TITLE: Re-Imagining Work

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NB

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Dave Coplin: There was a study released last year in the US, and it basically said that 71% of the American workforce is not happy at work, is dis-engaged by their organisations – 71%... And actually a lot of this – technology is part of the problem. And I wanted to address that, I wanted to show people that actually there is a very different way to use technology, in not just our professional lives, but in our personal lives too, that will really re-address that balance and get people more engaged and more productive in what they do at work.

When you use something like Facebook or Twitter, (it doesn't have to be those platforms) you are using a fundamentally different culture of collaboration. You are saying, pretty much, by default, everything I do is open, except for the bits that I choose to keep private. Contrast that to the standard of culture of collaboration inside most organisations. It's completely inverted. Everything I do is closed, unless I specifically say I'm going to share this. The change in that is absolutely profound. When you have people who are used to that sharing experience, that rich, friction-free way of sharing information, collaborating with their friends and family, and they join organisations and they cannot share in that way – trouble starts to happen.

It also makes us realise how some of the ways we live our working lives today has become outdated – it's become out of place with the kind of society that we live in. We're in a world now today where productivity – the thing we've been chasing for hundreds of years – is fast becoming the problem.

We've entered a world of work where productivity has become the thing that we do every day. We've gone through this period of industrialisation, where we thought, actually, we need to standardize processes in order to make organisations more effective. If we break down the thing that we're trying to do into a

series of processes and we standardize those processes, we will do more stuff, we will achieve more things. Email has just meant that all we do is we just generate that hamster wheel of communications. We spend our days just answering messages, batting things forwards and backwards. We forgot that that's not everything about work. That's just a part of work. When was the time that you actually just stop and think creatively – you start to think how could we do things differently – how could I innovate the thing that I'm doing here? We don't do that because we're too busy being busy.

So that's the technology piece, but it doesn't really stop there, in fact the biggest challenge that we face is really more about our office space than the tools that we use within them. Work is really changing. Work is really something different to us today, because of the way we live our lives, because of the world in which we live, than it was even just a few years ago. The other thing that's happening is the way that we've changed our office design. How many of you work in an open-plan office? These are sort of insane organisational studies that show that we could be more collaborative with people if we take away all of the barriers. If we remove all of the boundaries, people will talk to each other more. What do I do? I go to my office, I sit at my open-plan desk and I email people three desks away. But worse still, is this really kind of basic human dynamic. When you put people in these open-plan offices, which at the time we thought would be the height of collaborative thinking, some really primal things start to happen to us. We start to feel really exposed. If you go back to your office, and if you work in an open-plan, just have a look at this when you go back. What you will see is in the middle of the floor there will be a whole

series of open plan desks, and everybody sat in the middle of the floor will be sat with their screens facing outward, so they're always vulnerable, everything they do could be monitored at any one point in time. And this leads to a sense of anxiety, a sense of stress. Because I guarantee that somewhere on your floor there will be one, or maybe two other desks, and they will be different because they will be the ones where the monitors are facing the window, or facing the wall, so that the manager can sit and monitor everybody on the savannah and make sure that they're working and doing the stuff that they need to do. Now we know, even just from the animal world, that animals on the savannah live in this state of hyper, heightened stress, because they're under supervision, they don't know, at any moment the predator may strike, they may get distracted, they may get pushed away, and this in turn fundamentally changes the way people think, the way they create, the way they choose to do their work.

But if you buy any of that, you start to then question well, what is work? Work is no longer a destination. We've come through a history of standardization, of industrialization, where, in order to work, you had to go to where the infrastructure was. If you were a factory worker, you had to go where the plant was. We carried that forward into the information economy. You had to go, in the days before the internet, if you wanted to use personal computers, you had to go to the office, it was the only place you could see them, or use them or touch them. And then networks came along, and the only way you could get on the network was you had to be in the office. The problem is that we now live in a world where none of those things are true. For the average knowledge worker, you don't need to be in a specific location at a specific point in time to access specific services. You

have, most of you, I would guarantee looking at some of you are even doing it now, have all of the tools that you need in your pocket or in your bag, and you can work from anywhere. And yet what do we do, we still, we're so ingrained in working in this way, we still do this insane thing – we commute every day to be in the same place at the same point in time.

And that leads us into this definition of flexible working. We've been talking about flexible working for years. And the problem with flexible working is, when I say "flexible working", most of you will probably hear "working from home". And, yeah, working from home is a part of it, but actually this is about choosing the location where you want to be. It's also about you taking control of how you work and how you use the tools that are in front of you. I spent some time with some friends over the weekend and I was just amazed by a conversation that was happening, and you may have had conversations like this – this is where people start bitching and moaning about email – "oh god I've just looked at my email" and you know, it's a Sunday afternoon and "oh god, I've got all these bloody emails…." The problem with you getting email on a Sunday is not the fact that you got the email on a Sunday, it's the fact that you chose to read it. And it may be that you do that because that's the kind of person you are, and it may be because you work for the kind of organisation that makes you feel that you have to do it.

Flexible working, at its heart, is about being mindful about the tasks that you have in front of you and the best place to accomplish those tasks. It could be sat at home, in could be in your office, it could be with your customers, it could be in one of these third spaces that are opening up. It could be in my community.

Why do I come into London to buy a sandwich and a coffee from the sandwich shop in London, when I could be going to a library in Banbury and bringing that retail there, reinvigorating that community there?

Now I've worked for organisations that have sent the "bums on seats memo", I've worked with customers who have sent the "bums on seats memo". I'm not going to lay any judgment on what's happening at Yahoo, but the "bums on seats memo", whenever that gets sent, you know there are problems. And the problems probably relate to trust. It's nothing to do with people working from home, it's fact that I don't trust what my people are doing. We found one of the really interesting things in the studies that we did, is actually the biggest issue of trust with people working outside the office is not between employer and employee, it's about the employees amongst themselves. "I can't see Dave. He's probably not working. I wonder how his patio's coming on?" In our studies what we also showed is that people who weren't working in the office, they carry around this sense of guilt – "I'm not in the office, they're going to be thinking I'm working on my patio" – so they end up over-compensating – they end up sending more emails, making more phone calls in an attempt to be more visible, destroying the advantages of working away from the office.

These office spaces that we've created, are they really fit for purpose? Are we stuck in this endless cycle of productivity, when actually we need to be creating some cognitive space for people to be doing the thinking and innovation that should be done? If we live in a world where actually the only way that people can have competitive advantage, if we live in a world where everything is pretty good, right? – I mean you can't really buy a bad car these days… I'm not going to create a better car unless I take some proper time out to think really differently about how I might innovate the products and services I make. I'm not going to do that if I spend all my time sat in front of email. We need to think really differently about the office space that we provide. The collaboration and the community that we have for our people has to fundamentally change if we are to live up to the opportunity. And so for most organisations it's about this really hard thing – it's about having the confidence to let go – the confidence to empower your employees, the people that you work with, to choose the best place to work for the task that they have in hand, the best tools, to use them in the way that they want – that's a really scary place to be for most organisations – trust me, from an IT perspective – it's a hugely scary place to be. But if you do that – if you put the right kind of infrastructure in place, the right kind of culture, the right kind of process, actually you can make things happen.