The Future of Work + The Future of Us

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Over the past year in career services, a good deal of time has been spent discussing the Future of Work and its impact on our profession. We have contemplated and predicted what is to come, what will change, and how we must prepare our students (and alumni) for the future. Professionals across sectors have been examining related issues and topics: researching workforce needs and trends, closing the skills gap for employers, and the role of colleges in preparing students. We worry about preparing agile and adaptable learners who can swiftly make sense of the inordinate amount of information around them and who will adeptly reinvent themselves seamlessly into careers we cannot even begin to fathom.

But are WE holding ourselves to the same standards? Are WE pushing ourselves, our teams, and our institutions to be as agile and adaptable as we expect our students and alumni to be?

By this point, we have all read an article or two about change; leading change, the pace of change, technology and change, or how hard it is to change. As we consider what has already started to shift in the world of work and how we will prepare our students and alumni, we must also return to our core, our most important resource to do this work… our people. Before embarking on efforts to be future ready, it’s critical to assess your own organization, your team, and their ability to manage change (even if you are not in a decision-making position). Here are questions you might consider:

- How would you rate your comfort level with change? How would you rate your team’s collective comfort level with change?
- How would you evaluate your readiness for change - how much capacity do you have today in your career and position to manage or lead change initiatives? To help others?
- Where is your team in their development? Think in terms of team development stages. This is critical because where the team is will impact their ability to embrace and enact change.

Throughout our own careers and consulting work, we can definitively say that without a solid foundation, a clear vision, a shared set of values, and a culture crafted uniquely for your institution, it is not possible for you to be consistently agile, adaptable, and responsive to the future of work. If we are not ready, how can we expect to properly prepare our students with the mindset and skills needed for the world ahead? Managing change and preparing for the future are iterative processes that we know can often be intimidating and time consuming but we also believe that it is critical if we strive to better serve our institutions and key stakeholders. In this article we tackle the trends we see for the Future of Work and provide a framework of questions to assess your own, and your team’s readiness in these major areas. We summarize each trend, how we see it impacting our work, and offer an outline of questions to evaluate your team’s readiness so you can begin to establish your next steps in preparing for the future.
Future of Work Trends

Last summer, our friend and colleague, Farouk Dev hosted Stanford’s Future of Work Symposium. Bringing together a group of speakers and thought leaders across academia, industry, and government, this event challenged attendees to think about what students and alumni might expect in their lifetimes and it inspired us to think about how the future of work intersects with the future of us. Over the past decade, the evolution of our profession and key trends defining our services, structure, staffing, and institutional prioritization have all been discussed numerous times. Our thinking was further challenged this spring when we attended the Arizona State University - Global Silicon Valley (ASU-GSV) Summit. We spent three days engaging with people who are seeking to solve problems we face in education from diverse perspectives and offer different inspirations for disruption.

Four trends that emerged for us through these experiences are:

1. The Knowledge Economy + Critical Skills
2. Educational Structure + Adaptive Lifelong Learning
3. Freelance Economy
4. Equity as a Goal

The Knowledge Economy + Critical Skills

Given the level and speed of automation and technological advances in all arenas, our students and alumni must learn how to adapt, pivot, synthesize their experiences, and reinvent themselves on a regular basis. With information accessible at an all-time high, which will only continue to grow, it is what we are able to do with that information and how we make sense of it that matters. The senior vice provost for education at Stanford spoke about the importance of creativity and critical thinking skills for the next generation of workers who could have as many as 16-17 different jobs in five industries throughout their lifetime. Understanding how to ask thoughtful questions, frame (and reframe) problems, provide insight from various perspectives, and make sense of data and information will be necessary as a complement to the rise of automation.

These skills and qualities are the core to the liberal arts educational experience. Despite the critics who would argue for more vocational or skills-based programs, we believe (and many employers would agree) the value of a liberal arts education and/or the competencies derived from liberal arts disciplines has never been greater. The need for synthesizing abstract knowledge or pulling together disparate areas into cohesive solutions across multiple arenas will only increase in the future. While a constant in many industries for years, this will become even more central and important in the future as we seek workers who are able to think broadly, learn quickly, and comprehend systems different from their specialized area of expertise.

So when we think about our teams and our work in career education, how are we investing in the knowledge economy and growing critical skills? Specifically, we should examine two areas: our recruitment and hiring processes and our training and professional development. As we embark on the recruitment process, it is important for us to write job descriptions that focus on finding
individuals who exhibit high levels of adaptability, comfort with ambiguity, and the ability to make sense of large amounts of seemingly disparate (but often interconnected) information and dynamics rather than skills that can (quite frankly) be taught. We need to consider the language used in our job postings, the circles we disseminate and source from, and be more open-minded to the types of candidates that may not seem like the obvious choice on paper. Ironically, we know that a resume and cover letter is often an inadequate reflection of a whole person and what they can bring to a role. So how can we begin to shift the hiring and selection process to reflect the qualities we are screening for? Rethinking the entire recruitment and hiring process can be intimidating but is a necessity if we are to set the stage for change within our teams and organizations. We cannot expect our organizations to suddenly change without efforts to reimagine our hiring processes to seek out the competencies and individuals we know will be critical for our work. We have both spent a great deal of time thinking through these elements and revamping our recruiting processes to reflect these ideals and it’s a constant work in progress. For some inspiration on where to start, consider Simon Sinek’s tips on how to write the perfect want ad.

Beyond hiring, it’s just as critical to consider the ways in which we train, retrain, and offer professional development opportunities to our existing staff members to exercise and develop these skills. Career Education has already shifted dramatically over the past 5-8 years and automation has also reached our desks. With new vendors and new technology rapidly developing to supplement, enhance, and in some cases, do what we used to do at a faster rate than we can imagine, our team members must be ready to pivot and adapt just as readily as our students. Rather than mourn what used to be, we must build an environment where our staff are encouraged and expected to think creatively about redesigning career education to better serve, support, and challenge our students through scalable efforts. Our trainings and staff development need to shift to revolve around different types of professional topics such as a resiliency, change management, and systemic integration. For our profession, this will be the knowledge economy of the future as it will allow staff to become more adaptable, pivot, and iterate at faster rates than they possibly have done in the past. It will also allow for more professional growth within our organizations and offer employees opportunities to develop marketable competencies to broad functional areas within higher education and other fields - this makes our units more attractive to new professionals and related to the other future of work trends.

Educational Structure + Adaptive Lifelong Learning

With the rapid changes occurring in our society, current models of higher education are feeling pressure and tension to expand and evolve. As we outlined in the previous trend, there are critical skills that will be imperative for everyone to acquire. This is not a static effort but rather a dynamic one with a renewed expectation to continuously learn throughout a person’s career. While this has often been the case in the past, the speed and frequency at which this is now expected must be taken into account. The expectation that a traditional bachelor’s degree, even coupled with a graduate degree, might provide an education that alone can sustain an individual for the entirety of their career is being challenged. While we may not believe that the demise of all traditional higher education institutions is upon us, we do acknowledge that it is imperative for institutions to consider new ways to deliver content and engage learners in acquiring knowledge. There are many in the higher education community (e.g. institutions, policy makers,
vendors, employers, etc.) that are actively evaluating educational structures and systems, opportunities for adaptive lifelong learning, and credentialing.

Many colleges and universities are experimenting with blended learning environments even within the traditional higher education settings and many are exploring ways to support adult learners as they continue to re-skill and advance in their careers. Experiments with online education and MOOC’s have not been as disruptive as they were thought to be 10 years ago, but they have aided in shifting expectations and evolved how we think about delivering educational experiences. We can expect that there will be an increase in self-directed resources, tools, and more widely accepted micro-credentialing opportunities to address skill gaps throughout the lifetime of our students and alumni. Online education will most likely not replace the in-person residential college experience, but rather supplement it in ways that might extend our reach beyond the traditional four years. We recognize the diversity of educational institutions that currently exist (community colleges, for-profit institutions, public colleges and universities, private institutions of varying levels of selectivity and size) and how those institutions can fill a diverse set of needs for learners in the future. We do not believe that there is one set delivery mode or type of institution that will be MOST successful but rather the ones that are responding most rapidly and offering a wide array of knowledge attainment and skill development will be the most sustainable.

When we turn our focus inward, ask yourselves, what forms of learning do you encourage your team members to take advantage of and how frequently? As we highlighted in the section above about the “knowledge economy + critical skills,” think about what credentials or skills you want to see within your team? This concept of educational delivery and adaptive lifelong learning challenges what we expect of ourselves as career educators. As we work with students and encourage them to keep up with the rapid changes in their respective industries, we may supplement our faculty partners in evolving traditional graduate school program listings to a wider array of options and courses that could enhance skills they need. This area will not only challenge how we may lead our teams but also the role we play on a campus in providing resources in new mediums for our students and alumni - our offices may begin to offer these “courses” or “micro-credentials.” This approach demonstrates the interconnectedness of some of these trends - in order to effectively deliver content to stakeholders, what skills will we need within our units to be successful? What relationships do we need to invest in on our campuses and beyond to deliver content? This progressive approach can more quickly address the evolving expectations of our employers and provide our students with the opportunity to “get their foot in the door.” So the changing structure of educational delivery and adaptive lifelong learning has the potential to shift our relationships with many stakeholders in our ecosystem and allow for our teams to play an expanded and increasingly more integrated role on our campuses.

Freelance Economy

The gig or freelance economy is a hot topic these days with approximately 36% of the US workforce freelancing and contributing $1.4 trillion annually to the economy. Despite common assumptions and a bad rep, this is often not due to necessity with 63% of people choosing to be freelancers, up 10 points since 2014. In fact, many full-time workers choose to supplement their income or their experience with side projects and it’s predicted that the majority of our
workforce will be freelancing by 2027. Even we’re part of the freelance economy and we’ll admit we choose to do consulting work for all the reasons we’re about to share. The main takeaways here are that people choose the freelance economy for three main reasons: 1) control over WHO you work with, 2) control over WHAT you work on, and 3) control over your schedule.

Stephane Kasriel, CEO of Upwork and co-chair of the World Economic Forum’s Council on the Future of Gender, Education and Work recently said “Professionals who choose to freelance make this choice knowing that, as their own boss, they are in control of their destiny. Freelancers therefore think more proactively about market trends and refresh their skills more often than traditional employees, helping advance our economy.”

Although the increase of freelance workers has not stalled due to the desire for flexible work, the issue of benefits and how our labor regulations are structured remain challenges. Our society is still organized around a traditional 40-hour a week job with employers providing retirement, health insurance, and other benefits. These structures were built at a different time and have yet to evolve with the changing nature of our labor force. Forbes recently reported that 20% of freelancers are without health insurance and the Freelancers Union is working on ways to enhance unemployment insurance and address lack of accessible healthcare. Portable benefits that support health and retirement benefits regardless of employment status would be a huge step forward for our freelancing community and for society at large. As our workforce and the way we accomplish work continues to change, support for our workers must as well.

When we think about the increase of gig or freelance work, we want to acknowledge that this changing landscape also instills a more entrepreneurial mindset in the overall workforce. Whether we are employed in more traditional settings or not, we would argue that the desire to do meaningful work and the desire for flexibility has increased for most people. But we recognize that institutions of higher education are not always the most forward-thinking around these topics. Understanding your institution’s policies around this topic is critical as it can give you a roadmap to crafting policies or environments that work within the constraints of the structure to take advantage of what exists and how it could benefit you and your team. Becoming a more well-versed expert is key to helping reshape your environment to possibly support freelance opportunities, challenge and meet the needs of our top performers, expand the skill sets of current team members, or grow the talent pool we can pull from. We can begin to examine how we might restructure our organizations to be more nimble and flexible in order to create more engaging and growth-oriented environments for staff while also addressing the reasons why people seek out freelance work.

We have both explored and piloted options such as remote work arrangements, flexible work schedules, “work from home” schedules, contract employees, rotational positions, and short-term project assignments. We consider opportunities to cross-pollinate with other offices or divisions in new structural or programmatic ways that might expand training, exposure, or skill acquisition for our team members. Different offices and institutions will be able to tackle this problem in different ways based on existing structures but the challenge we put forth is to examine your ideas about serving your stakeholders and how that work can actually be structured - and then try some ideas out with your team to test the options. You can begin by taking the first step in
understanding your specific institution’s policies and what offices may have tried different solutions and what they learned from those experiences. The knowledge you gain can inform you approach in how you might create “freelance” opportunities within your office culture and how you can frame it for your team.

**Equity as a Goal**

As our workforce and our communities continue to grow more diverse, the associate dean and director of Stanford's First Gen and Diversity Office, Dereca Blackmon said it best, "Diversity is a fact, inclusion is a practice, and equity is a goal." With the changing technology that we have outlined in this article and the continued trend towards globalization, organizations will have new and additional ways to overcome unconscious bias in the work experience - from recruiting to performance management to pay equity - creating workplaces that are broadly inclusive beyond traditional categories of diversity. New vendors like HireVue, SuccessFactors, and Entelo are helping to monitor hiring practices to identify racial or cultural biases. Beyond training, which still remains the most popular intervention across most industries, organizations are considering what types of structural changes or data-driven solutions could help their executives and hiring managers to understand how bias impacts decision-making, talent decisions, and business outcomes. Within higher education, career educators also have an opportunity to serve as equalizers for their institutions as the student demographic continues to evolve and grow more diverse. In partnering with employers, we have the power to help students who may not have networks or social capital and can serve as a conduit in elevating access. By better understanding the changing landscape of recruitment, AI, and technology used, we can help all students to navigate their search and advancement experience in new and different ways. Across the board, those from higher education and industry agreed that inclusiveness is imperative to success. Many of the organizations at the Future of Work Symposium and the ASU-GSV Summit reaffirmed their belief that inclusion and equity are not only business imperatives but moral ones.

Notice that we’re referring to inclusion and equity (not just diversity), which means we’re also focused on the sense of belonging and fairness that exists in organizations after the initial hiring. Companies and employers also need to consider how leadership plays a role in the advancement and promotion of a diverse workforce. Deloitte recently reported six traits of an inclusive leader: commitment, courage, cognizance of bias, curiosity, cultural intelligence, and collaboration. Developing formal and informal ways to train, develop, and evaluate for these traits in performance measures and leadership development programs would be advantageous to all.

When we consider diversity, inclusion, and equity in our own practice and within our own teams, we need to be honest about where we currently stand. As we’ve mentioned in previous sections, our recruitment, onboarding, and training practices could be further enhanced or evolved to be more inclusive. When we work to attract new staff members, do we truly understand the factors they are considering in making a move to our institutions or offices? This is an area that higher education has been tackling for years with varying levels of success. Properly weighting the value of diversity, inclusivity, and equity for your organization is a critical first step followed closely by examining your pipeline for talent that reflects these values. Creating ways to source talent for your team demonstrates a strategic and proactive approach to the concept of equity and
this takes on even more importance in areas that we may deem as “less diverse” or providing a greater challenge to recruiting and hiring talent. We would argue that the following elements are critical to consider:

Location + Salary + Flexibility = whether someone wants to work and live in [INSERT PLACE]

- **Location** - Consider the town or city your university is located, what does the diversity of that location look like? What might it feel like for your prospective staff member and their family? For their kids if they have any? Can they get the food they want? Ingredients to cook? Can they get the services they desire (e.g. hair, skin, lessons, events, etc.)?
- **Salary** - Would you be able to pay them enough to live close by (assuming they feel at home in the town where your university is located)? Would your staff member(s) need to live farther away to “feel more at home”? How might this impact their quality of life?
- **Flexibility** - If your future staff member might want to live farther away, how flexible can you be with his or her hours or work arrangement? What might this need to look like?

Inclusivity is not just about the experience in your office or even on campus, your staff members have a life beyond work. This trend also connects significantly to the last section on the freelance economy and how an organization may structure the work in order to expand the talent pool they can pull from or reset expectations of the talent we recruit (knowing we will only keep young professionals for two years versus a “commitment” of longevity). And once you begin to expand the diversity of your team (in all forms), we can begin to develop the cultural awareness, cultivate belonging, and encourage shared experiences. We should regularly assess whether we have created an inclusive environment and evaluate how we are advancing inclusion and equity as a priority.

**Challenge to Us All**

Much of what we discuss in this article is not an easy undertaking but we believe that we can build better teams and develop people in order to prepare our students and institutions for what the future holds. Given the changes that are upon us, we have an opportunity to prepare ourselves for the changes within our own industry and the economy as a whole.

After all, we (in career education) should expect ourselves to be as agile, adaptable, and resilient as we expect our students to be about the future.

Tweet your thoughts to co-authors @cruzvergara and @jtestanicareers

**Resources and Additional Information**
We created a worksheet that we hope will be helpful as you consider the questions that we have posed in this article.