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# **The Future of Work: Attract New Talent, Build Better Leaders, and Create a Competitive Organization by Jacob Morgan. A Review**

Peter Norlander<sup>1</sup>

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*The Future of Work* by Jacob Morgan uses a collection of recent trends, some related to changes in society but many related to technology, to offer guidance on how to navigate the rapidly changing 21<sup>st</sup> Century employment environment. The essential prediction appears to be that things will be very different in the future, and that organizations need to adapt as a consequence. While that advice may seem conventional, Morgan offers many suggestions on how to do this.

Morgan presents 10 ways the new employee is different from the old, a six-step process for adapting to the new way of work, 12 habits of highly-collaborative organizations, 4 roadblocks of the future organization, 14 principles of the future organization, 10 principles of the future manager, 7 principles of the new employee, and three ways that the world of work today is different.

But the problems begin to creep in on closer analysis. The first reason things are different today is “the speed of change.” Morgan describes how doubling the number of grains of rice on each square of a chessboard leads to more rice at the end of 64 squares than all the rice in the world. Borrowing the futurist Ray Kurzweil’s concept of the second half of the chessboard, Morgan informs the reader that “this idea basically deals with the fact that once the grains of rice reach the second half of the chessboard the growth becomes exponential. Today, we are at the second

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Norlander is a doctoral candidate at the UCLA Anderson School of Management.

half of the chessboard where changes are happening at a more rapid pace ...” (17).

Of course, in this example, growth is also exponential on the first half of the board and the rate never changes – the grains of rice double with each additional square. Kurzweil’s observations has to do with the change in the amount of rice on the second half of the board having a significant impact and eventually becoming astronomical – an illustration of the power of exponential functions. Morgan confuses rates with impact and doesn’t provide an example of changes in the rate of change at work, and this would seem to have little to do with the future of work or even work at all. Exactly what about work is changing at an exponential rate? Not to worry: Morgan ties it back in by suggesting that technological disruption is creating inequality and that individuals and organizations need to adapt.

The second and third reasons why things are different is that we are all connected and everything is being disrupted. Morgan seems to think that the ability to be connected 24/7 and the disruptive forces are both inevitable and unambiguously good, as are freelancing and globalization. At the least, these are good or bad some of the time and various actors in various times and places have pushed back against these forces. Perhaps a more apt characterization of changes in the workplace is that they are glacial when compared to more radical innovations in technology, perhaps due to the active resistance of governments, organizations, and workers to changes that would harm their interests.

Workers don’t really appear to be a causal factor in Morgan’s analysis of the future of work, except as members of generations that are supposedly acculturated to different behaviors. Millennials receive a lot of attention, as they are supposedly more motivated by “meaningful work” than profit or prestige, but there is to be no equilibrium in the future of work: “When Generation Z becomes the majority workforce and starts relying on teleportation, self-driving cars, and artificially intelligent robots at work, then I and the rest of the millennials will have to adapt to that as well.”

Morgan is addressing an important issue, but in place of analysis, offers techno-causation, clichés and buzzwords. In contrast to when he started work: “None of the platforms we use today were in existence; there was no Facebook, Jive, Yammer, Twitter, or LinkedIn. There was no iPhone, iPad, Siri, Watson, or a bunch of other things that have so dramatically impacted our lives. We didn’t have the same behaviors either. “ But have these really impacted work?

There is surprisingly little discussion of work for a book on the future of work. Morgan’s seems to think every worker and workplace is going to be radically affected by the latest technological fad. But the bigger problem is

that his understanding of work is a distortion of reality: he doesn't adequately characterize what work is for most people who perform it, or how and why most people work. His analysis is concentrated on a fine slice of the highly educated and high wage end of the work spectrum, and in the industries most impacted by technology. He writes that the following time honored and much despised structures of white-collar working life are dead: the corporate office, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. jobs, and commuting to work are all things of the past. And yet the modal reality is that most working people still get up in the morning and drive to work.

In addition to dying practices, workers are also seen as the walking dead. Morgan cites research showing 63% of American workers are disengaged at work and 87% are emotionally disconnected. He says that these "employees are sleepwalking through their jobs ... a.k.a. they are zombies!" These are big problems, but Morgan doesn't offer a solution or an analysis beyond a "theory of zombification" that starts with debt-laden university graduates accepting jobs for pay rather than purpose.

What academics of work can probably agree with in Morgan's book are some of the following conclusions he draws: in order to prosper, organizations in the future will need to put people first, lead through values, establish democratic learning environments, and increase diversity of under-represented minorities and inclusion of multiple perspectives.

Many academics of the work relationship might further propose that structural reforms are needed to address 21<sup>st</sup> Century employment issues – including research-informed work redesign, reforms in labor and employment law, macroeconomic policy adjustments, revitalization of the labor movement, and steps that would improve wages, working conditions and benefits.

Morgan's extrapolation of generational and technological tendencies makes the future sound inevitable and adaptation sound like a necessity. He is decidedly optimistic about the five trends he identifies and presents no alternative scenario other than getting behind the juggernaut of forces including new behaviors, technology, millennials, mobility and globalization. Rather than being causal drivers of change, these trends could of course themselves be broken apart and seen as elements of a social system that could also be forced to adapt.

Morgan's model for getting ahead of the work environment starts with rethinking the game of chess. The lessons from the new masters of the game argue for the following ways of getting ahead: challenge tradition, identify opportunities, and adapt continuously. These are fine insights, but is high-stakes adversarial n-dimensional chess really the right model? My sense is that the overqualified and disengaged workers of today would be

more responsive to a change in the game than a rethinking of the old one. Unfortunately, changing a game reintroduces the less predictable elements of bargaining between the players and the contested and varied interests that actually do establish how work is organized within democratic societies.

Predictions about the future are hard, especially when they are based on the past. Today's dispiriting facts related to worker satisfaction and rising inequality, along with the promise of new technologies and behaviors, offer only a glimpse of what tomorrow holds. While prophetic thinking like Morgan's isn't quite legitimate among workplace scholars, there is a market for people who offer heuristics and make confident-sounding predictions. Workplace scholars who could offer better alternatives but do not may cede the speculative territory. This can lead to further propagation of past errors and new illusions.

Work is a fundamentally socially determined activity, and while there is the possibility of an analogy between the rate of change in technology and change at the workplace, this book doesn't make a convincing case. Non-linear, density-dependent, and causal effects in social systems are complex and hard to understand, and offering predictions may be little more than astrology. Ultimately, what perhaps can be said is that the future of work is that it is wide open, and that people will have to care enough about it if they are to construct a better path.

# Adapt International Network



**ADAPT** is a non-profit organisation founded in 2000 by Prof. Marco Biagi with the aim of promoting studies and research in the field of labour law and industrial relations from an international and comparative perspective. Our purpose is to encourage and implement a new approach to academic research, by establishing ongoing relationships with other universities and advanced studies institutes, and promoting academic and scientific exchange programmes with enterprises, institutions, foundations and associations. In collaboration with the Centre for International and Comparative Studies on Law, Economics, Environment and Work, (DEAL) the Marco Biagi Department of Economics, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, ADAPT set up the International School of Higher Education in Labour and Industrial Relations, a centre of excellence which is accredited at an international level for research, study and postgraduate programmes in the area of industrial and labour relations. Further information at [www.adapt.it](http://www.adapt.it).

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