The future of organization design

Author: Naomi Stanford . October 2021

Last week this email arrived: "I hope this note finds you well. We are in the final weeks of the organization design program for cohort 2. Your slot, part of session 10, is '**the future of Organisation Design'.** You can have up to 45 minutes right after the opening. Will, you want to include some slides? ... ".

Although I'm told that the session outline is 'straightforward' – mine is the slot after the session on reflections on session 9 – the topic itself is not straightforward. I ask myself, 'What is the future of organization design?'

Sometimes, in training courses, I've shown one of the several 'from-to graphics showing the future of organizations. Look, for example, at Tanmay Vora's sketchnote that goes 'from purpose to profit', from 'hierarchies to networks, etc., or the Booz & Co from analog to digital culture which has, among other dimensions, from the process and task orientation to result in orientation.

 It's easy to get seduced by these 'from-to graphics: they look good and appear convincing.   But are they the future of organizational design? I no longer think so. They imply a smooth movement, from left to right, in a stable context.   We are not in a stable context.

 In my forthcoming book I say: 'The late South African economist Ludwig Lachmann once wrote: "The future is unknowable, though not unimaginable". ... Because we can imagine different futures, we can act to create the better version. We have the creative ability to draft scenarios and possible outcomes, so we can prepare for what is more likely to be. And [we can] attempt to bring it about.

 There is a design tension inherent in designing for what is in front of us in the immediate future and what we imagine in the further out future. ... Leaders and designers must recognize and manage that tension, perhaps taking guidance from the authors of the book *The Design Way,* who say "Design is the ability to imagine that-which-does-not-yet-exist, to make it appear in concrete form as a new, purposeful addition to the real world".

We can do this by acknowledging that the immediate future is not entirely unpredictable. Specific future events and trends may be unpredictable, but it is possible to envisage the implications of possibilities assets of potential actions that the organization may have to be ready for and designed to take. '

Taking that perspective means detecting signals in the current, unstable context that we could take forward as possibilities into the future, searching for patterns the signals generate and making collective meaning from the signals and patterns. (See article 'On the role of collective sensing and evolution in group formation'). These activities give rise to scenarios that it is possible to imagine and, take some steps to prepare for.

Three newish signals that I noted this week that caused me to think about the possible future of organization design are:

Metaverses: These are shared online spaces that incorporate 3D graphics, either on a screen or in virtual reality. They came up in the New Scientist article that piqued my interest, not least because it mentioned Second Life, launched in 2003, which I used about 3 years later when I was doing some work with the American Red Cross.   At that point, I had high hopes that Second Life would become integral to organizational design, but it didn't happen. Now I see Roblox co-founder, David Baszucki, saying "Just as the mail, the telegraph, the telephone, text, and video are utilities for collaborative work, we believe *Roblox* and the metaverse will join these as essential tools for business communication." Maybe he's right?

Metaverses give rise to a possible scenario of big tech companies holding in their thrall all their users, having access to their users' data, and being able to control their users in various ways – extending this one can imagine big tech will someday supersede governments, and change the idea of national borders. People will be nationals of a metaverse. (See the novel, *He, She, and It* by Marge Piercy for a variant of this idea).   How would organizations be designed in this scenario?

Individuals as networks: I then read a fascinating piece on individual selves as networks. It says, '[Individual] selves are not only 'networked', that is, in social networks, but are themselves networks. By embracing the complexity and fluidity of selves, we come to a better understanding of who we are and how to live well with ourselves and with one another. It's left me wondering if and how this could influence organization design. I'm thinking it may give a different take on the phrase 'bring your whole self to work', and also challenge current approaches to health and wellbeing that organizations are

increasingly preoccupied with.

A scenario that could come from this is one of the very different career paths, skills assessments, and employment expectations as our networked self focus on different or new aspects of itself.

Gillian Tett's book: [Anthro-vision](#) provides a compelling case for using anthropological approaches to business life (and by extension, organization design). You can listen to an excellent [video](#) of her talking about this and I came away thinking that her view gave impetus to 'human-centered' organization design in an actionable way. Thanks to the [EODF newsletter](#) for the link.

The interview brought to my mind the various Covid-19 legacies around [building design/ventilation](#), [biophilia](#), etc. The pandemic has brought to the forefront the relationship between physical space design and human performance. Typically, organization designers and facilities managers/workplace designers are siloed. A scenario that could play out is one where organization design and workplace design are integrated, perhaps using tools like [digital twinning](#) to model human and workplace design options. This could give organizations a very different design from currently envisaged ones – much as 3D printing has enabled [innovative building design](#).

Three more ubiquitous signals came up again this week – ones that are now becoming patterns.

Geopolitical landscape shifts. Think how many organizations have had a recent high-profile brush with governments in a way that has forced the re-design of aspects of the business. Amazon, Alibaba, Uber, Google, Facebook are some that spring immediately to mind. Think too of other effects of geopolitical shifts, for example, on supply chains (e.g. semiconductors). These will have profound effects on the design of organizations. Will multinationals exist in the future?

Cyber security/threats – recent ransomware attacks have had a crippling effect on some organizations, [for example,](#) 'In the recent Colonial Pipeline and JBS attacks, cybercriminals disrupted gasoline and meat supplies, causing an artificial run on both commodities.' Given the acceleration in such attacks, what are the organization design implications?

Climate-tech This article notes that 'many corporate giants are going beyond hollow commitments of greenery and "net-zero" carbon pledges by investing directly in climate tech', again these actions will change the design of organizations.

Answering the question 'what is the future of organization design?' is best answered by saying there are multiple possible futures. A further question to ask is 'how do you design organizations to prepare for an unknown but not unimaginable future'. Is your organization doing this? Let me know.

*The post "**The future of organization design**" was first published by Dr. Naomi Stanford here* https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/future-organisation-design-naomi-stanford/

About Dr. Naomi Stanford

Dr. Naomi Stanford is an organization design practitioner and author. During her earlier UK career, Dr. Stanford was an employee of large multinational companies, including Price Waterhouse, British Airways, Marks & Spencer, and Xerox. She moved to the US mid-career working as an organization design consultant to a range of organizations in the government, non-profit and private sectors. She then returned to the UK to work in the government sector. Naomi is now free-lancing as an organization design consultant/adviser. Additionally, she writes books, articles, and a weekly blog (over 800 so far). Naomi speaks at conferences and tweets regularly on organization design. Currently, she is writing the third edition of her Economist book 'A Guide to Organisation Design', to be published in March 2022.

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