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Future Work

Surprise! Your kids may be better prepared for it than you are

TEXT BY CHRISTINE MACLEAN ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW VINCENT JUNE 11, 2008

ONE QUESTION SURVEY

Which issue do you think your oldest child will struggle with the most once he/she enters the workforce? (Choose one)

- Authority
- Boredom
- Reliability
- Collaboration
- Technology

REACT TO THIS STORY

Agree? Disagree? Stop sounding off to your computer screen! Instead, share your point of view on this subject with our readers.



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You've been asking for an easy way to share these articles with friends since Day One. To which we reply, "Uncle!"

Work's not what it used to be. My 75-year-old father worked for the same organization for more than 40 years, as did my father-in-law. My forty-something husband, on the other hand, has worked inside a large corporation, consulted to an even larger corporation, worked for a small start-up, and launched his own start-up--all in the last five years. Meanwhile, I've pieced together a living by freelance writing, fiction writing, and doing presentations about writing.

Both my husband and I have worked from home for long stretches of time and flexed our work hours with the best of them to accommodate hockey practices, conferences with teachers, and volunteer work.

Although our parents have been supportive, all this has made them uneasy. I imagine they wonder how long we'll be able to keep this up and pay the bills. And if it all falls apart, what respectable company will hire us? Experience tells them no good employer is going to want someone who job hops or works for themselves and doesn't keep regular hours. Perhaps our parents are even secretly worried that, even after 25 years on our own, we'll turn into boomerang kids after all and move back in with them.

I'm accustomed to the way we work, but as our teen and tween have begun to consider career choices, I've had a few moments of unease myself. I wonder what kind of work role models we've been for them, apart from demonstrating integrity. From watching us, they haven't learned how to arrive at work by 8:00 and stay until 5:00, the importance of face time, or any of the other things necessary to keep what our parents would call "a good job," one that provides stability and security (if those still exist).

I take some comfort in the fact that it may not matter: If work

isn't what it used to be, it's also not what it will become.

Scrabbling together a preview

I recently attended a small event facilitated by the Institute for the Future (IFTF). At the outset, each attendee was given a Scrabble tile with a letter on it and told to work with others to create words. The team that came up with the word worth the most points would win. We weren't put into teams or told how to create a team. The teams formed organically, mostly by people shouting things like "Who needs an S?" Or "Anyone got a B?" The first round was chaotic; subsequent rounds were better, as teams combined and the people with Qs and Zs (worth 10 points) realized their value.

At the end, the facilitator said, "Now you have an idea of the work world of the future."

To be successful in that world, our kids are going to need not necessarily different skills than we've needed so far, but additional skills. Dan Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind* and *Free Agent Nation*, believes we're moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age. In the Information Age, being able to think logically and analytically was prized, but in the Conceptual Age many jobs that depend heavily on those skills, e.g., computer programming, accounting, legal research, and financial analysis, are being done faster by computers or cheaper by workers overseas.

Workers will need "the ability to create artistic and emotional beauty, to detect patterns and opportunities, to craft a satisfying narrative, and to come up with inventions" people didn't even know they needed, says Pink. To increase their ability to see patterns across disciplines, some companies are forming trans-disciplinary teams, including fine artists on product development teams, for example. Creativity is in. Rules-based work is out.

Much of the work they'll be doing with others, sometimes with colleagues who work on the other side of the world. New telepresence systems, some of which offer up eerie life-sized versions of a person, will make it easier. Cell phones, instant messaging, virtual worlds, and immersive environments--many of which kids already use for entertainment--will be their best work tools. Even the gaming they do now could be useful. Robert Hof writes in *Business Week*, "Enterprises will steal sensibilities from games and virtual worlds and embed them into business," e.g., having gamers view real medical scans for signs of cancer--all within the world of the game.

Social networks are child's play

IFTF researchers Jason Tester, Jane McGonigal, and Kathi Vian have identified skills that will be crucial to the workplace of the future. Among the most important not just for your kids but for anyone who plans to be working in the next ten years are:

Social networking ("Mobbability"): While many parents consider MySpace or Facebook wastelands, they may be useful training grounds. "Building, mapping, and cultivating massive social networks, even with people we don't know, will be fundamental in the workplace of 2018," says Tester. "Work is becoming more social, more

distributed, and more collaborative and having a smart network of experts at hand will produce faster results and better results than working solo."

Iterative development ("Protovation"): Workers will need to be willing to show an idea to people in their networks before its completely formed. Quickly prototyping an idea, letting others play with it, then testing and improving it will be key in many fields.

Open authorship: Along with rapidly prototyping ideas on a massively networked scale, workers will need to be comfortable when other people tweak their ideas--or even take them in new directions.

Information filtering ("Signal-noise management"): Workers will increasingly use social filters (e.g., digg and del.icio.us) to avoid information overload. "We'll use our social networks to help us, and look for the reputation ratings of data, and adopt technologies that sense our attention and help us customize our interruptions," says Tester. "In a future that's more Wikipedia than Encyclopedia Britannica, it'll be up to us to piece together the whole story from dozens of parts."

In flux and flummoxed

Given all of this, it seems today's teens--who tend to be social, independent, tech-savvy and comfortable in the virtual world (and sometimes good at "forming narratives" about why they didn't get their homework done)--are already well suited to future work. While they're already learning about the hardware of their work world, however, much of the software, the rules of work, is changing at an incredible pace. Is it okay to text or IM or go online in search of information, all while in a meeting? If the boss can see you via life-sized telepresence or if you and your team members work in the same space in a virtual world in which you can maintain eye contact, is that as good as face time? Technology already allows us to be connected 24/7, but are we willing to be? Will our kids get to decide whether or not they want to be? Will they even care? Or will their work/life boundaries be so permeable as to be nonexistent?

I don't know. No one does. And I think that might be the real source of my unease when I think about my kids moving into the world of work. Without knowing these things and having only a vague idea of their future work world, I have no sure sense of how to prepare them for its challenges.

In his 2002 Stanford commencement [address](#), Steven Jobs said, "Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart."

That may be the one thing my husband and I are getting right. We're showing our son and daughter what it takes to follow your heart--the trade-offs involved, the stamina required, and how the effort can be, by turns, energizing, frustrating, disappointing, and satisfying. We're showing them that when you find your passion, play and work are sometimes indistinguishable. You show up and work long and hard because you want to, not because it's the rule. It's a

lesson that applies no matter what the work world turns out to be.

Christine MacLean, editor of Jugglezine, braves new worlds from her home in Michigan.

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Reactions to "Future Work"

The last line, "a lesson that applies no matter what the work turns out to be" is why I checked "authority" as the main issue to contend with in future employment.

Having the discipline and steadiness for self employment may be the greatest gift. As children and adults internalize real authority, authority that knows which and what next, that "follows its heart", we may have a gift out of the changing corporate model.

As a teacher once said to me, you are the only boss of your life. If children get this I imagine they can work for others or for themselves, successfully, I hope.

Nancy Peden
educator, Lived Learning

I don't think that the model presented will lead to a very successful work environment. Specifically, texting in a meeting -- regardless of intent -- would be distracting and not welcome. Collaboration might be the future but you still need to inject some order.

I've been on my own for over 15 years after corporate life and if this author examined her patterns she will see order and purpose behind the random achievements she has noted.

Gary Morris
Worker, Idea Studio

Great article! As a philosophy and German double major and a nerd-of-all-trades, this trend is good news. What a job

means needs to change along with a changing world paradigm. I look forward to shaping the new environment!

Laura Worth
Volunteer Support VISTA, Blandford Nature Center & Mixed Greens

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This is why I have hope for the future. My boys are 14 and 11, and their work styles and attitude toward collaboration rather than competition to solve a problem just blow me away.

20th-century thinking will not create leaders for the 21st century, as Dan Pink so ably argues in his books.

Mark VanderKlipp
President, Corbin Design

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Thank you! This was a welcome article to read - in the middle of my boys' year end exams, late night lacrosse and hockey, husband started a new business, cycled 100 miles, designed a brochure in between and around all of this. I guess my kids have learned to take it all in stride, I have not thought of the positive side of all of this insanity until reading this article.

liz
owner, ESHildebrandt

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Very intriguing article particularly for a 60 year old.

Jeff Bowen
President, Northern NM Mortgage Co.

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Parenting changes careers - for me it was not only the switch to flex time, freelance and then back to full time with the stages of my daughter's development - but the self reflection of role-modeling. Am I hardworking and still happy and creative? Do I take care of my marriage so that it remains a model of the one she may choose?

We can only hope to teach resilience and authenticity to our children, and understand it ourselves.

Ann Blackwell, LEED AP
Studio Proprietor, Design Within Reach

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Good for my son and daughter!
This article has various expert's opinions. I am sure that people concerned future (including me) can be helped through reading it. I was moved.

Seo
between jobs

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You may well be right about future workplace trends but you gloss over key facets of the present:

1) Currently many Americans "show up and work long and hard" because they have to, because it's the rule--as in unpaid overtime. Americans work more hours yearly--with less vacation--than their counterparts in all other modern democracies. And, since I've lived overseas for thirteen years I've concluded that Americans have little if anything of advantage to show for it vis a vis workers in other democratic nations that aren't nearly as hyped up as the USA with all its emphasis on convenience, speed, and consumption.

2) Although you raise concerns about the blurring of boundaries between work and play, the matter could (and should, I think) be framed differently. For instance: the difference between employers' unlimited claims on an employee's time and employers with a modicum of respect for the idea--old-fashioned though it may be by some lights--that there are more important things than work-for-hire and that these ought not to be infringed upon except in an emergency.

3) Your article seems to take for granted that it's desirable to "get ahead" in today's economy. Personally, I have no desire to get ahead (or, for that matter, to "keep up" with others) by working more or by sacrificing time off with my wife and friends. I can't even be bothered to read my email on weekends. Your article also rests upon an assumption that the trends you describe are inevitable. Well, they probably are but that isn't the same as their being inescapable, provided one is willing to hold the line and not buy into what is, after all, a corporate ethos that's wide open to question e.g., Is it worth it? One can have a pleasurable and creative work life without being at an employer's or colleague's beck and call 24/7.

My objections aren't intended as an across-the-board rejection of your ideas, observations and predictions; indeed, you seem to have struck a workable balance between your employment and your free time. In this we each have something in common: we have exercised our options.

What about those who have fewer or no options?

Mark Zimmermann
Instructor, MSOE

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