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Work futures

There seems to be an awful lot of crystal ball gazing just lately about the future of work. As the Economic and Social Research Council winds up a two-year-long research programme, another is starting based on a partnership between the UK's Work Foundation and Sense Worldwide, a London-based trend-spotting network.

It is only a few years ago that the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce ran a similar programme, leading to a report called *Redefining Work*. I still have a copy. It said the way we work was changing. Paradoxically, the ESRC programme concluded that the way we work was changing less than many of us think.

Jeremy Brown, who runs Sense Worldwide, promises a "fresh perspective, engaging people in a conversation". He says: "If things are not changing that much, then we will say so." But "business as usual" does not make headlines.

In the past few years I have looked at a series of predictions surrounding workplace change and have concluded that there is an art to futurology. The first rule of prediction is to go well into the future, say, 50 years hence when everyone, including you, will have forgotten everything that you said. If you were right and you are still around you can say: "I told you so." If you were wrong, you can simply keep your head down.

The second rule is to forecast that things are going to be different. No one is interested in predictions that say there will be no real change.

Rule three, an obvious one, is to base your forecasts on current or historical trends. People generally ignore the fact that history often repeats itself, so current trends tend to be adopted by most forecasters. The problem with this approach is that we cannot know whether these trends will be arrested or reversed.

I recall my geography teacher in the early 1970s telling me that by the turn of the century the world would have run out of oil. But we found new reserves and better ways to extract existing resources. The same teacher told me that large companies had discovered the merits of diversification. This was before the fashion for core competencies.

Rule four is timing. If you wait around long enough, anything can happen. Diversification may be due for a revival. There may even be a third world war eventually. But it will not be the extension of the cold war forecast by General Sir John Hackett in his book *The Third World War*. The book was a compelling read when it was published, during the 1970s. But it was wrong.

I have been planning my own book on the future of work. The proposal is that the world of work is changing (see rule two) and that we are moving steadily towards a watershed. The most crucial variable is the steepness of the trend and my belief is that we are in the early stages of a change that could take 50 years or more to come about (see rule one).

I would date the beginning of the change to July 1990, when the Harvard Business Review published an article by Michael Hammer, "Re-engineering work, don't

automate, obliterate". The article and a subsequent book led to a worldwide efficiency movement that changed the way people related to their employers.

This is another important feature of forecasting. You need a beginning. When Alvin and Heidi Toffler predicted that the world of work was changing in their 1980 book *The Third Wave*, they dated the beginning of the change to 1956, the year in which white-collar workers outnumbered blue-collar workers in the US for the first time.

If we look back at the 1950s we may be tempted to ask: "So what?" But the Tofflers have become so well established as futurists that a few misses here and there are hardly going to spoil their reputation.

The trend that interests me most is that towards temporary, contract and free agency forms of working. Why? Because that is how I work and I do not like to be in a minority. It is a world that has become familiar, so it seems fair to assume that it is happening everywhere. Well, no, it is not.

Most people are happy with their full-time jobs, according to labour force statistics. And this is not without good reason, since full-time work can offer benefits that contractors do not get: holiday pay, company pensions, share option schemes, company cars, sickness insurance, training and, yes, promotion prospects. For in spite of the movement towards flatter hierarchies, there remains a career ladder. It just has fewer rungs these days.

The only problem with managerial promotion is that many technical jobs are so intrinsically interesting and important that it may not be wise to promote the best technicians. This issue has been recognised for many years but has yet to be fully resolved. If you promote a fine technician who cannot manage, you are going to be in trouble. Better, perhaps, to promote an average technician, if he or she knows how to handle people and can recognise excellence when he or she sees it.

Unfortunately, in too many instances the wrong people have been promoted, too much reliance has been placed on their abilities and too much money has been paid to them. Too many companies are in trouble as a result.

Companies are surviving on the sum of their employee parts, not because of great leadership. The best way to deal with this problem may be to drop the concept of "promotion". In fact, the whole language of work needs an overhaul.

This leads me back to the watershed theory. When graduates see contracting as a career option; when enough able people are working outside the system that continues to be dominated by large businesses; when networked systems of co-operative working are perfected - and the internet is improving these systems all the time - the strengths of the worker as free agent will begin to be recognised.

These days, the most important strength of the contractor appears to be flexibility. But in time, free agents will be employed more for their skills and their knowledge. Will such people ever dominate the global workforce? Not tomorrow and not the next day. Give them about 50 years.