

Human Dynamics + Work Exploration Summary

10 global trends and their impact on fundamental human needs



In exploring the connection between human dynamics and work, Herman Miller has identified six fundamental human needs:

1. Achievement: We strive for excellence and take pride in our accomplishments.
2. Autonomy: We seek freedom in our actions and decisions.
3. Belonging: We want a meaningful connection to others.
4. Purpose: We want to make a meaningful difference.
5. Security: We desire health, safety, familiarity, and competence.
6. Status: We seek recognition for our contributions.

These six needs apply across all cultures and continents. Herman Miller's Human Dynamics + Work group, which studies the sociology of work, culled them from an exhaustive study of human behavior.

To investigate the interplay between the fundamental human needs and trends that are shaping the global work force, Herman Miller spoke with Zoltan Vadkerti and Agnes Uherezky of the WorkLife HUB in Brussels. The consulting firm works with companies worldwide to set up work-life supports for employees. Here are 10 global trends to watch, according to WorkLife HUB experts, along with a look at their impact on the fundamental human needs.

1. Investing in learning and development

College is for learning, and work is for earning. For decades, that's pretty much how it's been. Not so anymore. Interest in lifelong learning began simmering in the latter part of the 20th century and really came to a boil after the Great Recession. Suddenly, jobs didn't seem so secure and workers wanted to be sure their skills would prepare them for anything.

To meet this desire, companies are investing in internal training while also encouraging workers to follow their passions. Google, for instance, famously allows employees to spend the equivalent of one day a week on innovative side projects, a philosophy that spurred the development of Gmail.

Organizations that support learning and development help employees fulfill a number of fundamental human needs. A sense of achievement comes from mastering new skills, purpose stems from pursuing a passion, and status accrues when that passion pays off.

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2. Age of automation

As technology advances, machines will continue to replace manual labor. This trend has enormous ramifications for emerging economies based on that labor. It also calls into question efforts by developed economies to rejuvenate moribund manufacturing sectors. Any uptick in manufacturing employment, after all, is likely to be short-lived.

But it's not only manual labor that technology threatens. The repetitive, routine part of all jobs will gradually be taken over by machines. Accountants, lawyers, doctors—just about every white-collar occupation will be affected. Consider: By the time many people visit a doctor's office nowadays, they've already gained a pretty good idea of what ails them by visiting the Internet.

What's left for the professionals? The soft skills that make us human. Emotional intelligence and interpersonal communication will be prized more than ever. So, too, will be the ability to triage an abundance of information and decide the best course of action without bogging down in the paralysis of analysis.

The impact on fundamental human needs is potentially twofold: 1) The status of white-collar occupations will rise as their core skills become ever more specialized; and 2) The security that comes from dealing with highly competent professionals will increase as marginal practitioners vacate the field.

3. Global race for nomadic talent

With each successive generation, the world gets a bit smaller and cultural differences become less of a hurdle. That's especially true for a global cohort of highly educated, multicultural workers who could thrive in Asia or Australia as well as in North America or the EU.

The question is how to attract and retain them, particularly in light of the anticipated shortage of skilled labor in developed economies.

Companies that find ways to fulfill the fundamental human needs could fare best. One example: Offer perks that provide enviable work-life balance, thereby supporting the need for belonging at home. Another: Implement flexible policies around alternative work arrangements to tap into the need for autonomy among people who value the freedom to work when and where they choose.

Purpose matters, too. The most gifted talent is driven by more than money. Consider South African-born Elon Musk, who made a fortune from the sale of PayPal and promptly shifted his passion to SpaceX and Tesla Motors. Changing the world, making a difference, having a purpose—those are the things that really count for the kind of talent that could succeed anywhere.



ACHIEVEMENT



STATUS



SECURITY



AUTONOMY



PURPOSE



BELONGING

4. Entrepreneurship for all

By 2030, an estimated 40 percent of the U.S. work force will be self-employed, toiling as either freelancers or contract workers. This trend toward self-employment is a global phenomenon, and women are leading the way.

Many women who work in male-dominated sectors view self-employment as the best path toward realizing their potential and the sense of achievement that comes with it. Others, of course, value the autonomy of self-employment because it provides greater flexibility in balancing work and child care.

For both genders, self-employment is an appealing option because it's so easy to get started. A website and social media is pretty much all it takes to become your own brand. At that point, it's not just achievement and autonomy that get a boost, but every other fundamental human need as well.

Working for yourself can increase status. Charting your own course helps fulfill purpose. And though striking out on your own can feel scary at first, many of the self-employed come to realize that they actually feel more secure being their own boss. Losing a client, after all, is less devastating than losing a job.

Even belonging gets burnished. Workers who move from project to project and company to company form links to more social groups than they would at conventional jobs.



5. Rise of co-working spaces

Despite the flexibility of self-employment, many solo workers gradually come to share a gripe: too much isolation. There's no way to chat up colleagues around the water cooler, no boss to hold you accountable, and no teammate to bounce ideas off.

In response, co-working spaces are popping up around the world. These spaces draw entrepreneurs and sole operators, providing a professional place to work and the companionship of like-minded individuals. Occupants can be alone when they want and together when they feel the need.

Co-working setups preserve the autonomy that's so important to the self-employed, while offering a sense of belonging that might otherwise be missing.

6. From pyramid to pancake

The classic hierarchical pyramid, with power concentrated at the top, is crumbling into a pancake. Common among startups and making inroads at larger outfits, this flatter organizational structure jettisons the top-down chain of command in favor of a collaborative mindset in which leaders are inclined to serve rather than dictate.

Implicit in this transition from pyramid to pancake is the elimination of the corner-office culture and, to some extent, the salary gap that comes with it. Consequently, the change carries big implications for the fundamental human needs of achievement and status.

For leaders accustomed to the perks of power, it could be a blow to the ego. For up and comers, it could sap motivation if the rewards of promotion don't seem quite so evident. And for organizations, it presents challenges in balancing the needs of both.

“Moving from command-and-control to collaborative working styles needs a mindset shift from managers.”

7. Women in the work force

It may be commonplace in North America and Europe, but women in the workplace amounts to quite the cultural shakeup in much of the rest of the world. Consider Japan: For generations, the culture frowned on mothers who wanted to work.

Now, a shrinking population and aging work force has forecasters predicting an alarming labor shortage. To stave off demographic disaster, the Japanese government has introduced a collection of policies dubbed Womenomics, which are largely designed to improve child-care benefits and help female entrepreneurs.

Of course, any culture with more women in its work force will need men to pick up the slack at home. That means both genders will get a new perspective on their fundamental human need for status since their contributions will be recognized in new ways.

8. Clash of generations

Millennials aren't like baby boomers. Put them in the same office and things can get a little prickly. When baby boomers were starting out, they did what they were told. Now that they're managers, they find that the millennials reporting to them invariably want to know why. Millennials were raised to participate and ask questions.

They tend to be more interested in co-creating than in taking orders and more apt to voice an opinion than kowtow to hierarchy. Status? It's not really their thing. The problem, of course, is that baby boomers care very much about status. They figure they've earned it. To some extent, all cultures need to reconcile this generational clash. In the global village, after all, millennials in one hemisphere aren't so very different from those in the other.

9. Aging population

Governments and corporations around the world promote policies to help workers care for young children. Since kids grow up fast, most workers only use such policies for a few years.

The bigger burden is aging parents, who could easily lean on their adult children for two or three decades. It's a concern throughout the globe as people get grayer. Germany, for instance, expects to need 1 million care workers for older people by 2030.

Even cultures with a strong tradition of younger generations caring for older—think China and India—are feeling the pinch. As people leave the countryside to take advantage of urban opportunity, there are fewer family members at home to care for forebears.

Employers everywhere need to be aware of this troubling trend and begin thinking of appropriate work-life supports. On-site daycare for elderly people? It's already happening in Germany. There's a fundamental human need for security that's hard to attain if you're always worrying about Mom and Dad.

10. Challenge of lasting change

As new work-life supports come into play, organizations must take steps to embed them in their cultural DNA. Otherwise, there's a danger that employees will dismiss them as the flavor of the month.

What are we pushing now? Standing meetings or telecommuting? One strategy toward promoting permanency is to make any new policy transparent and democratic—if it applies to one, it applies to all. Another is to be sure there's strong support for change at the very top.

Implementing new ways of working involves a commitment, not just an announcement. Employees need the security of knowing that new policies won't disappear with the next management transition.

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This paper constitutes the summary of the research that covered the 6 Fundamental Human needs across 5 regions globally, which were included in 5 White papers for internal use for Hermann Miller Inc.