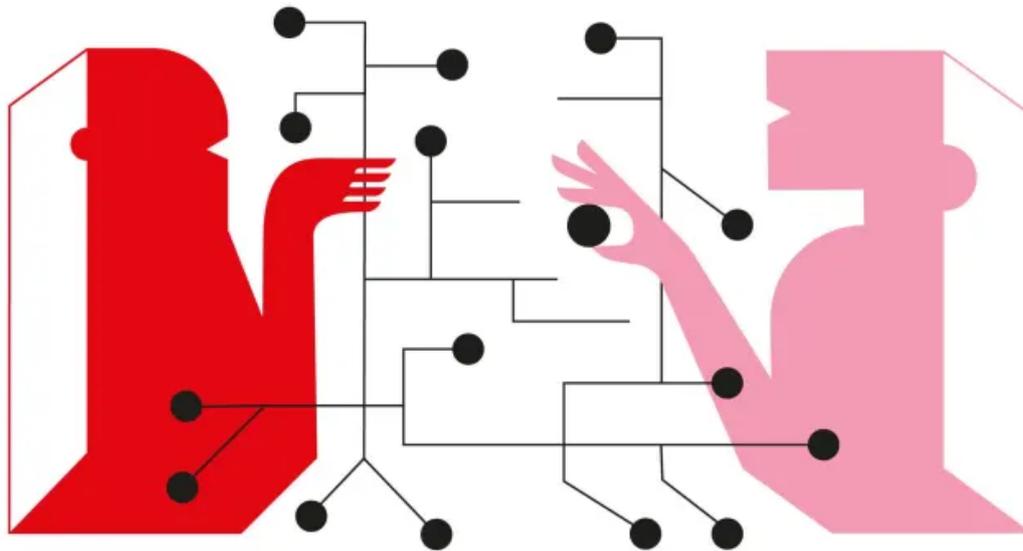


Rebooting the Workplace

Future of work

A radical prescription to make work fit for the future | Free to read

Organisations will thrive when all staff feel valued — and their ideas are implemented



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Cath Bishop and **Margaret Heffernan** SEPTEMBER 7 2020

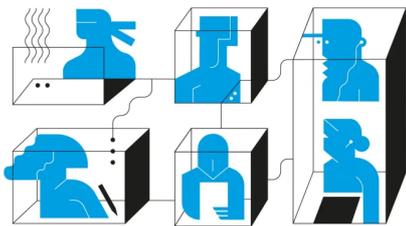
This article is part of the FT's [Rebooting the Workplace](#) series, asking prominent thinkers, policymakers and workplace experts to examine the biggest questions of the post-pandemic moment.

The future of work requires a new social contract. At a time when business outcomes can no longer be predicted or guaranteed, when forecasting has become more difficult and uncertainty endemic, it is essential that organisations stay attuned to early warning signals and cultivate the capacity to accelerate change when clarity emerges. Which means that leadership and decision-making cannot stay at the top.

A highly networked organisation, in which information and insight travels fast and without impediments, is the only coherent response to a world where business conditions can change overnight. We can learn from the improvisatory genius of world-class sporting teams, in which players have the freedom and skill for on-the-spot decision-making.

Glimmers of this approach were seen early in the pandemic. Across public and private sectors, leaders from line managers to chief executives went to exceptional lengths to look after their people, wherever they were. To their surprise, caring about people made productivity go up, not down. At the same time, much work shifted from the centre to smaller, often ad hoc, teams. Devolving decision-making to the frontline and increasing localisation forced leaders to trust their people to know what to do. They haven't been disappointed. Where sharing responsibility might have felt a risk, now it's an obvious asset.

Rebooting the Workplace



Prominent thinkers, policymakers and workplace experts examine the biggest questions of the post-pandemic moment — what will the future of work look like and how do we build it?

[This is our big chance to create better workplaces](#)

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October 19: Do we need workplaces?

At Ford, the collaboration with [ventilator designer Penlon](#) and manufacturer STI, produced 17,000 ventilators in a few months, an achievement that would never previously have been envisaged in under a year. In the NHS, the need for rapid creative thinking collapsed a vast and intricate hierarchy into a single organism, which in turn generated levels of co-operation across all levels and between services with an ease and speed previously only dreamt of.

Obtuse targets were discarded, pointless bureaucracy cut. Such stories have a common theme: with a newly clarified, shared sense of purpose highly complex collaborations work faster and better than the *ancien regime* of scientific management with its brigades of managers and metrics.



Cath Bishop: We can learn from the improvisatory genius of world-class sporting teams © Paul Stead

Permanently unleashing that hitherto untapped creativity and motivation is now the challenge. But this way of working requires people to be well informed about what is needed and why. Forthcoming research from Professor Veronica Hope-Hailey at the University of Bath shows that, while trust in leaders remained high during the crisis, both public and private sector workers want to be trusted with better information and knowledge. Active involvement in decision-making enables them to make better, more relevant contributions. In a future where creative responsiveness can spell the difference between survival and failure, the long win lies in driving deeper participation across the entire workforce.

The Future of Work

If you want to keep up to date with this series and other insights into the evolving post-pandemic workplace, add [the Future of Work](#) to your [myFT Digest](#).

We saw the beginning of this trend before the pandemic, with more organisations finding ways to gain greater insight from their workforce. [At the Bank of England](#), productivity improvements came from suggestions solicited from every level. [Capita](#) put a young employee on its board to provide cross-generational perspective. The [Post Office](#) recently added a serving postmaster to its board, to see more clearly the daily consequences of centralised decisions.

Central to participation ought to be purpose. But purpose is a much traduced word. Bland statements mean nothing and have corrupted the idea. For broad participation to be coherent it requires that purpose is real to everyone, in everything they do.



Margaret Heffernan: You don't have to sell change to people who designed it © FT

The pandemic revealed a capacity for change that managements worldwide had routinely underestimated. Most people [had never been asked for ideas](#) and didn't expect them to be heard. Companies had become fixated on incentives but to many people, satisfaction at work never meant hitting targets or achieving profit milestones. Success came from working alongside trusted colleagues to contribute to goods or services that mattered. That's the experience many more had when Covid-19 struck. And it's the way people want to keep working.

The new social contract offers the collective intelligence of people who are both an early warning system and a rich, collaborative network of creativity and improvisation. In return, they expect the open sharing of knowledge and information and an invitation to participate in work that makes the world better. The potential rewards for everyone are huge, because the greater the participation in decision-making, the faster implementing change becomes. You don't have to sell change to people who designed it. So it's fast, it's credible and it's co-created by people who care. That makes companies fit for the future, whatever it may bring.

Cath Bishop works on leadership development. She has been an Olympic rower and conflict diplomat and is author of the forthcoming "[The Long Win: The Search for a Better Way to Succeed](#)"

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