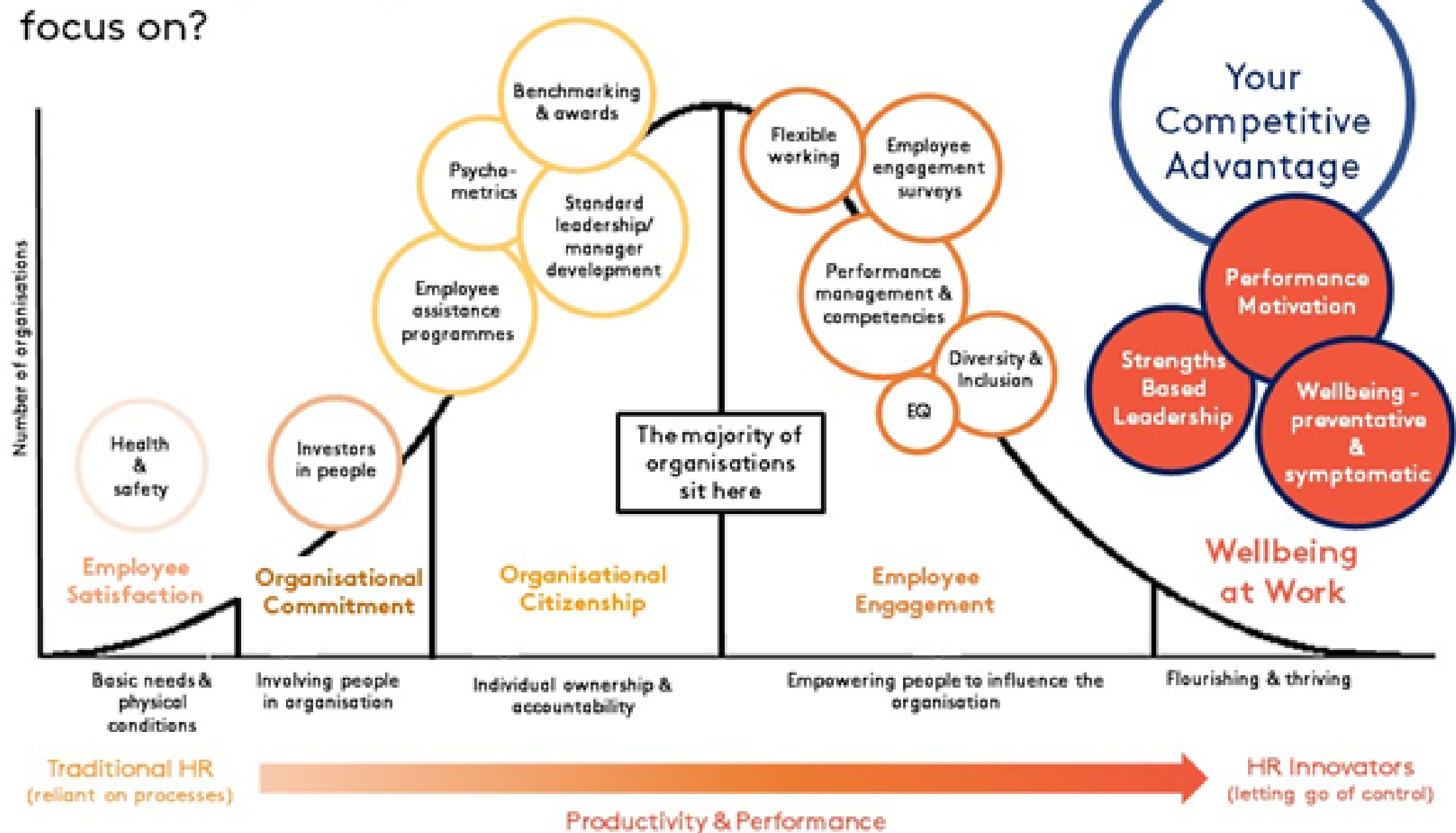
If the working environment were safe and pay was fair, what more could a 'worker' expect? HR could afford to be fully reliant on process and innovation wasn't necessary.

As we know, things evolve. Over the last couple of decades, the needs and expectations of people have been rapidly ascending Maslow's pyramid - hierarchy of needs. This has meant that HR teams have had to continually up their game.

For a while we have been developing an HR Innovation Curve, designed to show exactly where we need to be focusing our attention if we want to be our best, most innovative selves and build the best organisations we can.

HR Innovation Curve

What does your organisation focus on?



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People Interventions Over Time

In the early 2000s, we moved beyond employee satisfaction and organisational commitment to try to build a sense of organisational citizenship. Investment was high, we saw more HR Directors on organisational boards, and the 'war for talent' was big news, with pioneering HR programmes attracting, developing, and retaining great people to maintain competitive advantage.

Next, the psychometric market exploded, with a raft of different tests claiming to be 'the best way to understand ourselves and others better'.

This was supported by leadership development budgets for those deemed to be 'Top Talent' (decided by nine-box grids or bell curves), and Employee Assistance Programmes for those struggling to cope.

Strategically making the most of all this development, the awards market cranked into life, full of organisations applying (and paying) to be benchmarked against those in totally different markets/industries and sectors.

Before very long, citizenship was not enough. High employee engagement was vital for organisations to maintain their competitive edge, and the surveys to measure this seemed to become mandatory.

HR teams focused on increasing employee engagement which unlocked "discretionary effort" in employee populations resulting in increased performance and a healthy bottom line.

This Led To...

... a huge industry in Employee Engagement and the creation of teams of champions, armed with survey data and tasked to focus on levers that would make a positive difference (the ones with the lowest scores).

When we realised clarity was a lever for engagement, we created heavy process driven performance management and appraisal systems, kicking off the need for data analysis to ensure this mass of people info was being used impactfully. At the same time came the focus on competencies, with some frameworks stacking up to over 300 competencies which people were rated against. It rapidly snowballed into new team level interventions and larger organisational processes.

AND THEN, in 2017, the latest buzz word “Wellbeing” became the next big thing with People teams focusing on it as if it is another initiative to build engagement.

The frantic response from People departments included:

- Recommunicating the EAP
- Training in mental health first aid
- Offering gym memberships, yoga, or healthy snacks for people to feel better at work

| Chapter 2.



Diagnose what is wrong,
missing,
broken,
incorrect,
and fill it or fix it....

Deficit Interventions

The deficit intervention approach is like the traditional medical model – diagnose what is wrong or missing, broken or incorrect and then fill or fix it.

Basically, work on eliminating the negative symptoms and get everything back to normal, even, average.

An Example...

The greatest example of this is focusing people’s energy on developing in areas of weakness. Our strengths are those things we do well, enjoy and are confident in and our weaknesses are the opposite. Whilst we develop our strengths throughout the years 0-17, our weaknesses stem from this same upbringing and often, whilst we may be able to develop new skills to help us, we are never likely to enjoy using them.

We are much more likely to induce anxiety by focusing on them, yet organisations have been pinpointing those things in us for years and, unsurprisingly, year after year the same things appear in “areas for development” on our development plans.


The unusual thing? This has been going on for years with most working populations focused on developing in areas of weakness with limited success.

Strengths

Back in 2004, Martin Seligman and Chris Peterson wrote a ground-breaking book called **Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification**. In the book they discussed a systematic classification & measurement of universal virtues and strengths. They identified 6 virtues comprising of 24 measurable positive character strengths: wisdom & knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence

.....

 **36%**
Increase in performance when focusing on strengths.

 **ST%**
STATTAT

Focusing on strengths in development is still relatively new concept for organisations.

Despite helping people discover their strengths and tell people to play to them more, the habit of focusing attention on our deficit and trying to improve our weakness to become more average across the board is still prevalent and dominant.

Another example is where we focus more attention on attracting and recruiting “high performing talented individuals” to increase capability and create a high performing team, to close the gaps, the deficit. Many people have unrealised potential to grow rapidly into greater levels of capability and create high performing teams through collaboration with others. That growth opportunity may be missed entirely if focused on the individual predominantly and collaboration is just an afterthought.

Surveys are a good example of a deficit approach to developing people interventions; we create an ever-growing list of questions to ask our people in hope to understand what else they need and what more the organisation can do for them. This has moved on from the plethora of “levers” that affect Employee engagement (the release of discretionary effort and impact on performance and profit) to additional Wellbeing surveys.

Surely if we must survey our people, we are not doing a good job at listening to them day to day. Giving people more and more options of what would help them give more to the company is now an obvious and transparent exchange for effort for companies that are clearly driven to increase shareholder return.

Survey data highlights our lowest scores, fix what is wrong or missing; deficit corrected.

What is the organisations or employee relationship based on if the people strategy is always based on the lowest survey scores?

Surely this does not create empowerment but entitlement?

What is the organisation or employee relationship based on if the people strategy is always based on the lowest survey scores, surely this does not create empowerment but entitlement? The most interesting situation despite all this busyness surrounding surveys, scores, feedback etc is that some of the leaders of companies with high scores on Employee Engagement and Wellbeing know that their people are not any happier.

Similarly with Diversity and Inclusion, a topic which organisations are finding increasingly more difficult to explore, it has offered unconscious bias training as the main intervention available to fix what is wrong, and yet, this has now been proven to have limited effect on how people feel about Diversity & Inclusion at work.

Performance rating scales on competencies, capabilities or behaviours are about ensuring everyone can develop in all competencies required. This has been shown to be detrimental to motivation and is deficit focused.

EAP's are to provide counselling, therapeutic support confidentially for people who are struggling and need some help, need to be fixed. Deficit focused.

Study: Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is Happiness Relative?

Brickman et al in 1978 looked at the happiness levels of those who had won the lottery 6 months pre- and post-their big win to find despite an initial rise at the point of winning, their happiness levels return to the same as the 6 months prior. If this is the case, no filling of the missing gaps in engagement levers or wellbeing initiatives will have long term impact beyond getting back to normal, even, average.

Read the whole study [here](#).

Psychometrics help increase awareness of our negative personality traits through scientific diagnosis and categorisation and the output reports focus on these as areas for development, fix what is wrong with us, deficit focused.

Martin Seligman talks about a conversation with his daughter asking why he always focused on what is wrong with people for him to realise there was a whole body of research missing. This has led to a paradigm shift in psychology with the science and evidence-based research in the field of positive psychology. Despite the impact this has had in its application so far, organisations are still predominantly in the deficit mindset when it comes to people interventions.



The old diagnose and fix model is not working anymore. **We are awakened humans.** What about beyond average, beyond back to normal? Will the same things that negate disfunction help us flourish? Many organisations have adopted the use of thriving and flourishing, but how much does this reflect the reality of approach?

We are just exhausting ourselves, piling on more and more responsibility for people and managers to do more and more for people as we find another thing we could be doing or offering.

| Chapter 3.

Wellbeing as a turning point.

Stats on Wellbeing



17.9

million days were lost in the UK 2019/2020 due to stress, anxiety, and depression (Health and Safety Executive). 2020 has amplified this and it is a huge and urgent problem.



37%

lower absenteeism levels in companies with engaged employees and wellness programs can help increase employee engagement



£45

billion is lost in companies every year due to poor mental health. This is a rise of 16% since 2016—an extra £6 billion a year. For every £1 spent by employers on mental health interventions they get £5 back in reduced absence, presenteeism and staff turnover

Over 17.9 million days were lost in the UK 2019/2020 due to stress, anxiety, and depression (Health and Safety Executive). 2020 has amplified this and it is a huge and urgent problem.

There are significant issues with the current wellbeing dilemma that highlight the need for a paradigm shift away from the deficit model approach as per previous people interventions to a more positive and human response.

Firstly, wellbeing is a commonly misunderstood topic which makes diagnosing the problem and then fixing it a tricky approach from the outset.

Mental illness, mental ill health, wellness, and wellbeing with lenses of mental, physical, spiritual, financial, social all mean that people are interpreting the topic differently.

There are a total of **297 disorders** outlined in the clinical diagnosis for mental illness DSM5, so we cannot know the signs and symptoms of them all.

Stress, anxiety, and depression are the most common symptoms of mental ill health and yet are also experienced by those who are not clinically diagnosed or receiving treatment. These are also symptoms we may experience in normal situations as part of our human response to threat such as feeling a little worried before a test or speaking in front of a group.

With mental health being such a complex topic, it makes it difficult to diagnose and then design an overall solution in a traditional way.

How Organisations Are Offering Support

EAP systems brought in to support people at work confidentially are an example of a solution that is not that impactful, as the stigma and discrimination associated with mental ill health means people do not seek support from work related provisions. Most organisations with an EAP have a very low-level usage despite senior leader's role modelling openness and transparency about mental ill health to reduce the stigma.

The wellbeing offers from many organisations began closely aligned to the wellness industry with a focus on office-based yoga sessions, healthy snacks and BMI monitoring. This was a natural an easy progression for organisations from the increased “perks” already being offered through employee engagement initiatives. Then a huge step forward occurred when organisations started training people in Mental Health First Aid to ensure there were people at work to support those who were struggling and catch them as they fell. This felt like a point at which organisations truly invested in the moral duty of care to support their people beyond simply improving the bottom line.

Taking a survey approach to wellbeing as companies did with Employee engagement does reinforce the deficit model and indicate that support will likely be introduced similarly to those Employee Engagement interventions. We already see wellbeing champions in the same way we saw Employee Engagement champions taking on additional responsibilities to plan, design and deliver new interventions. Interestingly a lot of these new interventions are just more things to increase the workload and stress as a result, perhaps perpetuating the problem.... It is very rare to see a plan including a reduction of workload or effort as a main priority.

The moral duty of care over increased profits – taking a formulaic approach to fixing people's wellbeing could trivialise a complicated human issue when it could be the work itself causing the problem.

The complex and very personal issue of mental ill health could be out of bounds of the duty of the organisation to deal with, yet with the data showing the huge cost of mental ill health in sickness and turnover alone organisations are making it their business.

The value of the UK wellbeing market has grown from 20.5 billion euros to 23 billion in 2018 with projections to be 90 billion by 2026 (Statista 2019).

Furthermore, the Western European market was 140 billion euros in 2019.

Yet this is very different to the obvious exchange of increasing employee engagement in trade for discretionary effort. Whilst it does feel good to help people feel more engaged in their work, the premise is clear that it is often driven by increasing the bottom line and employees are aware of this. Wellbeing and mental health is more of a moral responsibility with senior leaders representing the organisation needing to genuinely demonstrate their duty of care for the people they lead. This has pushed leaders to go beyond previous responsibility and often comfort levels.

Managers are now being asked to blend wellbeing into their performance conversations. This is a huge ask for managers who struggle to have “difficult conversations” already.

Are our managers equipped and confident to enter into personal discussions?

Bringing wellbeing into performance conversations.

Managers are now being asked to blend wellbeing into their performance conversations. This is a huge ask for managers who struggle to have “difficult conversations” already. Are our managers equipped and confident to enter into personal discussions? Traditional performance management and measurement approaches are focused on the deficit approach and asking managers to blend in wellbeing to their discussions needs to be taken very cautiously. Particularly with relationships strained due to working virtually there is more opportunity for misunderstanding and increased pressure if people feel their wellbeing is being “assessed”.

Changes to work itself make traditional diagnosis and fix harder.

Pandemic pressure is changing work itself with the huge shift to dispersed working at home, hybrid working and working more flexibly. The work itself has changed and is unlikely to ever return to how it was; ways of working have become completely digital, we are having to work around others in the home, businesses are changing their structures, business models are pivoting all over the place, some businesses are surviving and others taking off and technological advances are already happening at pace and are going to occur more quickly. How are these changes considered in terms of wellbeing when they are happening continuously, morphing into different issues every day? It is much easier to diagnose problems from static situations and events than moving parts.

Human social connection has diminished.

How much damage is already done? Social distancing has increased isolation and loneliness as well as changed how comfortable people feel when together, reducing how close we get to others and how we form relationships. Children are developing socially in different ways and online channels which had been suggested could contribute to depression are now potentially alleviating it.

Going against our natural inclination to be close physically with others, shake hands, hug, standing distance will cause separation for some time to come. Online channels create barriers on top of the social fabric missing from everyday activities and the “humanness” of interactions is depleted.

Looking at the history of how people interventions have developed over time shows that they have been mostly driven by the needs of the organisation and the problem is that the human focus of wellbeing means we must view our approach differently.

Humans need to be the beginning, the centre and the core of any intervention that is of such importance to our existence. With social connection decreasing and pushing so many over the tipping point into new ways of being or thinking about their world and their life with much less outside influence, the old deficit approach is unlikely to have an impact.

The obsession with change and transformation vs growth and evolution.

Every organisation it seems is running a change or transformation programme, often to increase efficiencies or innovation. The fundamental premise of this is a negative one, that what is going on is not working and therefore it needs to be changed and, in many cases, transformed completely. What is often overlooked here is that the people workstream is being processed in the same way. A cultural change or transformation programme rings alarm bells immediately. The message is simple – our culture is us, our people, and we are not ok as we are and need to change and transform for this company and our work to survive. The burning platform exists to create urgency for people to be different to how they are now. It is not respectful; it is not inclusive.

It is time to treat our people as humans and embrace and celebrate their unique and brilliant selves with a positive focus on lifelong learning offering us opportunities to grow and evolve. This new human era is happening now.

This is not going away...

Generational X, Y and Z differences are showing through in the workforce with reports that Gen Z are the most anxious generation to enter the workplace yet, with 54% reporting they felt anxious in the last month (Wall Street Journal, 2019). This is increasing the focus on wellbeing at work more than ever. Children are encouraged to discuss emotions, understand them more, play to their strengths and are more aware of their own and other feelings finding it more acceptable to then recognise and manage these when negative experiences affect general mental health. Being more aware of mental health issues and reducing stigma means Gen Z will be more likely to be open about themselves as well as expect their organisation to understand and support them.

People are driven by purpose and meaning

As organisations and leaders focus on coming out of the pandemic and adjusting to the new landscape, they should be aware that their people are reassessing their own pathway and a large part of this will be influenced by the meaning and purpose the new organisation offers them. Meaning and purpose are a core pillar to human wellbeing in terms of flourishing and thriving (Seligman 2012)

Creating strong links to an individual purpose benefits individuals and companies alike—and could be vital in managing the post pandemic uncertainties that lie ahead (McKinsey Quarterly Aug 2020)

Of the 220 million people who left their jobs in 2020, 80 million chose to do so*

80 million people decided to stop doing what they were doing for work.

What is this telling us?

Are people are choosing human first?

*World Economic Forum Skilling the Global workforce, 2021

| Chapter 4.

**People Are Choosing
Human First**

People are putting their wellbeing and their sense of meaning from work first and rebalancing their lives accordingly. So many organisations had to restructure and let people go to survive 2020 and the economy is not back yet. The people left behind, exhausted, and burnt-out are now trying to cope with businesses that have pivoted into new ways of working and so much more to still understand about their future. Not enough people, too much work... something has got to give.

Many older workers may be choosing early retirement during the COVID-19 crisis, new economic research suggests. In a paper recently published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, University of Texas at Austin economist Olivier Coibion and colleagues Yuriy Gorodnichenko of the University of California, Berkeley, and Michael Weber of the University of Chicago report a 7 percent drop between January and April in labour force participation with those older workers either retiring early or choosing to not look for further employment.

Study: Women in the Workplace

At least one in four women are considering downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce because of COVID-19, according to the annual Women in the Workplace study from LeanIn.org and consulting firm McKinsey & Company. The study involved 317 companies representing over 12 million employees.

Among senior-level women who said they are considering stepping out of the workforce or downshifting -- working in a reduced capacity -- in their careers, almost 3 in 4 of them cited "burnout" as the main reason.

People are choosing entrepreneurial pathways and becoming self employed more now than in any other economic downturn.

In the third quarter of 2020 alone, there were more than **1.5 million new-business applications** in the United States—almost double the figure for the same period in 2019 (McKinsey Jan 2021).

France saw **84,000 new business formations** in October, the highest ever recorded, **7 and 20 percent** more than in the same month in 2019. Germany has also seen an increase in new businesses compared with 2019, the same for Japan. The number of new businesses registered in the United Kingdom in the third quarter of 2020 **rose 30 percent** compared with 2019, showing the largest increase seen since 2012

Where is the big data when it comes to listening to employee's voices? We should be looking at this data and exploring what it means rather than sending round another survey to produce colourful diagrams that tell us what we should already know.

Overall, this urgent and important focus on Wellbeing could be the critical piece of self-actualising that tips organisations out of its deficit approach to fixing people problems and towards a space where it recognises we must flip into a new era.

Martin Seligmans Research

Seligman's research team in Pennsylvania looked at the twitter feeds in states of the US and looked at the positive vs negative emotional words used and then mapped them onto the cardiovascular health stats of the state and found a correlation between negative emotion and decreased cardiovascular health on a massive scale. This is a more impactful and innovative way of listening to people and we need to be more creative as well as get closer to our people and work with them to humanise the workplace.

The Human model is one of growth and evolution.

To humanise work we must work from the human centre, we must stop fixing symptoms and build and evolve from what is already good and unique.

We must flip this now to focus on what is already right with people, teams and organisations, work on growth and evolution through collaboration, and we must do this instead of all the other stuff, not on top of it. As humans, we absolutely cannot keep increasing the number of things we need to attend to, now is the time to strip things out and make space for what is important. Make space to start from the human centre, the human core.

Getting rid of distractions, discarding outmoded traditions, and exploiting unique advantages are the new areas of focus, IBM says in its 2021 CEO Study.

“The COVID-19 pandemic challenged many leaders to focus on what’s essential, like their people,” says Mark Foster, senior vice president at IBM Services

You cannot meaningfully focus on growth and evolution if your people strategies and interventions are deficit focused.

As global work is already evolving people will choose the paths that feel more human.

Those organisations that make this shift the quickest will attract, retain and thrive with human experience at the heart of work.

| Chapter 5.

**We must innovate,
as humans,
and not lose the human feel.**

This increasingly digital world is going to challenge us in innovating beyond tech, **innovating as humans and not losing the human feel** and connection through to the unknown of the future.

We continually review our past and present to best enter our future (Homo Prospectus Seligman et al., 2016), and we should be doing this in HR – supporting people and organisations over time to ensure we best enter our future and shape it.

We need to start with our leaders who are the team's closest touchpoint for trust, meaning, belonging and help them be themselves, help them lead purposefully and empathetically.

We need to ensure our more diverse teams have the conditions to **flow together with space to be our unique selves, with alignment in where we are going and meaningful human connection to get there, together.**

ARE YOU AND YOUR ORGANISATION LOOKING TO HUMANISE THE WORLD OF WORK?

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