

## **Breaking Tradition: The Necessity of Modernising Workplace Practices**

A recently published article by Henley Business articulated key trends in how talent is challenging the traditional concept of organizations. This made me reflect on my 25-year career journey. When I started working, being part of a big multinational corporation (MNC) was a significant achievement.

In 2011, during a large project on employee value proposition in London, we reached out to over 300 mid-career professionals and university graduates globally. Working for a blue-chip company was highly desirable because it provided a safety net, clear career progression, and long-term benefits, including attractive expat packages and charismatic leaders who were somewhat revered.

*Continue reading to dive deeper into this subject.*

By 2016, when I was heading a global talent role, we conducted a similar study, and the results had shifted. ***Tech companies were seen as cooler and more appealing, with local and regional players offering empowerment and excitement despite sometimes lacking structure and formal internal processes.***

These companies were refreshing from an HR perspective, as most HR processes were set in the 1960s, and organisations were still holding on to those practices (performance ratings, 9-box grid, bell curve, competency model). ***Many still do because***

- (A) it is familiar and tested and has worked in the past,***
- (B) the new processes are messy and may or may not work, and***
- (C) HR colleagues don't enjoy experimentation as the fear of failure is immense unless they have a very strong business sponsor and highly dynamic, outward-looking HR team members.***

I recall Laszlo Bock's famous book *Work Rules!* and Netflix's renowned 150-slide culture deck, which were different from traditional HR approaches. Furthermore, for the first time since the 1960s, employees witnessed massive layoffs and restructuring, often due to external factors, changes in business models, a competitive and evolving environment, or sometimes due to lack of sponsorship, short tenure of CEOs, or high-profile ethical breaches.

***This led to a shift in loyalty and a preference for shorter-term opportunities.*** People began to realize that while large corporations provided stability, they could also be hierarchical, less dynamic, and cost-conscious compared to smaller companies, where recognition and career advancement could be faster. However, the unpredictable nature of both types of organizations remained consistent.

This trend was further disrupted during COVID.

In 2022, post-COVID, I engaged with university students and young professionals (Gen Z) across the region. ***They expressed little interest in the traditional corporate path. Many aspired to become their own boss or start their own businesses, valuing autonomy and flexibility over climbing the corporate ladder, which might not even be available when they are ready after 10 years.***

According to a Deloitte survey, 49% of Gen Z would like to own their own business, and 64% prefer a career with a positive impact on society rather than a traditional corporate role.

**This evolution highlighted the need for a significant shift in HR functions and leadership approaches, especially in established companies.** Traditional frameworks are being challenged by new expectations and trends.

Some of these trends include:

**Increased Awareness and Sensitivity:** There's a heightened awareness of workplace issues, making tough conversations more challenging. The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified workplace stress as a global issue, with an estimated \$1 trillion loss in productivity annually due to mental health.

**Information Overload:** Platforms like Youtube, Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn provide a plethora of self-development materials, reducing the novelty of internal training programs.

**Opaque Career Discussions:** Career progression is often seen as opaque, in many cases it is dependent on likeability, not just talent . A Gallup report highlighted that only 22% of employees believe their leaders have a clear direction for their career progression.

**Perfection in Leadership:** The current leadership development framework is overly idealistic, expecting leaders to be authentic, growth-oriented, charismatic, and culturally fit while addressing global issues and delivering shareholder value. This creates unrealistic expectations and contributes to workplace stress and disengagement. According to a Harvard Business Review study, 61% of leaders feel overwhelmed by the increasing demands of their role.

**Other workplace challenges:** Recent statistics show that workplace stress is growing, retention among employees under 30 is challenging.

There are fewer women on boards, and there's been no significant progress in sustainability over the last decade. Just 12% of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are currently on track.

All of these factors contribute to a highly disengaged workforce, with Gallup reporting that 85% of employees are not engaged or actively disengaged at work.

To address these challenges, I propose a Start-Stop-Continue model for HR:

## **Stop**

Outdated HR practices that hinder innovation and fail to align with current organizational needs. More specifically:

**Putting People in Boxes:** Abandon outdated frameworks like the 9-box grid and bell curve. These methods can limit potential and discourage failure (necessary for innovation) and collaboration.

**Relying Solely on Assessments:** Move away from over-reliance on 360 feedback and other tools that assess past performance and culture fit. These tools can perpetuate bias and hinder diversity.

**Lengthy HR Processes:** Simplify HR processes and approvals. Enhance agility and responsiveness.

**Rigid Competency Frameworks:** Avoid overly detailed job competency frameworks; allow flexibility for future job roles.

**Sole Ownership of Culture:** Recognize that fostering culture and engagement requires a collective effort.

**Allowing Politics in HR Function:** Ensure HR function reflects the organization's values and integrity. Creating an outward-looking culture that you want to embed in the organisation.

## **Start**

Embracing modern, flexible approaches that foster a positive work environment and support dynamic leadership; more specifically:

**Focus on Culture Value Proposition:** Identify and promote the unwritten rules that help individuals and the organization thrive. Culture is a key driver of engagement and performance.

**Personalised Development Plans:** Engage in personalised conversations and development plans, possibly outsourcing to coaches for tailored support. Individualized approaches yield better results.

**Define Employee Life Cycle Benefits:** Clearly articulate the benefits available throughout an employee's life cycle, not just grade/level.

**Encourage Experiential Learning:** Provide opportunities for experiences and projects that build careers and offer appropriate rewards rather than linear career progression.



**Start**

**Collaborative Policy Creation:** Involve employees in policy creation, similar to marketing strategies. Employee input fosters buy-in and relevance.

**Effective Marketing:** Promote HR initiatives as a key player in creating a solid internal and external employer brand.

**User-Friendly Services:** Ensure HR services are accessible and transparent. Efficiency improves satisfaction.

**Embed Trust and Transparency:** Start within the HR function before extending these values organization-wide. Trust is foundational to a positive culture.

**Invest in Culture and Capability Building:** Focus on building a dynamic culture and capabilities, not just cost savings, even when there is limited support from the management team. At least present a case.

## **Continue**

Reinforcing practices that effectively build and sustain a strong organizational culture and enhance leadership development, more specifically:

**Personalised HR Approaches:** Maintain a personalized approach in HR practices. Individual attention meets unique needs.

**Focus on Key organisational/Business Issues:** Continue addressing Inclusion, belonging, diversity, sustainability, and wellness. These are critical for long-term success.

**Understand Business Priorities:** Stay connected with business goals and leadership to help shape people and culture strategies. Alignment ensures relevance.

**Allow Flexibility and Growth:** Give yourself and your team room to make mistakes and grow. Learning from failure fosters resilience.

*Opinion*



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