

The Future of Work and Leadership: 10 Predictions, 3 Trends, and 5 Capabilities *by Ian Ziskin*

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*“Not everyone is coming to the future,
Not everyone is learning from the past,
Not everyone can come into the future,
Not everyone that’s here is gonna last.”*

— Madonna, Quavo, “Future” from the album *Madame X*, 2019 (Interscope Records)

It is virtually impossible to predict the future of anything. Yet, that does not stop many of us from being intoxicated by “what *it* will be like *when...*” I have spent my entire career thinking about the “it” and “when” associated with key changes and challenges in work, the workforce, and the workplace. The past, present, and future of work have profound implications, not only for the people who *do* the work, but also for the people who *lead* those who do the work.

This essay suggests 10 specific predictions, highlights 3 emerging trends, and recommends 5 new capabilities that leaders must master to successfully address these predictions and trends over the next 20 years – by the year 2040. The most intriguing question is not, will *all* of these things happen? The real question is, when *any* of these things happen, will leaders be ready and relevant to address them?

10 Predictions

By the year 2040, the world of work in the United States will be characterized by the following realities:

1. 50% of the workforce will be in freelance, gig, or other agile and non-traditional roles, not in specific jobs working for specific organizations...and they will deliver their work through a combination of virtual and/or flexible work arrangements that include locations and schedules of their choice.
2. 50% of Board of Directors seats will be held by women and people of color.
3. 33% of company CEOs will be women or people of color.
4. 100% of the workforce will be covered by health care and retirement plans that are completely portable, thereby allowing talent to move freely and seamlessly among and across organizations and work assignments.
5. Mandatory retirement will be completely abolished for all but the most safety-critical jobs.
6. The fastest growing jobs and gigs in the manufacturing and technology sectors will be associated with artificial intelligence, climate change, data sciences, health care, high speed transport, machine learning, and robotics.
7. 25% of high school graduates will opt to move on to technical apprenticeship programs, rather than to college or directly to work.
8. More people will complete formal credentialing programs in Leadership each year than will receive MBA degrees.
9. Leadership Effectiveness Scores for individual leaders and leadership teams will be as commonplace and transparent as Yelp ratings.
10. At least 50% of the next 6 U.S. Presidents will be African-American, Asian, LatinX, LGBTQ, Jewish, Muslim, and/or women.

3 Trends

Even if only half of the above predictions come to pass, there are clear implications for a host of underlying trends that are emerging around the future of work. Here are the 3 that will matter most:

- **Agile On-Demand Talent** – more agile talent and more flexible organization models are inevitable. There will be more gigs and fewer traditional jobs as defined by current employment models. Increased flexible and virtual work arrangements will be the norm, including many situations where leaders and the people they lead never meet in person. Workers will work on what they want, when they want, where they want, and with whom they want. Increasingly, this trend will be driven by workforce demands and expectations, irrespective of whether company strategies prefer to embrace more traditional definitions of work or organizational operating models. The people strategy will be defined first and foremost by the people, not by the organization.
- **Technology-Enabled Work and Workforce** – expertise in and comfort with algorithms, artificial intelligence, and automation as well as human-machine collaboration will permeate nearly every industry, skillset, and functional discipline. Humans will be replaced by computers, machines, and robots in many jobs and industries. Likewise, entire new industries and skill demands will create unprecedented new opportunities for millions of people. But, the skills available in the workforce will not align with the new technologies and capabilities required – at least not easily or right away. Big disruption is ahead including unemployment, job dislocation, and skills shortages. Big opportunity is also ahead including new industries, new industrial policy, and new large-scale learning and skill development programs.
- **Economic and Social Polarization** – climate, crime, demographics, diversity, drugs, education, food, health, inequality, politics, population, race, religion, unemployment, urbanization, and war are just a handful of global issues confronting organizations and societies. Big-picture problems like these and others require big-picture solutions, which in turn require big-picture leaders. While the issues themselves are hugely complex, they are not the most difficult thing to fix. The toughest challenge to address is polarization, and solutions demand sophistication, nuance, and resilience – to get past differences and focus on collaboration and common ground. Those who can *articulate* problems are in plentiful supply. However, people and organizations that can effectively *resolve* problems are in pitifully short supply, and will be in unprecedented demand over the next 20 years and beyond.

5 Capabilities

The above predictions and trends suggest some fascinating questions about the role, relevance, and readiness of leaders in 2040. What will leaders need to know and do as the future of work emerges? Will leadership be a necessary evil or a strategic differentiator? Will leaders lead people, or robots, and/or work for people, or robots? Will leaders even exist?

For purposes of this essay, I would like to focus on 5 of my favorite leadership capabilities that will be essential over the next 20 years:

1. **External, *NOT* Internal** – in 2040, leaders will distinguish themselves more through their savvy about external trends and dynamics (competitive landscape, economic and social challenges, and other forces of change) than through their deep knowledge of their organization's internal environment (strategy, operations, products, services, and culture). Of course, internal knowledge and experience will always matter. But, the ability to master the meaning of external forces will matter more. In the past, most leaders became leaders primarily because of their internal expertise. In the future, external savvy will be a more powerful and meaningful capability.
2. **Networks, *NOT* Organizations** – in 2040, organizations as we traditionally define them will have largely been replaced by networks as the foundational operating model for how and through whom work will get done. Who you know will still matter. Who you do not know, but need to know and collaborate with, will matter even more. The ability to find these people, build relationships with them, and get them to work

on your priorities and projects without bossing or controlling them will be paramount. Organizational walls, boundaries, boxes, ceilings, silos, and the organization charts used to depict them will still exist. But, that will not be the way work actually gets accomplished. Networks and collaborative relationships will drive how work is done. Leaders will need to deliver results through people they do not own, control, manage, or in some cases, even know.

3. **Segmentation, NOT Sameness** – in 2040, the workforce and customer base will be significantly more diverse than they are today. Demographics are destiny. Leaders will therefore need to become comfortable with differentiating how they treat people – communication, development, engagement, feedback, rewards, and work assignments will be increasingly customized and personalized to meet the expectations and needs of different workforce segments and pivotal talent. Treating everyone the same will no longer be the definition of fairness. Fairness will instead be defined by treating people as they need and prefer to be treated – differentiated by workforce segment, contribution, performance, and personal value proposition. This leadership capability implies the application of marketing related principles to solve people-related problems. Mass customization, differentiation, personalization, and segmentation will be in vogue. Treating everyone the same in the name of fairness will increasingly be a cop-out. And ineffective.
4. **Orchestration, NOT Expertise** – in 2040, most leaders will become leaders because they are great at orchestrating cross-functional, multi-disciplinary solutions to big complex problems. The best leaders will no longer be the biggest experts in their field or organization. Technical expertise will be table stakes, not differentiating. Leadership will be more about finding the very best talent; figuring out whether they need to be employees, or freelancers, full-timers or part-timers, and onsite or half way around the world; and bringing out the best in them as individual contributors and as team members. The leader will not be “most expert.” The leader will be the one who finds and curates the experts needed, from multiple disciplines, to solve multi-dimensional problems. Leaders will therefore need to become the most collaborative and humble listeners that organizations have ever seen.
5. **Ready Able, NOT Ready Now** – in 2040, talent strategies and succession planning will no longer be aimed at identifying and developing leaders who are “ready now” to move into their next roles. Instead, the leadership succession pipeline will primarily be filled with leaders who demonstrate readiness for the ever-changing world of work. Successful leaders will possess capabilities including agility, flexibility, seeing around corners, connecting the dots between seemingly unconnected things, and moving fast to where the workforce and workplace are headed instead of holding onto where they have been. “Ready now” implies we already know what is needed for leaders to excel, and suggests that future leadership success will be based on what has worked in the past. What happens if the future looks nothing like the past? “Ready able” implies that we are unsure about what will be needed for leaders to succeed, and assumes that the best leaders will be those who are able to flex and morph quickly to new and unanticipated future demands.

*“Don’t worry, darlin’
 Now baby, don’t you fret
 We’re livin’ in the future
 And none of this has happened yet.” (Author’s emphasis)*
 — Bruce Springsteen, “Livin’ in the Future,” from the album *Magic*, 2007 (Columbia Records)

Ian Ziskin is President, EXec EXcel Group LLC, where he serves as a board advisor, coach, consultant, entrepreneur, teacher, speaker, and author. He is also Co-Founder and Partner of Business inSITE Group (BiG), a strategic partnership focused on coaching, leadership development, and HR transformation. Ian’s global business experience includes Chief Human Resources Officer and/or other senior leadership roles with three Fortune 100 corporations – Northrop Grumman, Qwest Communications, and TRW.